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## TO CURE A THIEF

Ephesians 4:28

By

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April 6, 2008  
Ephesians Lesson 34

To Cure a Thief  
Ephesians 4:28

At first glance, you may wonder why Paul included a verse about stealing in a letter to Christians. And, you may wonder why I would devote an entire message to this verse. After all, isn't stealing just a problem for unbelievers, not for us evangelical Christians?

I won't do it, but to get us to face reality, I could ask for a show of hands (heads bowed, eyes closed, of course) as to how many were tempted to steal or actually stole something in the past month. Since most of us have been working on our taxes during that time, it might be more skewed than at other times. We're all tempted to think, "The government wastes billions of dollars every year. They won't miss the tax on the extra income that I made in cash if I don't report it!" But to act on that temptation is stealing!

While few of us would be tempted to pull off an armed robbery, if the situation is just right, it can be *very* tempting to take what does not belong to us. A 20-year Pinkerton study found that 30 percent of the population will steal, not only if the opportunity arises, but also will create the opportunity whenever possible. Forty percent will steal if there's little danger of getting caught. Only 30 percent won't steal at all (L. M. Boyd column, 9/6/1999). But I would venture to say that even the 30 percent would be tempted,

- Ø If there's no chance of getting caught;
- Ø If it's something you really need and can use;
- Ø If it's a small item that won't be missed;
- Ø If you figure that the company or government agency can afford it; or,
- Ø If you rationalize that everyone else takes little things.

People don't need much encouragement to steal. According to a 2002 National Retail Security Survey, inventory shrinkage (a combination of employee theft, shoplifting, vendor fraud and administrative error) cost U.S. retailers over \$31 billion, which was 1.7 percent of their total annual sales. Inventory shrinkage remains the single largest category of larceny in the United States, more

than motor vehicle theft, bank robbery and household burglary combined. Ultimately consumers are hurt the most in the form of higher prices. An average family of four will spend more than \$440 per year in higher prices because of inventory theft ([http://retailindustry.about.com/od/statistics\\_loss\\_prevention/1/aa021126a.htm](http://retailindustry.about.com/od/statistics_loss_prevention/1/aa021126a.htm)). And, that number probably does not include the amount that retailers spend on security and theft prevention!

The Internet has opened up a whole new avenue for thieves, namely, identity theft. Back in 2003, one in four American households were victims of identity theft in the previous five years (*USA Today*, 9/04/2003). In 2003 alone, identity theft cost individual victims \$5 billion in out-of-pocket expenses and nearly \$48 billion in losses to businesses and financial institutions (<http://www.white-canyon.com/identity-theft-statistics-ut-09-2003.php>).

So, stealing is a widespread *human* problem. As such, it is a huge temptation for us as Christians living in this evil world. In the context of our text, Paul is spelling out in detail a number of changes that Christians must make as a result of the new birth. In general terms, we must put off the old way of life, be renewed in the spirit of our minds, and put on the new way of life (4:22-24). Specifically, this includes putting away falsehood and speaking the truth (4:25); putting aside sinful anger and being careful with righteous anger (4:26-27); and, not stealing, but instead, working and giving (4:28). Stealing goes hand in hand with falsehood, because thieves must lie and deceive in order not to get caught. But,

Believers must stop stealing and instead work hard so that they can give to those in need.

Verse 28 implies several changes: from selfishness to service; from taking to giving; from thinking only of my needs to thinking of the needs of others; from laziness to hard work; from deception to honesty; and, from irresponsibility to responsibility. Our lives as Christians should reflect these changes. Paul doesn't go into any analysis of why people steal. He just says, "Stop doing it." In effect, he is saying, "Stealing isn't Christian behavior. You're a Christian now. So stop stealing." But the Bible does reveal several root causes that lead people to steal. So I want to examine five causes of stealing, contrasting them with five changes that will cure a thief.

1. Stealing stems from a lack of genuine conversion; a main cure for stealing is truly to trust in Christ as your Savior.

A. Stealing stems from a lack of genuine conversion.

People can change from being thieves to being honest apart from the gospel, but that is just moralism. Many unbelievers pride themselves on being honest people, and I'm glad that many of them are honest, in that it makes for a better world. But, apart from God giving a person a genuine change of heart, they are prone to thievery. Jesus said (Mark 7:21-23), "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."

So if stealing proceeds from within, from the heart, the problem cannot truly be dealt with apart from a supernatural change of heart, which the Bible describes as the new birth:

B. A main cure for stealing is truly to trust in Christ as your Savior.

Paul warned the Corinthians (1 Cor. 6:9-11), "Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God."

The great news of the Bible is that none of these terrible sins put a person beyond the reach of salvation. Jesus came to save sinners. Even though your life has been consumed with any or all of these sins, as many of the Corinthians' lives had been, God can deliver you from them through the power of the cross (see 1 Cor. 1:18-31).

But, Paul's warning indicates that a person may make a profession of faith in Christ and yet continue to live in these sins. Such a person is deceived into thinking that he will inherit God's kingdom, but he will be shocked to hear the Lord say, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23).

