

Dishonesty (Or the Sin of Theft and of Injustice)

by Jonathan Edwards

The sermon emphasizes the importance of honesty and the prohibition of theft and injustice as stated in the Eighth Commandment.

Scripture: Galatians 6:8

Topics: "Moral Accountability", "Eternal Rewards"

Description

Greek Word Studies delves into the concept of 'wages' (misthos) in the Bible, highlighting its dual usage to refer to pay for labor or as rewards bestowed by God for moral actions, often in eternity. Misthos can be obtained through iniquity, as seen in Judas' betrayal of Christ. The principle of reaping what is sown applies to both present and future rewards, emphasizing the importance of motives in actions.

Transcript

Dishonesty

Or

THE SIN OF THEFT AND OF INJUSTICE

Dated July, 1740.

Exodus 20:15

Thou shalt not steal.

Subject: An unjust usurping of our neighbor's property without his consent is forbidden by the eighth commandment.

This is one of the ten commandments which constitute a summary of man's duty, as revealed by God. God made many revelations to the children of Israel in the wilderness by Moses. But this made in the ten commandments is the chief. Most of those other revelations contained ceremonial or judicial laws; but this contains the moral law. The most of those other laws respected the Jewish nation; but here is a summary of laws binding on all mankind. Those were to last till Christ should come, and have set up the Christian

church. These are of perpetual obligation, and last to the end of the world. God everywhere, by Moses and the prophets, manifests a far greater regard to the duties of these commands than to any of the rites of the ceremonial law.

These commands were given at Mount Sinai, before any of the precepts of the ceremonial or judicial laws. They were delivered by a great voice out of the midst of fire, which made all the people in the camp tremble, and afterwards were engraven on tables of stone, and laid up in the ark; the first table containing the four first commandments; which teach our duty to God; the second table containing the six last, which teach our duty to man. The sum of the duties of the first table is contained in that which Christ says is the first and great commandment of the law; Mat. 22:37, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." The sum of what is required in the second table, is what Christ calls the second command, like unto the first; verse 39, "The second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

Of the commands of this second table of the law, the first (which is the fifth of the ten), refers to that honor which is due to our neighbor; the second respects his life; the third his chastity; the fourth his estate; the fifth his good name; the sixth and last respects his possessions and enjoyments in general. It is that command which respects our neighbor's estate, and which is the fourth command of the second table, and the eighth of the whole decalogue, on which I am now to insist. And here I shall make the command itself, as the words of it lie before us in the decalogue, my subject: and as the words of the commandment are in the form of a prohibition, forbidding a certain kind of sin. So I shall consider particularly what it is that this command forbids. The sin that is forbidden in this command is called stealing; yet we cannot reasonably understand it only of that act, which in the more ordinary and strict sense of the word, is called stealing. But the iniquity which this command forbids, may be summarily expressed thus: -- An unjust usurping of our neighbor's property, without his consent.

So much is doubtless comprehended in the text; yet this comprehends much more than is implied in the ordinary use of the word, stealing; which is only a secret taking of that which is another's from his possession, without either his consent or knowledge. But the ten commands are not to be limited to the strictest sense of the words, but are to be understood in such a latitude, as to include all things that are of that nature or kind. Hence Christ reproves the Pharisees' interpretation of the sixth command, Mat. 5:21, 22; and also their interpretation of the seventh command; see verse 27, 28; by which it appears that the commands are not to be understood as forbidding only these individual sins, which are expressly mentioned, in the strictest sense of the expressions; but all other things of the same nature or kind. -- Therefore, what is forbidden in this command is all unjust usurpation of our neighbor's property. Here it may be observed, that an unjust usurpation of our neighbor's property is twofold; it may be, either by withholding what is our neighbor's, or by taking it from him.

SECTION I

The dishonesty of withholding what is our neighbor's.

There are many ways in which persons may unjustly usurp their neighbor's property, by withholding what is his due. But I shall particularize only two things.

First, the unfaithfulness of men in not fulfilling their engagements. Ordinarily when men promise anything to their neighbor, or enter into engagements by undertaking any business with which their neighbor entrust them, their engagements invest their neighbor with a right to that which is engaged; so that if they withhold

it, they usurp that which belongs to their neighbor. So, when men break their promises, because they find them to be inconvenient, and they cannot fulfill them without difficulty and trouble; or merely because they have altered their minds since they promised. They think they have not consulted their own interest in the promise which they have made, and that if they had considered the matter as much before they promised as they have since, they should not have promised. Therefore they take the liberty to set their own promises aside. Besides, sometimes persons violate this command, by neglecting to fulfill their engagements, through a careless, negligent spirit.

