

If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him, but if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him. He shall surely pay. If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. If the stolen beast is found alive in his possession, whether it is an ox or a donkey or a sheep, he shall pay double.

So, first, we see the Lord instructs Israel in the principle of restitution. If a man steals an ox and is caught, he must return the ox. But he also must give a second ox in restitution. It's not enough to reset things to the way they were; the thief must experience the full extent of the damage he caused. If the animals has been sold or slaughtered, the thief must make restitution of five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep. Second, if he can't make restitution this way, he will make restitution by being sold as a slave. Third, a man is justified in defending his property, even using lethal force. At the same time, force must be proportional. If the theft happens in the daylight and the thief is caught, unnecessary lethal force becomes murder.

Under this heading the law also forbade cheating and swindling. One of the most frequently addressed swindles was the use of dishonest weights and measures. Today a grocer might put his thumb on the scale to add a bit to the weight so that he can overcharge the customer. In the ancient world the weights used in commerce were sometimes doctored and merchants would deceive and steal from their customers. Rulers would debase their coinage, reducing the percentage of actual silver or gold or slightly reducing the size of the coins. Rome would become notorious for this, but our modern governments and banks with their fiat currencies

and fractional reserves have taken it to heights the Caesars could never have dreamed of. All of this was out of bounds for Israel in the Lord's land.

Wages and fair treatment of the poor also fall under this heading. Leviticus 19:13 says,

You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning.

In a cash and barter economy where many were day-labourers who lived hand-to-mouth, wages were not to be held overnight. A man would often need that day's wages to buy dinner and food for the next day for his family. There are also a number of passages in the *torah* that ban the charging of interest to fellow Israelites. This is what Deuteronomy 23:19-20 says:

You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but you may not charge your brother interest, that the LORD your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

This one's interesting, because it doesn't ban interest outright. You can charge interest to the foreigner, but not to the fellow Israelite. Why? Because the Israelites are the Lord's people, the land is the Lord's land, and his promise of care and provision extends to all of his people. If an Israelite is in need, his fellow Israelites have an obligation to help him out of their abundance. This is a reminder that Israel's law is not our law, but it's also an important principle to keep in mind. It was true of Israel and it's true of us as Christians: While we have a right to our property, we also need to recognise that what we have is a gift from God and that we ought to be

ready to share freely what we have with those who are in need—and especially with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Yes, when we make a capital investment, we deserve a return on that investment. But that's not how we should treat loans made to friends in need—in fact, better just to give than to loan in the first place.

There are more applications, but these are some of the major ones. But one final Old Testament application comes from the prophet Malachi. The Lord instructed the people about tithes and offerings. They were expected to look after the poor in their midst. They were expected to be generous with what the Lord had given them. But they were also given specific instructions about supporting the formal ministry of the priesthood and the temple. Through Malachi, the Lord rebuked his people for stealing from him and explains that this is why their land of plenty has become barren. Here's Malachi 3:8-10,

Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.

Again, this is the Old Testament. The tithe is an Old Testament principle, but I think you get the idea here. Everything they had was from the Lord. They would have still been slaves in Egypt if it hadn't been for him. They were expected to be generous in return out of gratitude. The *torah* specified a tithe of ten per cent along with various offerings to support the ministry of the priests. They were the mediators between the Lord and his people. While we have

sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

I think, too, that Jesus and Paul both gives us some perspective on how we should treat our private property. The Bible is clear: our property is our own. No one has a right to it. But at the same time, we follow a Saviour who gave his life for the sake of his enemies and he calls us to sacrifice for the sake of the gospel that we might have a gospel witness of his kingdom. Jesus reiterated the command, You shall not steal. But in the Sermon on the Mount, he also addresses this issue of rights. Here's what he says in Matthew 5:39-42.

I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

A Christian has as much right to his or her property as anyone, *but* the Christian also has higher priorities than putting up a fight for his property. Just as Jesus gave up his rights for the sake of the world, we are called to give up our rights for the sake of the gospel. That we are willing to turn the other cheek rather than strike back, that we are willing to give our clothes to a thief rather than use force to keep what's ours, that we're willing to freely give and trust God to provide for our needs is a witness to our faith in him.

I think this is in part what Jesus is getting at when he says to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and when St. Paul writes about paying our taxes and being peaceable citizens. John the Baptist called on the soldiers who came to him in repentance not to use

their position to steal anymore. Jesus prompted Zacchaeus, the corrupt tax collector, to return what he had stolen and to do business honestly from that point on. But the New Testament never suggests Christians engage in a tax revolt, even against a government that used those taxes for all sorts of evil and even for the suppression of their fellow believers. Jesus (and then Paul) understood, again, that there are higher priorities for the Christian than demanding our rights. The fact was that the Emperor would one day kneel in submission to the Lord Jesus and bring reforms to his government and empire, but that was going to happen not through violence, but through the patient witness of Christian after Christian after Christian who dramatically demonstrated faith in the Lord, even to the point of allowing themselves to be fed to lions, rather than retaliate. Yes, their property was their property. Yes, Caesar was corrupt and evil. But the Lord had a higher calling on their lives and through their witness he brought Caesar and his empire to faith.

It didn't happen overnight. It took three centuries. But it happened. And if it happened to the Roman Empire, it can certainly happen again. Now, there was nothing those early Christians could do about the government of Caesar. The only voice they had was their gospel witness and, for many, their martyrdom. In contrast, we live in a democracy. I think this is something to consider as we're in the midst of another election season and as politicians pander to us by offering us favours paid for with our neighbours' money. Are we letting them play to our greed? Are we casting votes in return for favours paid for by the despoilment of our neighbours? Brothers and Sisters, we'd better not be. The opposite ought to be the case. Christians ought to be using our political voice to stand up for the property rights of others, to stand up against greed, and to stand up against corruption. Standing up for

the rights of others is a part of our witness—we stand for what is right, we stand for justice, we stand in defence of our neighbours. But that said, even more powerful witness in this regard lies in our holding lightly to our property and our money. When it is taken unjustly, we let it go. When we see another in need, we give. We do that because we trust in the providence of God—in his goodness, in his care, in his generosity. And, Brothers and Sisters, we trust because we know and have experienced first-hand his covenant faithfulness. In a world filled with greedy and grasping hands, I can think of few things that better witness our faith than that the Lord's people should live with our hands generously open.

Let's pray: Gracious Father, we give you thanks for your good care and provision. We ask this morning that you would convict us where we have been greedy or wasteful with our property and money and of those ways and times that we have stolen from you and from our neighbours. Reminds us to look at our worldly goods through the lens of the cross of Jesus, that we might dedicate everything to you and make your kingdom and the good news about Jesus our first and greatest priority. Each week we say those words, "All things come from you and of your own have we given you." May we truly see your gifts in that light. Amen.