

DUMPSTER DIVING FOR LUXURIES¹

How People Steal and Don't Know They're Doing It

By Paul Penno Jr.

October 24, 2015

The church and the thrift store shared an alleyway in the city. Donors would drop off their discards over the weekend. On Sabbath the unsightly array of clothing and appliances were clearly visible as people came to church. It always attracted the “dumpster divers” who would pick over the goods and run off with them before getting caught.

If you have never stolen anything, you probably were born on Mars, because on earth “there is none righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10), and all the sons and daughters of Adam here have “become guilty before God” (vs. 19). We all need a Savior!

The eighth of God’s Ten Commandments says, “You shall not steal.”

Many people break that commandment without knowing it. They think it’s impossible to obey it fully. But, rightly understood, it’s an assurance of salvation from stealing, not a stern prohibition.

The reason why people think it’s impossible to obey is that they have not understood the ten commandments that God gave to us on Mt. Sinai. They have forgotten part of what God spoke on that occasion. In the Preamble He says: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Ex. 20:1, 2).

In these words He introduces Himself to us as being already our Savior. He has already accomplished something, He has given Himself as a sacrifice for us; for every one of us He “poured out His soul unto death” (Isa. 53:12). “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23), but Christ has taken those “wages” on Himself, and has died those “wages” of death for “everyone” (Heb. 2:9).

In this precious preamble, He does not want us to think of Himself as a possible, maybe, perhaps, might-be Savior if we first do everything right and never steal even a tiny dime. He wants us to see Him as He truly is—already “the Savior of the world” and therefore of us (John 4:42).

Thus, as we remember the preamble and include it with the “ten,” He says to us, “Now you will never steal. There will never be such a stain upon your record. You will hold your head high everywhere, and always! I will save you from that sin.”

Stealing is sin; but the angel who spoke to Joseph just before Jesus was born promised, “He will save His people from [not in] their sins” (Matt. 1:21). As we think about this commandment, “You shall not steal,” we could spend time reviewing all the ways we can break the commandment, how easily we can bring upon ourselves this guilt of stealing without realizing what we are doing. There are a thousand ways! Instead, let’s review how great is Christ’s salvation to us:

The root of stealing is the desire to have something that God has not given us. This is the root that the gospel of Christ takes out of the heart. The Holy Spirit reminds us immediately that when

¹ Philippians 3:8, 334, 572.

He was with us on earth, Jesus said, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Matt. 8:20). Although He was a master builder (He was a carpenter) He owned no house, no real estate; He had no bank account. When He was crucified, all His wealth was the clothes He had on. Because He knew true inner peace, He could say truthfully, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:15).

Paul knew the same inner peace when he said that “I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, . . . and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8). According to that, our endless love affair with materialism is diving into the dumpster. What joy there is in freedom from constantly hankering for luxuries! So we are encouraged to read this good news: “Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content” (1 Tim. 6:6-8).

Failure to pay our honest taxes to the government is a form of stealing that Christ saves us from. Jesus taught how to pay taxes honestly when He said, “Render therefore to Caesar the things which are Caesar’s” (Matt. 22:21). He was speaking of the pagan Roman government of His day! The reason is that God has ordained the establishment of proper human government.

The inspired Apostle Paul explains why: “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority [failure to pay honest taxes is “resisting”] resists the ordinance of God.” And Paul goes on to say that the one who is dishonest with the government will bring “judgment” upon himself. “For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.”

This is why Paul says that those who follow Jesus truly will be honest with the government “not only because of wrath, but also for conscience’ sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render [that’s the word Jesus used] therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:1-8).

“But,” some say, “the government is corrupt; politicians steal from the treasury; police accept bribes.”

All of this may be true, but God’s word is still true above it all. If there were no government, the nation would be in total anarchy, nobody’s life or property

would be safe. God can grant His blessings to a government, or He can withhold His blessings; to a great extent this depends on the basic honesty of the people themselves.