They violate this command, in withholding what belongs to their neighbor, when they are not faithful in any business which they have undertaken to do for their neighbor. If their neighbor [has] hired them to labor for him for a certain time, and they be not careful well to husband the time; if they be hired to a day's labor, and be not careful to improve the day, as they have reason to think that he who hired justly expected of them; or if they be hired to accomplish such a piece of work, and be not careful to do it well, do it not as if it were for themselves, or as they would have others do for them, when they in like manner betrust them with any business of theirs; or if they be entrusted with any particular affair, which they undertake, but use not that care, contrivance, and diligence, to manage it so as will be to the advantage of him who entrusts them, and as they would manage it, or would insist that it should be managed, if the affair was their own: in all these cases the unjustly withhold what belongs to their neighbor.

Second, another way in which men unjustly withhold what is their neighbor's is in neglecting to pay their debts. Sometimes this happens, because they run so far into debt that they cannot reasonably hope to be able to pay their debts; and this they do, either through pride and affectation of living above their circumstances, or through a grasping, covetous disposition, or some other corrupt principle. Sometimes they neglect to pay their debts from carelessness of spirit about it, little concerning themselves whether they are paid or not, taking no care to go to their creditor, or to send to him. And if they see him from time to time, they say nothing about their debts. Sometimes they neglect to pay their debts, because it would put them to some inconvenience. The reason why they do it not, is not because they cannot do it, but because they cannot do it so conveniently as they desire. And so they rather choose to put their creditor to inconvenience by being without what properly belongs to him, than to put themselves to inconvenience by being without what doth not belong to them, and what they have no right to detain. In any of these cases they unjustly usurp the property of their neighbor.

Sometimes persons have that by them with which they could pay their debts if they would. But they want to lay out their money for something else, to buy gay clothing for their children, or to advance their estates, or for some such end. They have other designs in hand, which must fail, if they pay their debts. When men thus withhold what is due, they unjustly usurp what is not their own. Sometimes they neglect to pay their debts, and their excuse for it is that their creditor doth not need it; that he hath a plentiful estate, and can well bear to lie out of his money. But if the creditor be ever so rich, that gives no right to the debtor to withhold from him that which belongs to him. If it be due, it ought to be paid. For that is the very notion of its being due. It is no more lawful to withhold from a man what is his due, without his consent, because he is rich and able to do without it, than it is lawful to steal from a man because he is rich, and able to bear the loss.

SECTION II

The dishonesty of unjustly taking a neighbor's property.

The principal ways of doing this seem to be these four, by negligence, by fraud, by violence, or by stealing strictly so called.

First, the first way of unjustly depriving our neighbor of that which is his, is by negligence, by carelessly neglecting that which is expected by neighbors, one of another, and is necessary to prevent our neighbor's suffering in his estate by us, or by anything that is ours: and necessary in order that neighbors may live one by another, without suffering in their lawful interests, rights, and possessions, one by another.

For instance, when proper care is not taken by men to prevent their neighbor's suffering in the produce of his fields or enclosures, from their cattle, or other brute creatures; which may be either through negligence with regard to their creatures themselves, in keeping those that are unruly, and giving them their liberty, though they know that they are not fit to have their liberty, and are commonly wont to break into their neighbor's enclosures greatly to his damage; or through a neglect of that which is justly expected of them, to defend others' fields from suffering by the neighborhood of their own. In such cases men are guilty of unjustly taking from their neighbor what is his property.

It is said in the law of Moses, Exo. 22:5, "If a man shall cause a field or vineyard to be eaten, and shall put in his beast, and shall feed in another man's field; of the best of his own field, and of the best of his vineyard, shall he make restitution." Now a man may be unjustly the cause of his neighbor's field or vineyard being eaten, either by putting in his beast, and so doing what he should not do; or by neglecting to do what he should do, to prevent his beast from getting into his field. What is said in the 144th Psalm, and two last verses, supposes that a people who carry themselves as becomes a people whose God is the Lord, will take thorough care that beasts do not break into their neighbor's enclosures. "That our oxen may be strong to labour; that there be no breaking in, nor going out; that there be no complaining in our streets. Happy is that people that is in such a case; yea happy is that people whose God is the Lord."

Second, taking away that which is our neighbor's by fraud, or by deceiving him, is another mode of usurping our neighbor's property. This is the case when men in their dealings take advantage of their neighbor's ignorance, or oversight, or mistake, to get something from him; or when they make their gains, by concealing the defects of what they sell, putting off bad for good, though this be not done by speaking falsely, but only by keeping silence. Or when they take a higher price than what they sell is really worth, and more than they could get for it if the concealed defects were known. Or when they sell that for good, which indeed is not merchantable, which is condemned in Amos 8:6, "Yea, and sell the refuse of the wheat."

