

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON SEVENTY)

“GOD GLORYFYING WORK”

EPHESIANS 4:25-28

25 Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another.

26 Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath:

27 Neither give place to the devil.

28 Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth.

Approximately 30 years ago, the American evangelical pastor and author, **Raymond Charles Stedman**, preached a sermon in **Palo Alto, California**, entitled, *“Living in Focus.”* At the beginning of his sermon, Pastor Stedman made the following remarks:

“A number of years ago at **Stanford University**, **Arnold Toynbee**, the prominent historian, said that most people today have rejected Christianity on the basis of a caricature. What did he mean? He meant that most people have never seen the real thing. **They have never seen real Christianity.** What they have seen was a blurred, distorted and twisted picture of Christianity, and they turned away disappointed and indifferent to the claims of Christ. Well, what were they looking for? Perhaps more than we professing Christians may realize, men and

women in the world today expect to see in Christians some likeness to Christ. If you listen carefully to the protest movements that are so vocal today, and which have captured the ear of the press and the nation, you will see that the heart of their complaint is that they do not see in Christians, and the church, that likeness to Christ which they have been led to expect. That is why they turn away so disappointed, often bitter in their antagonism.

Now the fault, of course, is with the church. I know how easy it is for us to read the papers today and, seeing the spreading tide of restlessness, riot, and lawlessness in our day, point the finger in self-righteousness at this, go 'tut-tut,' and decry it as a terrible thing. Yet, I am increasingly convinced that the finger of blame, if it must be pointed anywhere, should be pointed at the church. It is the church that is at fault-not the rebels, not the world in its evil ways. **For the image of Christ in Christians has been terribly blurred. That is the essential problem.** It is like a picture that is out of focus, where everything is fuzzy, undefined, blurred.

Fortunately, this is not always the case. One of the encouraging aspects of our time is the increasing degree to which Christians are recapturing the image of Christ. He is coming into focus again for the world to see. Men and women everywhere are taking down their religious facades, their posturing pretensions, their self-righteous images of themselves, and are becoming real people again, and, through them, the love of Christ is beginning to show. *Jesus said, 'I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me' (John 12:32 KJV).* **A Christ that has touched the life of a man, and crucified him, will always draw men unto him.**

That is what these studies in **Ephesians 4** have been telling us. Here, in this chapter, among many other places in the Word of God, we see set forth the secret of living in focus. How is it done? How can a person live in a confused, bewildered, pathetically blinded world, where false

ideas and false philosophies are trumpeted abroad on every side, and still be in touch and live in focus? The apostle tells us in **Ephesians 4** that it is by a repetitive walk of two steps. By continuously fulfilling the process of **putting off** the **old life** and **putting on** the **new**. That is possible to a Christian because he has received a new life. *'He that has the Son has life, but he that has not the Son of God does not have life'* (**1 John 5:12**). There is no use trying to live on this level if you have not begun with Jesus Christ, have not received him. But if you have invited him into your life and heart, and he dwells there, as he promised he would, then you can live in a new life and it is that kind of living that captures people's attention. Put off the old, put on the new. Put off the deceitful urges of the old life that still come with all their alluring power. Put them off by a deliberate choice of the will. Agree with God about the old life and then put on the self-giving qualities of the new life in Jesus Christ, by a deliberate act and choice of the will. They are available to you **in him**.

The key to this is to face the fact that you never can be half-and-half at the same time. That is the whole thing. You can never put off part of the old man at any given moment. You must reject it in totality, then you can put on the new. Paul says this also in that wonderful **13th** chapter of **Romans** where he is dealing with the practical level of Christian living. He says there, *'Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof'* (**Romans 13:14**). If you honestly put off the old, then you can truly put on the new, but you cannot do the second until you have done the first. We find ourselves clinging to part of the old life, hanging on to areas of it that we particularly enjoy, wanting to defend these and excuse them, and therefore we cannot put on the new. **If we honestly put off the old, we can put on the new; but we cannot put off only the outward actions of the old while the heart remains the same.** If we do, we shall discover we are unable to put on the love, the compassion, or the joy of Jesus Christ, but we will try to imitate it, and when we do we

become a phony and our phoniness is evident to everyone but ourselves.”