Every nation desperately needs within its borders the presence of a pure church that “keeps the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.” The entire population benefits from the presence of servants of God, even if their number is small proportionately. Do you remember how God said He would spare Sodom if ten righteous people could be found therein? Let us not forget that politicians, police, government servants—all come from the common people themselves. This precious Good News of the pure gospel always uplifts the people. No matter where you live in whatever nation, thank God for the measure of peace and security you now enjoy! And when you pay your taxes, offer a prayer for your government and its servants. Then you will receive a blessing!

The one who appreciates salvation in Christ also gladly returns his tithe, or tenth of all his “increase” to God.

When Jesus said, “Render ... to Caesar the things which are Caesar’s,” He also said, “[Render] to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21). The question immediately arises, Why should we have to give anything to God? The answer is, In paying tithe we do not give God anything; we simply return to Him a tenth of what He has given us, and this is as a confession that all we have comes from Him, the “possessor of heaven and earth” (Gen. 14:19). He says, “All the earth is Mine” (Ex. 19:5) and He

claims, “Every beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills” (Ps. 50:10).

If God gives you a gift, isn’t it a sin not to recognize it?

David prays, “The eyes of all look expectantly to You, and You give them their food in due season. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Ps. 145:15, 16). This evokes the picture of God kneeling down and opening His hand for us all to eat out of it, like birds or squirrels eat out of your hand. Shouldn’t we say “Thank You”?

Paying tithe to Him is simply our saying, “Thank You, Lord! I choose to ‘remember the Lord [my] God; for it is He who gives [me] power to get wealth” (Deut. 8:18). When we forget, we bring all kinds of trouble upon ourselves. So it is in kindness and mercy to us that the Lord says, “You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year” (14:22). “All the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the Lord’s. It is holy to the Lord” (Lev. 27:30).

But what does the Lord do with this tithe, since He already owns everything?

The answer is: He gives it to His servants who spend their full time proclaiming His gospel. He says, “I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting” (Num. 18:21). And this blessed plan for the support of the sacred ministry is carried over into the New Testament church: “Even so the Lord

has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:14)

This is so serious that when we fail to return this sacred tenth to Him, He considers that we have robbed Him: “Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, in what way have we robbed You? In tithes and offerings” (Mal. 3:8).

We could read the entire passage to see how the Lord promises temporal prosperity if we “bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house” (vs. 10). And the Lord does bless! “There is one who scatters, yet increases more; and there is one who withholds more than is right, but it leads to poverty. The generous soul will be made rich” (Prov. 11:24, 25). But the reason why we pay tithe and give offerings is not because we hope for a special economic reward—that would be merely “pious selfishness.” The real reason is gratitude to Him who has brought us out of the “bondage” of spiritual Egypt, and has actually saved us for time and for eternity.

The good news is that the Holy Spirit will motivate us to be faithful in paying tithe and giving offerings so that we will enjoy being liberal! Learning to enjoy unselfish giving is a miracle for all of us by-nature selfish mortals!

The eighth commandment is an eternal defense against the false doctrine that is sometimes passed off as “communism.” Many honest, sincere people have assumed that communism is the best plan for achieving equality among all people. But as we study the Bible, we find that God recognizes the right of private property. The so-called

“communism” in the early church when the apostles “had all things common” and no one said “that any of things he possessed was his own,” was a totally voluntary sharing in a time of emergency, It was motivated by brotherly love (Acts 4:32-34). It wasn’t government taking by force from one individual to give to another.

Peter told Ananias and Sapphira that God recognized that their property was their own (Acts 5:4) because He has given man dominion over the earth. God has given man a right to the lawful fruits of his labor. “He who tills his land will have plenty of bread” (Prov. 28:19). God does not force him to give it to those who do not “till” their land, but He does ask us to be generous to help others who are in need. The love of Christ would put an end to poverty all over the world! It would heal the abuses of both Capitalism and Communism.

In all our business dealings, God teaches His people to be strictly honest, as well as generous. “Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over” is God’s way of doing business (see Luke 6:38).