If a man puts off something to another with defects that are concealed, knowing that the other receives it as good, and pays such a price for it, under a notion of its having no remarkable defect but what he sees, and takes the price which the buyer under that notion offers; the seller knows that he takes a price of the buyer for that which the buyer had not of him; for the buyer is deceived, and pays for those things which he finds wanting in what he buys. It is just the same thing, as if a man should take a payment that another offers him, through a mistake, for that which he never had of him, thinking that he had it of him, when he had it not.

So a man fraudulently takes away that which is his neighbor's, when he gets his money from him by falsely commending what he hath to sell, above what he knows to be the true quality of it; and attributes those good qualities to it which he knows it has not. Or if he does not that, yet sets forth the good qualities in a degree beyond what he knows to be the true degree; or speaks of the defects and ill qualities of what

he has to sell, as if they were much less than he knows they are. Or on the contrary, when the buyer will cry down what he is about to buy, contrary to his real opinion of the value of it. -- These things, however common they be in men's dealings one with another, are nothing short of iniquity, and fraud, and a great breach of this commandment, upon which we are discoursing. Pro. 20:14, "It is nought, it is nought, saith the buyer; but when he is gone his way then he boasteth." -- Many other ways there are whereby men deceive one another in their trading, and whereby they fraudulently and unjustly take away that which is their neighbor's.

Third, another mode of unjustly invading and taking away our neighbor's property, is by violence. This violence may be done in different degrees. -- Men may take away their neighbor's goods either by mere open violence, either making use of superior strength, forcibly taking away anything that is his; or by express or implicit threatenings forcing him to yield up what he has into their hands; as is done in open robbery and piracy. Or, by making use of some advantages which they have over their neighbor, in their dealings with him, constrain him to yield to their gaining unreasonably of him; as when they take advantage of their neighbor's poverty to extort unreasonably from him for those things that he is under a necessity of procuring for himself or family. This is an oppression against which God hath shown a great displeasure in his word. Lev. 25:14, "And if thou sell ought unto thy neighbour, or buyest ought of thy neighbour, ye shall not oppress one another." Pro. 22:22, 23, "Rob not the poor, because he is poor, neither oppress the afflicted in the gate; for the Lord will plead their cause, and spoil the soul of those that spoiled them." And Amos 4:1, 2, "Hear this word, ye kine of Bashan, that are in the mount of Samaria, which oppress the poor, which crush the needy, the Lord hath sworn in his holiness, that he will take you away with hooks, and your posterity with fishhooks."

When the necessity of poor indigent people is the very thing whence others take occasion to raise the price of provisions, even above the market; this is such an oppression. There are many poor people whose families are in such necessity of bread, that they in their extremity will give almost any price for it, rather than go without it. Those who have to sell, though hereby they have an advantage in their hands, yet surely should not take the advantage to raise the price of provisions. We should doubtless think we had just cause to complain, if we were in such necessity as they are, and were reduced to their straits, and were treated in this manner. And let us remember, that it is owing only to the distinguishing goodness of God to us, that we are not in their circumstances. And whatever our present circumstances are, yet we know not but that the time may still come when their case may be ours.

Men may oppress others, though they be not poor, if they will take advantage of any particular necessities of their neighbor, unreasonably to extort from him. The case may be so at particular seasons, that those who are not poor, may stand in particular and extraordinary need of what we have, or what we can do for them. So that it would be greatly to their disadvantage or loss to be without it. Now to take advantage of their urgent circumstances, to get from them an unreasonable price, is a violent dealing with our neighbors.

It is very unreasonable to say, Such men are so rich, and get money so much more easily than I, that it is no hurt for me to take advantage when they are in special need, and make them give me, for work that I do for them, a great deal more than I would desire to ask of other men. Let such consider, whether, if they should by any means hereafter get forward in the world, and come to have plentiful estates, they would like that persons should act upon such principles towards them. That men are rich, gives us no more right to take away from them what is theirs in this way, than it does to steal from them because they come easily by their property, and can do without it better than we.

Again, another thing that is a kind of violent taking from our neighbor what is his, is taking the advantage of the law to gain from others, when their cause in honesty and conscience is just and good. The circumstances of mankind, their rights, possessions, and dealings one with another, are so various, that it is impossible that any body of human laws should be contrived to suit all possible cases and circumstances. Hence the best laws may be abused and perverted to purposes contrary to the general design of laws, which is to maintain the rights and secure the properties of mankind. Human laws have a regard due to them, but always in subordination to the higher laws of God and nature. Therefore when it so happens, that we have an advantage by the law, to gain what the laws of moral honesty allow not, it is an oppression and violence to take the advantage. That human laws allow it, will not excuse us before God, the Judge of the world, who will judge us another day by his own laws and not by the laws of the commonwealth.