In other words, while believers may fall into these sins, if they characterize someone's life, with no repentance and no effort to change, it is evidence that he is not genuinely converted. So the cure for stealing is to make sure that you have been washed from your sins through faith in Jesus Christ, crucified in your place.

2. Stealing stems from a temporal value system; a cure for stealing is to establish biblical priorities.

A. Stealing stems from a temporal value system.

If you're living for the things of this world, you'll be tempted to steal to get those things if the opportunity presents itself. Jesus said (Matt. 6:19-21), "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." If your treasure is on earth, your heart will be on earth. And since theft is a heart problem (Mark 7:21-23), you've got to ask God to change your heart from a temporal value system to an eternal one, where your supreme treasure is the joy of being with Jesus in heaven.

The apostle John wrote (1 John 2:15-17), "Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever." He's making the same point as Jesus: a person with a temporal value system—who values money, status, and material things above eternal matters—has a heart problem. It is a matter of what you love or desire. If you love earthly things more than heavenly treasures, you will be more prone to steal to get them.

A person with a temporal value system will usually be out of line in several ways:

Ø He views things, not God, as the key to happiness.

He thinks that if he can just get that new car, that nicer home, or that latest gadget, he will be happy. His happiness centers around a steady influx of new things. Heaven may be nice for the

far-distant future, but his focus right now is on accumulating more and more things. The “prosperity gospel” (which is heresy, not a gospel at all) promotes this mindset. God becomes the means to your material prosperity. But He is not your chief joy; rather, it’s the stuff that He can provide for you.

The most tragic example of this in the Bible is Judas, who was the treasurer for Jesus and the disciples. Rather than pursuing the joy of knowing Jesus intimately, Judas used his position to steal (John 12:6). This set him up for Satan’s main aim, which was to get Judas to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. That was the worst of all possible trades!

Ø He views things as the key to success and status.

This is the “boastful pride of life,” to think that success and status will bring satisfaction to your soul. This person seeks to impress others with his things—the way he dresses, the cars that he drives, or the expensive toys that he owns. Such a life is built around a temporal value system.

Ø He views things as the key to future security.

A person with a temporal value system isn’t trusting in the Lord for the future, but rather in his financial portfolio. If a man thinks that he is set because he has plenty of solid investments, or extensive real estate, or a fat retirement account, he’s trusting in the wrong things. All of those things could be taken in an instant, if an enemy overthrew our government. They will be taken in a heartbeat when he dies (Luke 12:16-21). While the Bible strongly commands us to provide adequately for our families (1 Tim. 5:8), it is wrong to trust in our provisions rather than in the Lord.

If you are living for temporal values, rather than for eternity, you will be more prone to steal when the temptation comes, as surely it will. Even Christians can fall into this. My dad once had business dealings with a man who was a prominent and gifted Sunday School teacher in a large Baptist church. In fact, he was featured in a film about how to be a successful Bible teacher. In his business life, he offered first trust deeds to investors. I saw some of these offerings. They pictured beautiful homes with their addresses. You could invest in the mortgage, supposedly secured by the properties, and receive a secure rate of return.

The problem was, because of his position as a well-known Sunday School teacher, people trusted him without checking on these investments. It came out that he was just making them up and using investor funds to pay early returns, in a sort of Ponzi scheme. The last I heard, this man who was then in his seventies was arrested and sent to prison for fraud. You would think that at that point in life, his focus would be on eternity! But his temporal value system led him to steal.

B. A cure for stealing is to establish biblical priorities.

Godliness, not financial gain, should be your aim. In 1 Timothy 6:5, Paul warns Timothy about men “who suppose that godliness is a means of gain.” They were an early version of today’s prosperity teachers, using religion for personal financial profit. Paul goes on to say that we didn’t bring anything into the world, so we won’t be taking it with us in a U-Haul! He then warns (6:9-11),

But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love perseverance and gentleness.

A starting point to establish biblical priorities is to yield the rightful ownership of all your assets to God. You don’t own any of it; He owns it all. You just manage it for Him and you will give Him an account someday of how you managed it in light of His kingdom purposes. If you think of your money and possessions as belonging to God, you will not be prone to stealing.

3. Stealing stems from not trusting God to supply your needs; a cure for stealing is to trust God for finances through prayer and financial faithfulness.

A. Stealing stems from not trusting God to supply your needs.

A person who steals is obviously not trusting God to provide. Rather, he is disobeying God and probably justifying it by thinking, “I’ve got to do what I’ve got to do to survive.” Martin Luther once

came upon a group of peasants who were breaking into a mill to take some corn. "What do you think you're doing?" he demanded. Terrified, one of the men answered, "We know it's wrong to steal, but after all, we have to live." Luther indignantly responded, "I do not know that one must live. But one *must* be honest!" (In "Our Daily Bread," Summer, 1979.) Not trusting God leads to stealing.

