

Introduction

I begin by drawing your attention to the title of this sermon, *Property Rights*. That title might make you think you're attending a legal conference instead of a worship service. That's because property rights, as you know, are a vital component of governmental law.

The Fifth Amendment to the United States Constitution, for instance, contains what is called "the Due Process Clause." It states: **"No person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law."** It also contains what is called the Eminent Domain clause. It states: **"Nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation."** Those clauses reflect that the protection of private property is a primary concern of our federal government.

Or consider our own Ohio Revised Code. Sections 2909 to 2913 delineate over 40 criminal laws that relate to people's private property. Those criminal laws reflect that the protection of private property is a primary concern of our state government.

But property rights aren't just a vital component of governmental law. More importantly, they're a vital component of divine law as well and that's what I'm going to preach about today, what God says about people's property and how we should regard and treat it.

Property Rights as a Component of God's Law

In the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, God delivered the judicial, moral, and ceremonial laws that would govern His chosen nation, Israel, in the Promised Land. The three passages we read are part of the judicial laws. Let's quickly examine each one.

The first is Exodus 20:15. God commands, **"You shall not steal."** That means don't take another person's property and use it as your own without his or her consent.

The second passage is Exodus 22:14-15. Verse 14 prescribes that if a person borrows someone's property and it breaks or, if it's an animal,

dies, while he's using it, he is liable. He must pay the owner what it's worth in money or kind. But according to verse 15, if the owner is there, and able to supervise its use, or if he rented it out, the borrower or renter isn't liable. He doesn't have to pay.

The third passage is Deuteronomy 22:1-4. It debunks the old adage, "**Finders keepers; losers weepers.**" If a person finds an animal lost or according to verse 3 "**anything lost**" he has the obligation to return it to its owner. If he doesn't know who the owner is, he has the affirmative duty to find that out if he can, and then return it.

These three passages have something in common. They're about property. The first passage, Exodus 20:15, is the eighth of the Ten Commandments that are the kernel of God's law. It spawned other Old Testament property laws, including those in the other two passages.

Together, all three teach that property rights are a vital component of God's Law. One of His primary concerns in human life is how people regard and treat each other's property. Or to say it in different terms, how we regard and treat other people's property is a matter of discipleship to Jesus. During Poland's Independence Day activities, I found a man's wallet that contained three credit cards and \$125 in cash. I've said before that discipleship to Jesus encompasses literally every aspect of our lives. That includes what I would do with that man's wallet. We find a wallet, check out a book from the library, rent a DVD, borrow our neighbor's lawn mower, use our company's expense voucher, rent a motel room, and so on. We cast our allegiance for or against Jesus by how we regard and treat other people's property.

So, let's cast our allegiance for Him by doing three things.

Value Other People's Property

The first is, value people's property for their sake. Old Testament property laws imply two things that compel us to do that.

One is that people's ownership of their property is a God-given right. God gives every person on earth the right to possess property that

belongs only to him or her. I'm talking about property over which no one else has control, including the government.

Do you realize what that means? Property rights are human rights. Human rights, by definition, are basic rights to which all human beings are entitled. The Declaration of Independence calls them "**inalienable rights**" and includes life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness among them. But there are others including the ownership of property. Because it's a God-given right, it's a human right as well. Human beings are as entitled to it as they are to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

That explains an observation that eminent economist and historian Herbert Schlossberg made: "**There are no societies that are cavalier (careless or disdainful) toward property rights but which safeguard human rights. The state that lays its hand on your purse will lay its hands on your person.**" That's true not only at the governmental level but the personal level as well. We usually regard and treat people themselves the way we regard and treat their property.

Old Testament property laws imply a second thing. People's ownership of their property is a psychological need. There is a strongly defined and natural link between their property and their personhood.

How many of you have ever had something stolen from you by burglary, robbery, deception, or any other means of theft? Try to do something if you have. Remember exactly what you thought and how you felt the moment you realized it had been stolen. When Jill and I lived in Barberton, we came home one day and found that burglars had stolen a wedding ring, a watch, money, a stereo, and a television set from our home. I can tell you how Jill and I felt, "**violated.**" I've heard several burglary victims use that same word and it's an accurate one. There's a strongly defined and natural link between people's property and their personhood. Consequently, whenever we touch their property, we're touching their persons as well. What we do to it physically, good or bad, we do to them psychologically.

Those then are two things that Old Testament property laws imply.

People's ownership of their property is a God-given right and a psychological need. Understanding and believing those two things compels us to value other people's property for their sake. When I found that man's wallet, I wasn't inclined at all to keep it. On the contrary, I felt strongly compelled to return it. Why? It's because I recognized his right and need to have it back. I valued his property for his sake.