Fourth, the fourth way of unjustly taking from our neighbor that which is his, is stealing so called. All unjust ways of taking away, or invading, or usurping what is our neighbor's, are called stealing in the most extensive use of the word, and all in included in the expression in this command. Yet the word stealing, as it is more commonly used, is not of so great extent, and intends not all unjust invasion of our neighbor's property, but only a particular kind of unjust taking. So that in common speech when we speak of fraudulent dealings, of extortion, unfaithfulness in our trust, and of stealing, we understand different sins by these expressions, though they are an usurpation of what is our neighbor's.

Stealing, strictly so called, may be thus defined. A designed taking of our neighbor's goods from him, without his consent or knowledge. It is not merely a withholding of what is our neighbor's, but a taking away. And therein it differs from unfaithfulness in our undertakings and betrustments, and also from negligence in the payment of debts. It is a designed or willful depriving of our neighbor of what is his, and so differs from wronging our neighbor in his estate through carelessness or negligence. It is taking of our neighbor's goods without his knowledge. It is a private, clandestine taking away, and so differs from robbery by open violence.

So also it differs from extortion, for in that the person knows what is taken from him. The aim of him that takes is no other than that he should know it; for he makes use of other means than his ignorance, to obtain what is his neighbors, viz. violence to constrain him to give it up. So also it differs from fraudulent dealing or trading. For though in fraudulent dealing, the lawful possessor doth not understand the ways and means, by which he parts with his goods, and by which his neighbor becomes possessed of them; yet he knows the fact; the deceiver designedly conceals the manner only. But in stealing, strictly so called, he that takes, intends not that it shall be known that he takes. It also differs from extortion and fraudulent dealing, in that it is wholly without the consent of the owner. For in extortion, though there be no free consent; yet the consent of the owner is in some sort gained, though by oppressive means. So in fraudulent dealing consent is in some sort obtained, though it be by deceit. But in stealing no kind of consent is obtained.

A person may steal from another, yet not take his goods without the knowledge of the owner; because he may know of it accidentally, he may see what is done, unawares to the thief. Therefore I have defined stealing, a designed taking without the consent or knowledge of the owner. If it be accidentally known, yet it is not known in the design and intention of the thief. The thief is so far at least private in it, that he gives no notice to the owner at the time. It must be also without the consent of the owner. A person may take without the knowledge of the owner, and yet not take without his consent. The owner may not know of his taking at the time, or of his taking any particular things; yet there may be his implicit consent. There may

have been a general consent, if not expressed, yet implied. The circumstances of the affair may be such, that his consent may well be presumed upon, either from an established custom, allowed by all, or from the nature of the case; the thing being of such a nature, that it may well be presumed that none would refuse their consent; as in the case of a person's accidentally passing through his neighbor's vineyard in Israel, and eating his fill of grapes; or from the circumstances of the persons, as is the case, in many instances, of the freedom which near neighbors and intimate friends often take, and of that boldness which they use with respect to each other's goods.

In all such cases, though the owner [does] not particularly know what is done, yet he that takes, does it not with any contrived designed concealment. And though there is no express, particular consent, yet there is a consent either implied, or justly presumed upon. And he that takes, doth not designedly do it without consent.

It may happen in some cases, that one may take the goods of another both without his knowledge and consent, either explicit or implicit, but through mistake; yet he may not be guilty of stealing. Therefore the design of him who takes must come into consideration. When he designedly takes away that which is his neighbor's, without his consent or knowledge, then he steals. So that if it should happen, that he has both his consent and knowledge, without his design, he steals. And if it so happen that he takes without either his neighbor's consent or knowledge, and yet without his own design, he steals not. I desire therefore that this, which I take to be the true definition of theft or stealing, may be borne in mind, viz. a designed taking of our neighbor's goods, without his consent or knowledge; because it is needful to clear up many things which I have yet to say on this subject.

SECTION III

Dishonest excuses.

Here I shall particularly take notice of some things, by which persons may be ready to excuse themselves, in privately taking their neighbor's good, which however cannot be a just excuse for it, nor will they make such a taking to be stealing.

First, that the person whose goods are privately taken, owes or is in debt to him that takes them. Some may be ready to say that they do not take that which is their neighbor's, they take that which is their own, because as much is due to them, their neighbor owes them as much, and unjustly detains it, and they know not whether ever they shall get their due of him. Their neighbor will not do them right, and therefore they must right themselves.

But such pleas as these will not justify a man in going in a private and clandestine manner to take away anything of his neighbor's from his possession, without his consent or knowledge; his doing this is properly stealing. For though something of his neighbor's, which is as valuable as what he takes, may be due to him; that doth not give him such a right to his neighbor's goods, that he may take anything that is his, according to his own pleasure, and at what time and in what manner he pleases. That his neighbor is in debt to him, doth not give him a right to take it upon himself to be his own judge, so that he may judge for himself, which of his neighbor's goods shall be taken from him to discharge the debt; and that he may act merely according to his own private judgment and pleasure in such a case, without so much as acquainting his neighbor with the affair.