In our previous 3 Lessons, we have made the point that in **Ephesians 4:25-32**, Paul provides a list of specific sins which were characteristic of the **old man**, but are **not** to be characteristic of the **new man**. He also provides a list of the contrasting virtues. Since the **old man** with all his accompanying lusts has been **put off**, and the **new man**, who is created in the righteousness and holiness of the truth has been **put on**, the lifestyle of a believer should demonstrate that a radical change has occurred.

The first filthy garment of the **old man** that Paul exhorts believers to put off is **dishonesty**. In verse **25**, he writes, “*Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another.*” As new creatures in Christ we are to display the life and loveliness of our Lord. Dishonesty has no place in the life of the **new man** in Christ. We are to **put off** dishonesty and we are to **put on** truth.

The second filthy garment of the **old man** that Paul urges believers to put off is **anger**. In verse **26** Paul writes, “*Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath.*”

When the Apostle says, “*Be ye angry,*” he is speaking of an anger that is approved by God and is to be encouraged in believers. He is actually commanding believers to manifest righteous anger toward sin as a lifestyle! But the words “*and sin not,*” provide a check and restraint to the anger. Paul forbids only a particular form or measure of anger. He is acutely aware that even righteous anger has the potential to become sinful if it is not restrained by the virtue of self-control, which is an expression, or characteristic of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Believers are to **put off** pride which is the root of all sin, including un-godly anger, and we are to **put on** humility which is the root of all righteousness.

In verse **27** Paul writes, “*Neither give place to the devil.*”

The word “*neither*” connects verse **27** with verse **26**. In **Lesson 69**, we stated that if we allow anger to settle in our spirits, it will degenerate into enmity, and we will become bitter and vengeful. The idea indicated by the connection is, that anger which is not dealt with in a scripturally appropriate manner, will eventually afford the devil an opportunity to gain a foothold in our heart and life. The **New English Translation** renders the verse as follows: “*Do not give the devil an opportunity.*”

The word “*give*” is the translation of a Greek word which means, “to grant someone the opportunity or the occasion to do something.” The word is in a construction in Greek which forbids the continuance of an action already going on. Paul is literally saying, “Stop giving the devil a foothold in your heart and life! Stop giving him an opportunity to create division in the Body of Christ!” If we nurture anger and fail to deal with it appropriately, our hearts will be laid open to the devil and to the malignant passions which are associated with his presence and operations.

Brothers and sisters, if we do not want to “give place to the devil” in **any** way, we must resist him in **every** way! If we resist the devil, “*he will flee*” from us (**James 4:7**).

The third filthy garment of the **old man** that Paul urges believers to put off is **theft**. Before we look at what Paul has to say about theft in verse **28**, let us consider what he wrote concerning theft in his letter to **Titus**, one of his sons in the Gospel who was pastoring in Crete, a Greek island in the Mediterranean Sea:

In **Titus 2:9-10** Paul wrote the following to Titus,

9 Slaves are to be subject to their own masters in everything, to do what is wanted and not talk back,

10 not pilfering, but showing all good faith, in order to bring credit to the teaching of God our Savior in everything.

(**New English Translation**)

The word “*pilfering*” is the translation of a Greek word which means, “to set apart for oneself, to withdraw secretly and appropriate to one’s own use by a breach of trust.” It conveys the idea of stealing small amounts repeatedly for one’s own use or purpose. Paul is writing to Titus and instructing him to tell the slaves in Crete, that they are not to keep setting apart for themselves a part of that which had been entrusted to their care by their masters.

He says “*not pilfering, but showing all good faith.*” The word “*showing,*” is the translation of a Greek word which means to demonstrate or prove, either by word or act. The word is in the present tense indicating that this should be their habitual practice. Paul tells Titus to urge the redeemed slaves to be continually demonstrating, by their words, and even more so by their actions, that they were loyal and could be fully trusted. They were to prove to their masters that they were faithful servants. In **1 Corinthians 4:2**, Paul wrote: “*Now what is sought in stewards is that one be found faithful*” (**New English Translation**).