Don't Steal Other People's Property

We cast our allegiance for Jesus by doing a second thing. According to Exodus 20:15, we don't steal other people's property.

Some people, whom we call criminals, steal blatantly. When I began practicing law, I took criminal appointments. In one of them, a security officer saw my client stuff his jacket with Lucky Strike cigarette packs, waited for him to exit the store, began chasing him (with Lucky Strike packs flying everywhere), and finally apprehended him. He was caught red handed and eventually pled guilty to petty theft. That's how criminals steal – blatantly – and the eighth commandment prohibits it.

That's all well and good but how in the world does the eighth commandment apply to decent people like us? After all, we aren't criminals. We aren't going to commit any of the theft offenses in the Ohio Revised Code. Or are we?

Several years ago, my wife and I were in line at Chuck E. Cheese behind a family that we could tell, from their conversation, was churched. Which was why we were surprised when the mother told the father to order only one salad bar. There was no point in paying for two, she said. She'd just eat from his one instead and did just that. They stole food, in other words, from Chuck E. Cheese.

There's more than one way to skin a cat, and there's more than one way to steal. It's true. Decent people don't steal blatantly. But it's also true. They do steal subtly. They steal in ways that are furtive and insignificant enough that they're able to justify or even ignore it that they do. Someone told me that several Christian friends of hers regularly

violate copyright laws. They download songs to their I-pods for free instead of paying a dollar a piece for them as they're supposed to. They do so without giving it any thought, she said.

But that's precisely the problem isn't it. We need to give thought to things like that. We realize how wrong they are when we do.

So let's do that. Let's give thought to what that church couple and those Christian friends do. All crimes have what are called "elements" that make them up and that must be proven. Listen to the elements that make up the crime of "theft", in Ohio Revised Code 2913.02: **"No person, with purpose to deprive the owner of property or services, shall knowingly obtain or exert control over either the property or services . . . without the consent of the owner or person authorized to give consent."** Here's what I want you to see and it's critical. That church couple taking the salad bar and those Christian friends the songs meet all the elements of theft. The implications are profound. When they do that, they're violating God's law, Exodus 20:15, which makes them sinners. They're also violating Ohio's law, Ohio Revised Code 2913.02, which makes them criminals. Most decent people don't think about that but they should.

The bottom line is that stealing a salad, songs, or anything else in any way no matter how subtle, isn't worth what it makes us – sinners and criminals. So, don't steal.

Treat Other People's Property the Same Way We Treat Ours

There's a third thing we do to cast our allegiance for Jesus. According to Exodus 22:14-15 and Deuteronomy 22:1-4, we treat other people's property the same way we treat ours.

Most of us know the Golden Rule that Jesus articulates in Matthew 7:12, **"In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you."** But remember what I said. There's a strongly defined and natural link between people's property and their personhood. Which reveals an inherent principle in the Golden Rule,

what I call the Golden Rule of Property. Treat other people's property the same way we want them to treat ours. Or to say it another way, treat theirs the same way we treat ours, assuming we value ours of course.

That means two things as a practical matter. First, on the negative side, we don't vandalize other people's property. We don't purposely or even negligently damage or destroy it. We wouldn't do that to ours. So, we don't do it to theirs either. Second, on the positive side, we do care for other people's property. We actively preserve and protect it. We would do that to ours. So, we do it to theirs as well.

Have you ever examined a DVD that you checked out of the library or rented from a video store? Their surfaces are usually a mess with scratches, fingerprints, food, and who knows what else on them. Well, they wouldn't be that way if people followed the Golden Rule of Property. I do not, for instance, put my fingers on the surface of my own DVD's. I only put them on the edges. Following the Golden Rule of Property, therefore, I do not put my fingers on the surface of library or video store DVDs either. I only put them on the edges. I treat their DVDs, in other words, the same way I treat my own.

That illustrates the Golden Rule of Property and how almost endless its applications are. We rent a chain saw or car. We check out a book. We borrow a lawn mower. We lease a home. We sit in a movie theatre's seat. And so on. Whatever the property is and to whomever it belongs, we treat it the same way we treat our own. We don't vandalize it - damage or destroy it. We care for it - preserve and protect it - instead.

Conclusion

Those then are the three things we should do. Value other people's property for their sake, don't steal it, and treat it the same way we treat our own. Doing those three things is a matter of discipleship to Jesus. Why? It's because He has the same vital concern that our governments do, property rights. And as His disciples, so should we!