In order to warrant such a proceeding as this, everything that his neighbor has, must be his. A man may not take indifferently what he pleases out of a number of goods, without the consent or knowledge of any other person, unless all is his own, to be disposed of as he pleases. Such a way of using goods according to our own pleasure, taking what we will, and at what time we will, can be warranted by nothing but a dominion over the whole. And though he who is in debt may be guilty of great injustice in detaining what is due to another; yet it doth not thence follow, but that he that takes from him, may also be guilty of great injustice towards him. The course he takes to right himself may be very irregular and unreasonable; and such a course, that if universally allowed and pursued in such cases, would throw human society into confusion.

When men obtain a property in any of the professions of this life, they are at the same time also invested with a right to retain a possession of them, till they are deprived of them in some fair and regular proceeding. Every man has a right to hold his estate, and keep possession of his properties, so that no other can lawfully use them as his own, until he either parts with them of his own accord, or until it be taken from him according to some established rule, in a way of open justice. Therefore he who, under pretense of having just demands upon his neighbor, privately takes his goods without his consent, takes them unjustly, and is guilty of stealing.

Second, much less will it make such a private taking not to be stealing, that he who takes, has, in way of kindness or gift, done for the person from whom he takes, as much is equivalent to the value of what he takes. If a man do his neighbor some considerable kindness, whether in labor, or in something that he gives him, what he does or gives is supposed to be done voluntarily, and he is not to make his neighbor debtor for it. And therefore if anything be privately taken away, upon any such consideration, it is gross stealing.

For instance, when any person needs to have any services done for him, where a considerable number of hands are necessary; it is common for the neighborhood to meet together and join in helping their neighbor, and frequently some provision is made for their entertainment. If any person who hath assisted on such an occasion, and is a partaker at such an entertainment, shall think within himself, the service I have done is worth a great deal more than what I shall eat and drink here, and therefore shall take liberty privately to take of the provision set before him, to carry away with him, purposely concealing the matter from him who hath entertained him, this is gross stealing. And it is a very ridiculous plea which they make to excuse so unmanly and vile an act.

Persons in such cases may say to themselves, that the provision is made for them, and set before them; that it is a time wherein considerable liberty is given, and they think, seeing they have done so much for their host, they may take something more than they eat and drink there. But then let them be open in it; let them acquaint those with it who make the entertainment; and let it not be done in any wise, in a secret, clandestine manner, with the least design or attempt to avoid their notice. On the contrary, let care be taken to give them notice and obtain their consent.

When persons do such things in a private manner, they condemn themselves by their own act. Their doing what they do secretly, shows that they are conscious to themselves, that they go beyond what it is expected they should do, and do what would not be allowed, if it were known. Such an act, however light they may make of it, is abominable theft, and what any person of religion or any sense of the dignity of their own nature, would to the greatest degree abhor and detest.

Third, it is not sufficient to make a private taking without consent not to be stealing, that it is but a small matter that is taken. If the thing be of little value, yet if it be worth a purposed concealing from the owner, the value is great enough to render the taking of it proper theft. If it be pretended that the thing is of so small consequence, that it is not worth asking for; then surely it is not worth a purposed concealing from the owner, when it is taken. He who, under this pretense, conceals his taking, in the very act contradicts his own pretense; for his action shows that he apprehends, or at least suspects, that, as small a matter as it is, the owner would not like the taking of it, if he knew it; otherwise the taker would not desire to conceal it.

The owner of the goods, and not other people, is the proper judge, whether what he owns be of such a value, that it is worth his while to keep it, and to refuse his consent to the taking of it from him. He who possesses, and not he who takes away, has a right to judge of what consequence his possessions are to him. He has a right to set what value he pleases on them, and to treat them according to that value. Besides, merely that a thing is of small value, cannot give a right to others, purposely and designedly to take it away, without the knowledge or consent of the owner. Because if this only gives a right, then all have a right to take things of small value; and at this rate a great number of persons, each of them taking from a man that which is of small value, might take away all he has.

Therefore, it will not justify persons, in purposely taking such things as fruit from the trees, or gardens, or fields of their neighbors, without their knowledge or consent, that the things which they take are things of small value. Nor is that sufficient to render such an act not an act of theft properly so called. This shows also that the smallness of the value of what is privately taken at feasts and entertainments, doth not render the taking of such things not stealing.

The small value of a thing may in some cases justify an occasional taking of things, so far as we may from thence, and from what is generally allowed, reasonably presume that the owner gives his consent. But if that be the case, and persons really take, as supposing that the owner consents to such occasional taking, then he that takes will not at all endeavor to do what he does secretly, nor in any measure to avoid notice. But merely the smallness of the value of a thing, can never justify a secret taking of what is another's.