B. A cure for stealing is to trust God for finances through prayer and financial faithfulness.

God not only wants you to pray, but also to work hard, as we'll see in a moment. But we all need to depend on God through prayer to provide for our basic needs. The Lord taught us to pray (Matt. 6:11), "Give us this day our daily bread."

Also, part of trusting God for adequate finances is that we act with financial faithfulness. In other words, you can't ask God to provide for your financial needs at the same time that you're squandering His resources on careless living. I have repeatedly seen Christians who ask the church for financial help. But then I see them taking the family out to dinner, or I go to their house and see a large screen TV, hooked up to the cable! Or, they run up credit card debt on frivolous purchases, but they don't pay their basic bills. So, when an opportunity to steal comes along, they yield to the temptation. At the root of their sin is that they are not trusting God for finances and they're not being faithful stewards.

4. Stealing stems from laziness; a cure for stealing is to assume responsibility through hard work.

A. Stealing stems from laziness.

The thief doesn't want to work, so he steals instead. I have seen people who work so hard at stealing that if they worked that hard at a real job, they'd do okay! But working would take weeks or months to get what you can often steal in a few minutes. So thieves are often lazy people.

Some lazy people manage to hold down jobs, but they're still prone to steal whenever they see an opportunity. They don't want to work hard and be disciplined with their money. They see stealing as an easy and quick way to get ahead. Laziness is at the root of their sin of stealing.

- B. A cure for stealing is to assume responsibility through hard work.

Paul says, "but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good." The word, "labor," means hard work or toil. God ordained work as a good thing. Adam was given work to do in the garden before the fall. And while Paul's mention of working with our hands does not prohibit management or desk jobs, it does indicate that manual labor is a reputable and godly way to make a living. After all, Jesus was a carpenter and Paul made tents.

If you struggle with the temptation to be lazy (and thus to steal), my counsel is to get a job that pays a fixed wage and requires you to work fixed hours, because the discipline imposed by that kind of job will help you. A self-employed person must be self-motivated to discipline himself for work, or he will not succeed. So, get a steady job. When Paul says, "what is good," he means a job that is useful in some capacity to people. There are certain jobs that Christians should not work in. For example, Christians should avoid working at casinos or liquor stores. Some jobs may be permissible, but they will put you in situations of strong temptation. If your job is causing you to stumble, look for another job.

To this point, a person could stop stealing and start working to provide for his own needs, and yet live a self-centered, materialistic lifestyle. So the final point is essential:

- 5. Stealing stems from selfishness and greed; a cure for stealing is to look for opportunities to serve and give.

- A. Stealing stems from selfishness and greed.

Thieves are selfish and greedy. They do not care about others or think about others' needs, but only about themselves. They want what they want and they will take advantage of others to get it. Often, such selfish people think, "They owe it to me," or, "I deserve it." I've read that studies show that prisoners, who are often there because of theft, have much higher self-esteem than the population at large! Their inflated view of self makes them think that they can take what belongs to others.

- B. A cure for stealing is to look for opportunities to serve and give.

The person who works so that he can accumulate more stuff for himself has not dealt the axe-blow to the temptation to steal, because he is still essentially a selfish and greedy person. The cure for stealing is to work to earn money so that you can give to those in need. In other words, your mindset has to change radically from using money to serve yourself to using it to serve others.

The Bible condemns lazy people who refuse to work and then try to sponge off of others (2 Thess. 3:10; plus many references in Proverbs about the sluggard). If someone is able to work but does not; or he spends money on frivolous things and then doesn't have money for necessities that he knew would come up later; the Bible mocks him as a fool. We are not under obligation to give to such people. In fact, to give to them is wrong, because it only encourages them to continue in their irresponsible ways. Love tries to teach, but if the person refuses to obey, love allows him to suffer the consequences of his foolish behavior.

But, there are people who are unable to work due to physical limitations or who have suffered financial setbacks due to health problems or some catastrophe. The cure for stealing is to look for those in need and serve them by sharing what you have earned through hard work.

### Conclusion

A few years ago, a Church of England priest made the news when he suggested that it is not a sin to shoplift, as long as the victim is a big store. He said that it is wrong to steal from individuals or from small merchants. But, he rationalized, with giant retail corporations it's different. He said that he wasn't encouraging shoplifting, although he said, "if people wander in and wander out without paying for the stuff, I think it is a perfectly comprehensible action" (*Arizona Daily Sun*, 3/6/97)!

If by "comprehensible" he means, "understandable," I'd say, "Yes, I understand why people steal." But if he means that it is justifiable to steal, he is denying God's Word! Believers must stop stealing and instead work hard so that they can give to those in need. When the former thief becomes a worker and a giver, he has cured the problem!

## Application Questions

1. What should a Christian (who can't afford to lose his job) do if his boss asks him to fudge an account statement in favor of the company?
2. How can a lazy person recognize this sin in himself and then overcome it? What steps should he take?
3. What are some jobs that a Christian should never take? What are some jobs that may be morally difficult for Christians?
4. Is it wrong for Christians to gamble? Is this a form of stealing? Why/why not?

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