Norman Rockwell painted a famous picture of a merchant weighing the lady customer’s selection of meat on a scale. While the merchant is looking up at the scale he is cleverly tipping the scale downward with his finger to make her purchase weigh more. At the same time the customer is looking up at the scale but pushing it upward from underneath to make it lighter than it really was, so she could pay less than it was worth. But God says, “If you sell anything to your neighbor or buy from

your neighbor's hand, you shall not oppress one another" (Lev. 25:14).

Why are we so often anxious to get things for less than they are worth? Or equally anxious to sell things for more than they are worth? Why do we boast when we buy something for less than it's worth? "'It is good for nothing,' cries the buyer; but when he has gone his way, then he boasts" (Prov. 20:14). The reason? It is basically our deep unbelief—doubt that the Lord will care for us by giving us all we need. No millionaire would haggle over the price of a bunch of carrots because he knows he can afford them at any price. We need to remember that since we are God's children, we are therefore "millionaires." "All things are yours: whether . . . the world or life or . . . things present or things to come—all are yours. And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (1 Cor. 3:21-23).

Gambling, whether legalized or not, is a violation of the eighth commandment. If a million people pay a dollar each into a lottery and then a "lucky" person wins that jackpot, it is not his money—in the sight of God. It is money that actually belongs to others and they should not have been enticed to part with it. Gambling is not "sport," it is selfishness gone wild. A mere handful of people win the jackpots while multitudes often lose either their life savings or their income which their families need for food and shelter.

There is a fatal lure in gambling that tells the victim of this obsession, "Just throw in a few more dollars and maybe you'll win." So on and on the poor victim

of this deception pays out until he gets desperate. Gambling tragedies are terrible.

It may be said that if these victims don't use common sense, it's their fault; they should know better. But the problem is that gambling becomes an addiction of the same basic quality as alcoholism, heroin, or crack. The gambling addict gets to the point where he can't control himself. Such is the craving for something that is not ours.

There is glorious deliverance in the eighth commandment which is an assurance from the sin of breaking it. The Holy Spirit puts into the believing heart a hatred for taking anything that is not ours. This again is a miracle of grace! Love will motivate us to help the alcoholic not to take a drink, for he is an addict; it will also motivate us to help any addict who has lost his God-given power of self-control.

Perhaps the most famous thief of all history was one of Jesus' Twelve disciples—Judas Iscariot. John tells us that Judas was the treasurer for the little group of Christ's disciples and that he secretly embezzled funds for his own use. His heart always wanted what was somebody else's; and this is what finally drove him to betray the Son of God (John 12:6).

The Holy Spirit has left his story on record for us to learn a good news lesson. After he was paid the "thirty pieces of silver" (the price of a slave!), he was so conscience-stricken for what he had done that he rushed to the Sanhedrin Council and threw the money down on the floor and went out and hanged himself. Now he hated the filthy money that never was rightfully his!

Our dear Lord is so merciful to us: His Holy Spirit will teach us now, before it's too late, to learn to hate anything that is not ours by right. This is how He will keep to us the blessed assurance that is in the eighth commandment—"You shall not steal." He saves us from the sin that ruined Judas Iscariot. That's something to be happy about for all eternity! Thank God for such a Savior!

* An old poem "glories" in the cross of Christ "towering o'er the wrecks of time." There at His cross all humankind line up under two clearly demarcated categories. We all are defined as "thieves," either (a) the repentant one who begged Jesus, "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom," or (b) the unrepentant one who refused to believe what his fellow had seen—that the One between them was indeed "the Savior of the world." No third person was crucified that day; we are all "there" on His right or left.

What did the believing thief "see"?

Don't despise his understanding. The greatest scholars in the world can humble themselves to learn from him. You can learn to "see" a lot of theology in just a few moments when you are crucified side by side with the Son of God—if you will believe. Truth flashed into the mind of that thief: this Man in their midst is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). He is "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42), Paul's "Savior of all men" (1 Tim. 4:10). He is the second or "last Adam" who has reversed all the condemnation that the first Adam brought on the human race.