SECTION IV

The subject applied. -- The dishonest warned.

The first use I would make of this doctrine, is to warn against all injustice and dishonesty, as to what appertains to our neighbor's temporal goods or possessions. Let me warn all to avoid all ways of unjustly invading or usurping what is their neighbor's, and let me press that exhortation of the apostle, Rom. 12:17, "Provide things honest in the sight of all men;" which implies, that those things which we provide for ourselves, and use as our own, should be such as we come honestly by; and especially that we should avoid all clandestine or underhand ways of obtaining anything that is our neighbor's, either by fraudulent dealing, or by that taking without our neighbor's knowledge and consent, of which we have been speaking.

I warn you to beware of dishonesty in withholding what is your neighbor's, either by unfaithfulness to your trust in any business which you undertake, or by withholding your neighbor's just and honest dues. Consider that saying of the apostle, Rom. 13:8, "Owe no man any thing, but to love one another." Be also warned against wronging your neighbor or injuring him in his enclosures, or in any of his just rights and properties, through careless neglect of what is reasonably expected by neighbors one of another, in order that they may live one by another without mutual injury. Let all beware that they bring not guilt on their

souls in the sight of God, by taking an advantage to oppress any person. Especially beware of taking advantage of others' poverty to extort from them. For God will defend their cause, and you will be no gainers by such oppression.

Beware also of all injustice by deceitful and fraudulent dealing. You doubtless meet with abundance of temptation to fraud, and have need to keep a strong guard upon yourselves. There are many temptations to falsehood in trading, both about what you would buy and what you have to sell. There are, in buying, temptations to do as in Pro. 20:14, "It is nought, it is nought, saith the buyer." There are many temptations to take indirect courses, to blind those with whom you deal, about the qualities of what you have to sell, to diminish the defects of your commodities, or to conceal them, and to put off things for good, which are bad. And there are doubtless many other ways that men meet with temptations to deceive others, which your own experience will better suggest to you than I can.

But here I shall take occasion to speak of a particular kind of fraud, which is very aggravated, and is rather a defrauding of God than man. What I mean is, the giving of that which is bad for good in public contributions. Though it be matter of great shame and lamentation that it should be so, yet it is to be feared, from what has sometimes been observed, that there are some who, when there is a public contribution to be made for the poor, or some other pious and charitable use, sometimes take that opportunity to put off their bad money. That which they find, or think, their neighbors will refuse to take at their hands, because they will have opportunity to see what is offered them, and to observe the badness of it, even that they therefore take opportunity to put off to God.

Hereby they endeavor to save their credit; for they apprehend that they shall be concealed. They appear with others to go to the contribution, as it is not known, but that they put in that which is good. But they cheat the church of God, and defraud the expectations of the poor, or rather, they lie to God, for those who receive what is given, stand as Christ's receivers, and not as acting for themselves in this matter.

They that do thus, do that which is very much of the same nature with that sin, against which God denounces that dreadful curse in Mal. 1:14, "Cursed be the deceiver which hath in his flock a male, and voweth and sacrificeth unto the Lord a corrupt thing: for I am a great King, saith the Lord of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen." That hath in his flock a male, i.e. That has in his flock that which is good and fit to be offered to God. For it was the male of the flock principally that was appointed, in the law of Moses, to be offered in sacrifice. He has in his flock that which is good, but he vows and sacrifices to the Lord "the torn, the lame, and the sick." As it is said in the foregoing verse; ye said also, "Behold what a weariness is it, and ye have snuffed at it, saith the Lord of hosts; and ye brought that which was torn, and the lame, and the sick; thus ye brought an offering: should I accept this of your hands? Saith the Lord."

Contributions in the Christian church come in the room of sacrifices in the Jewish church. Mercy comes in the room of sacrifice. And what is offered in the way of mercy is as much offered to God, as the sacrifices of old were. For what is done to the poor is done to Christ, and he that hath pity on the poor, lendeth to the Lord; Pro. 19:17. The Jews that offered the sick and lame of the flock, knew that if they had offered it to their governor, and had attempted to put it off, as part of the tribute or public taxes due to their earthly rulers, it would not be accepted, and therefore they were willing to put it off to God. "And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? Offer it now unto thy governor, will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? Saith the Lord of hosts."

So those persons who purposely put bad money into contributions, know that what they put in would not be accepted if they should offer to pay their public taxes. Yea, they know that their neighbors would not accept it at their hands; and therefore they are willing to save themselves, by putting it off to God.

This practice has also very much of the nature of the sin of Ananias and Sapphira. What they offered was by way of contribution for charitable uses. The brethren sold what they had, and brought it into a common stock, and put all under the care of deacons, that the poor might every one be supplied. Ananias and Sapphira brought a part of their possessions, and put it into the common stock. And their sin was, that they put it in for more than it really was. It was but a part of what they had, and they put it in, and would have it accepted, as if it had been all. So those among us, of whom I am speaking, put off what they put into the charitable stock, for more than it is. For they put it in, under the notion that it is something of some value. They intend it shall be so taken by the church that sees them go to the contribution, when indeed they put in nothing at all.

Ananias and Sapphira were charged with lying to God, and doing an act of fraud towards God himself, in what they did. Acts 5:4, "Whilst it remained, was it not thine own? And after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? Why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God." So those who knowingly put bad money for good into a contribution for a charitable use, as much as in them lies commit an act of fraud and deceit towards God. For the deacons who receive what is contributed, receive it not in their own names, but as Christ's receivers. I hope these things may be sufficient to deter every reader from ever daring to do such a thing for the future.

Again, another thing I would warn you against, is, stealing, properly and strictly so called; or designedly taking away any of your neighbor's goods without his consent or knowledge. And especially I would now take occasion to warn against a practice which is very common in the country, particularly among children and young people; and that is, stealing fruit from their neighbor's trees or enclosures. There is a licentious liberty taken by many children and young people, in making bold with their neighbor's fruit. And it is to be feared, that they are too much countenanced in it by their parents and many elder people.

I am sensible, that the great thing which is pleaded, and made very much the ground of this liberty which is taken and so much tolerated, is a very abusive and unreasonable construction and application of that text of Scripture in Deu. 23:24, "When thou comest into thy neighbour's vineyard, then thou mayest eat grapes thy fill. But thou shalt not put any in thy vessel." Because this text seems to be so much mistaken and misimproved, I shall therefore endeavor particularly to state the matter of persons taking their neighbor's fruit, and to set it in a just and clear light as concerning this text.

It was to eat their fill of grapes when they occasionally came into or passed through their neighbor's vineyard, and not that they should go thither on purpose to eat grapes. This is manifest by the manner of expression; "When thou comest into thy neighbour's vineyard, thou mayest eat;" i.e. when thou art come thither on some other occasion. If God had meant to give them leave to come thither on purpose, for no other end, it would not have been expressed so; but rather thus, Thou mayest come into thy neighbour's vineyard, and eat grapes thy fill. -- Such were the circumstances of that people, and vineyards among them were so common, that there was no danger that this liberty would be attended with ill consequence. It is manifest throughout the history of Israel, that vineyards among them were so common that the people in general had them. Every husbandman among them was a vine-dresser; and a great part of the business of a husbandman among them, consisted in dressing and taking care of his vineyards. Grapes seem to have been the most common sort of fruit that they had. Besides, there was no liberty given for

persons to go on purpose to a vineyard to eat the fruit of it. So that there was no danger of neighbors suffering one by another, by any such liberty. -- The liberty did not tend to any such consequence, as the flocking of a great number to eat grapes, whereby the fruit of the vineyard might be much diminished.

Such were the circumstances of the case, that the consent of the owners of vineyards in general might well be presumed upon, though no such express liberty had been given. You may remember that in the definition of stealing, I observed, that explicit consent is not always necessary; because the case may be so circumstanced, that consent may be well presumed on. And the reason why consent might well be presumed on in the case of eating grapes, of which we are now speaking, is, that there could be no sensible injury, nor any danger of any ill consequences, by which a man would sensibly suffer in the benefit of his vineyard. Hence it is the more easy to determine, what would and what would not be justified by this text, among us. Suppose a particular person among us had a vineyard of the same kind with those which the children of Israel had, it would not justify others in using the same liberty when occasionally passing through it; because it would be a rare thing, and the rarity and scarcity of the fruit would render it of much greater value. Besides, if one man [was] distinguished by such a possession, to allow of such a liberty would have a much greater tendency to ill consequences, than if they were common, as they were in the land of Canaan. There would be danger of many persons falsely pretending, and making occasions, to pass through the vineyard, for the sake of such rare fruit.

Nor would it be a parallel case, if men in general among us had each of them a few vines. That would be a very different thing from persons in general having large vineyards. Nor would this text, in such a case, warrant men's eating their fill of grapes when occasionally passing by. -- And though all in general had vineyards, as they had in the land of Canaan, this text would not justify men in going into their neighbor's vineyard on purpose to eat the fruit. No such liberty is given in the text. If there had been such liberty, it might have been of ill consequence. For the sake of saving their own grapes, men might make a practice of going and sending their children into their neighbor's vineyard, to eat their fill from time to time.