Anyone can learn an enormous lot when at last he faces the real thing known as death. The repentant thief "saw" that when Christ took away the "verdict of condemnation" that Adam brought on us all, He gave us instead forgiveness, His "verdict of acquittal" (Rom. 5:15-18, NEB; Eph. 1:3-7). Don't underestimate that saved man's knowledge: Jesus gave him an "A+" that morning. His "curse" was transformed into justification. Any theological seminary would be honored to have that repentant thief as a professor.

But if we "see" that Christ has given us all the "gift" of "justification unto life," is that a heresy—being "born justified"? It's not heresy. We are all "born condemned" in Adam; so why can't we be "born justified" in Christ if He is "the Savior of the world," "the Savior of all men"? You believe like the one thief, or you dis-believe like the other.

* You will agree that since the world began there have been lots of good people. But did you know that there has been only *one* righteous act ever performed on this planet? All other so-called "righteous acts" have been only reflections of that one. Only one was the "pioneer" act of righteousness, done on a lone initiative—utterly alone: "As the issue of one misdeed was condemnation for all men, so the issue of one just act is acquittal and life for all men" (Rom. 5:18, NEB).

It's shocking to take a close look at what Paul said there, probably the most highly controversial verse of Scripture he ever wrote. Reading our KJV glosses over a theological landmine lying just

beneath the surface. And glossing over leaves us comparatively blah in our Christian experience.

The KJV merely says, “By the righteousness of one . . . upon all men unto justification of life,” leaving us wondering what it means. The “One” of course we know—Jesus Christ; but what is that “righteousness”? Lo and behold, it turns out that it’s not the usual word for Christ’s righteousness (*dikaiosune*, which is always only “imputed” to us sinful mortals). In other words, we don’t have any of that kind of righteousness on our own.

But here in this verse is a different word for “righteousness”—a righteous “act” performed by One who no longer relied on His own innate righteousness (“*dikaiosune*”), but it is an act performed by Him who had been cast out, “forsaken,” cursed,” by His own Father, “made to be sin for us who knew no sin”—it’s “*dikaionata*.” It’s a “righteous act” performed by One who no longer has any hope of heaven for Himself. The last vestige of egocentric concern is gone forever. A blackness of despair has wiped out what He had said to the repentant thief. In that one “righteous act” there is a total emptying of self, for all eternity. Yes, He “tasted” our second death. Let the truth begin to sink in; let self be crucified with Him.

Are you longing for some solid truth, firm as a rock, that you can trust, that’s also good news? Here it is in Titus 2:11-14:

It’s truth taught by the “grace of God that brings salvation to all men” (vs. 11). It’s not a fear motivation. The “grace” is that “much more abounding” kind that’s greater than all our sin (Rom.

5:20). And it’s given, not merely offered, to “all men.” It overwhelms you when you think about it. “Every man” does one of two things: he either receives it or he rejects it.

That grace (not fear!) teaches us to “say No!” to every temptation to sin that Satan can fling at us (NIV). That’s where our problems are—“worldly lusts.”

We don’t naturally know how to do it, but that “grace” teaches us to “live soberly, righteously, godly, in this present world” right where we are. The worst sinner learns under that tutelage. It’s being in school with Christ as the Teacher. (That’s a great privilege!)

We cherish “the blessed hope” of seeing Him come again—we believe His literal second coming is that soon! Yes, we do! (vs. 13).

That otherwise impossibility is accomplished by comprehending how He “gave Himself for us” (vs. 14). It’s looking, beholding, grasping, absorbing, the four grand dimensions of a love (*agape*) that passes knowledge (Eph. 3:16-19). When you gaze at His cross, the lethal bites of the “serpent” are healed (John 3:14, 15). Yes! Yes!

Why did He “give Himself for us”? To save us “in sin”? No, to save us from all of it (vs. 14 again). You see yourself as the believing thief crucified with Him—yes! Self dies with Him. You share His cross, by living faith.

(g) What He’s doing is to “purify to Himself” 144,000 people in a time when the Enemy says it’s impossible to happen (vs. 14 again; see also Rev. 7:1-4; 14:1-5).