But the liberty given in this text to the children of Israel, seems to be very parallel with the liberty taken among us, to take up an apple or two and eat, as we are occasionally passing through a neighbor's orchard; which, as our circumstances are, we may do, and justly presume that we have the owner's consent. This is a liberty that we take, and find no ill consequences. It was very much so with vineyards in the land of Canaan, as it is with orchards among us. Apples in some countries are a rare fruit. And there it would by no means be warrantable for persons to take the same liberty when occasionally passing by their neighbor's apple tree, which we warrantably take here, when going through a neighbor's orchard.

The consideration of these things will easily show the great abuse that is made of this text, when it is brought to justify such a resorting of children and others to their neighbor's fruit trees, as is sometimes, on purpose to take and eat the fruit. Indeed this practice is not only not justified by the law of Moses, but it is in itself unreasonable, and contrary to the law of nature. The consequences of it are pernicious, so that a man can have no dependence on enjoying the fruit of his labor, or the benefit of his property in those things, which possibly he may very much value. He can have no assurance but that he shall be mainly deprived of what he has, and that others will not have the principal benefit of it; and so that his end in planting and cultivating that from which he expected those fruits of the earth, which God hath given for the use, comfort, and delight of mankind, will not be in the main frustrated.

SECTION V

An exhortation to honesty.

Under this use, I shall confine myself to two particulars, many other things having been already spoken to.

First, I shall hence take occasion to exhort parents to restrain the children from stealing, and particularly from being guilty of theft in stealing the fruits of their neighbor's trees or fields. Christian parents are obliged to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. But how much otherwise do they act, who bring them up in theft! And those parents are guilty of this, who -- though they do not directly teach them to steal, by example and setting them about it, yet -- tolerate them in it.

Parents should take effectual care, not only to instruct their children better, and to warn them against any such thievish practices, but also thoroughly to restrain them. Children who practice stealing, make themselves vile. Stealing, by the common consent of mankind, is a very vile practice. Therefore those parents that will not take thorough care to restrain their children from such a practice, will be guilty of the same sin which God so highly resented, and awfully punished, in Eli, of which we read, 1 Sam. 3:13, "For I have told him, that I will judge his house for ever, for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not."

Second, I exhort those who are conscious in themselves that they have heretofore wronged their neighbor to make restitution. This is a duty the obligation to which is exceedingly plain. If a person was wronged in taking away anything that was his, certainly he is wronged also in detaining it. And all the while that a person, who has been guilty of wronging his neighbor, neglects to make restitution, he lives in that wrong. He not only lives impenitent as to that first wrong of which he was guilty, but he continually wrongs his neighbor. A man who hath gotten anything from another wrongfully, goes on to wrong him every day that he neglects to restore it, when he has opportunity to do it. The person injured did not only suffer wrong from the other when his goods were first taken from him, but he suffers new injustice from him all the while they are unjustly kept from him.

Therefore I counsel you who are conscious that you have heretofore wronged your neighbor, either by fraud, or oppression, or unfaithfulness, or stealing, whether lately or formerly, though it may have been a great while ago, speedily to go and make restitution for all the wrong your neighbor has suffered at your hands. That it was done long ago, doth not quit you from obligation to restore. This is a duty with which you must comply; you cannot be acquitted without it. As long as you neglect it, it will be unreasonable in you to expect any forgiveness of God. For what ground can you have to think that God will pardon you, as long as you willfully continue in the same wrong, and wrong the same many still every day, by detaining from him that which is his? You in your prayers ask of God, that he would forgive all your sins; but your very prayers are mockery, if you still willfully continue in those sins. -- Indeed, if you go and confess your faults to your neighbor, and he will freely acquit you from making restitution, you will be acquitted from the obligation. For in so doing, your neighbor gives you what before was his. But otherwise you cannot be acquitted.

I would leave this advice with all, for direction in their behavior on their deathbeds. Indeed you should not by any means put it off till you come to die; and you will run the most fearful risk in so doing. But if you will not do it now, while you are in health, I will leave it with you to remember, when you shall come to lie on your deathbeds. Doubtless, then if you have the use of your reason, you will be concerned for the salvation of your poor souls. And let this be one thing then remembered, as absolutely necessary in order to your salvation, that before you die, you must make restitution for whatever wrong you shall have done

any of your neighbors; or at least leave orders that such restitution be made. Otherwise you will, as it were, go out of the world, and go before your great Judge, with stolen goods in your hands. And certainly it will not be very comfortable or safe, to bring them into his infinitely holy and dreadful presence, when he sits on his throne of judgment, with his eyes as a flame of fire, being more pure than to look on iniquity; when he is about to sentence you to your everlasting unalterable state.

Everyone here present, who has been guilty of wronging his neighbor, and has not made restitution, must die. Let all such therefore remember this counsel now given them, on the day when death shall approach, if they shall be so foolish as to neglect it till that time.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jonathan-edwards/dishonesty-or-the-sin-of-theft-and-of-injustice/>

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