Now, what did this spiritual dynamic look like in everyday practice? Owners of slaves were accustomed to slaves being dishonest and stealing. The vast majority of slaves operated in this manner. When a master came across a slave that was honest and could be trusted implicitly, he would be intrigued, and would wonder what was it about such a slave that made him or her so radically different from his or her fellow slaves, especially if the slave had not always been trustworthy. Eventually these pagan masters would learn that it was as a result of the slave’s encounter with Jesus Christ, and his or her relationship with Him, that he or she was now so different! They would come to appreciate that what they were witnessing was the Lord Jesus Christ, living out His beautifully efficacious life in the life of the slave! This would ultimately “*bring credit to the teaching of God our Savior in everything.*”

Brothers and sisters, unsaved persons are always looking for a flaw in the lives of those who profess to be Christians. The honesty, loyalty and

diligence of believers is a stark contrast to the dishonesty, unfaithfulness and laziness of the general worker. Paul urges Titus to encourage the believing slaves who have been taught sound doctrine, to live it out before a watching world who is skeptical, indeed cynical about the transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Charles Spurgeon writes that, "The life of the Christian, even if he be a servant, is to be an 'ornament' of Christianity. Christ does not look for the ornament of his religion to the riches or the talents of his followers, but to their holy lives."

Beloved, do we "*bring credit to the teaching of God our Savior in everything,*" or do we discredit the teaching of God by our lack of honesty and diligence? The truth of **Titus 2:9-10** is applicable to all believers, for whether we are employees or employers, our lives are continually either bringing credit to the name and doctrine of God, or disgrace to His name and doctrine!

Brothers and sisters, as believers, we should order our lives in such a manner that unsaved persons will be attracted to our Savior and Lord. Our main motive should be to honour and glorify Him. We need to carefully consider our attitude and behaviour, especially on our job. What will our attitude and behaviour cause our employers and co-workers to think about Christ and the Christianity that we profess to follow? **Our lives must be the foundation for our verbal witness.** If our lives are not examples of godliness, then let us not tell anyone that we are Christians! We do not have to be perfect, but we do need to live consistently godly lives in order to beautify the gospel. If and when we fail, we must confess our sin and ask forgiveness of those we have wronged. Such an attitude and conduct also demonstrates the reality of the gospel in our lives, and may be a powerful witness.

We will now return to our text. In **Ephesians 4:28** Paul writes, "*Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his*

hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth.”

Some of you may have heard of the infamously erroneous way in which this verse was once quoted by an individual, who discovered that in the early manuscripts of the New Testament, words were not divided up into sentences and paragraphs, neither were there any punctuation, as we have them in our English translations. The individual felt that since the punctuations were not inspired, he could punctuate it to suit himself. Rather than reading, “Let him that stole steal no more.” He read, “Let him that stole steal, no more let him labour, working with his hands.” Perhaps this indicates how far a person will go in order to justify his or her sin.

Brothers and sisters, what we have here is in fact, a categorical demand that believers stop stealing, and that means stealing of all kinds. As **Ray Stedman** states, “This is not a word addressed only to the professional thief, but includes all amateurs as well, and covers all amateur forms of stealing, no matter how sophisticated they may be. It includes shoplifting, tax dodging, shady bookkeeping, borrowing without returning, obtaining money on false pretenses, false advertising, shifty promotion schemes, and whatever else may be the means of depriving another of his property without giving him true value in return.”

The **New English Translation** renders the verse in the following way: *“The one who steals must steal no longer; instead he must labor, doing good with his own hands, so that he will have something to share with the one who has need.”*

When we examine verse **28**, we notice that it contains 3 commands.

First, *“Let him that stole steal no more.”*

Second, *“But rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good.”*

Third, *“that he may have to give to him that needeth.”*

John Piper points out that “there is a progression here from an inferior to superior way of life. First, you can **steal** in order to **have**. Second, you can **work** in order to **have**. Third, you can **work** in order to **give**. The first two ways of life describe an illegal and a legal way of satisfying the drive of covetousness and greed. You can be driven by greed to steal and you can be driven by greed to work. One is illegal; the other is legal. Both are sinful.”

Working in order to **have** is the aim of the vast majority of persons. If we are honest, we would have to admit that it is the goal of many of us. We work in order to satisfy our own needs. However, working in order to merely satisfy our own needs is **not a God-inspired** ideal. God desires for His people to be gainfully employed, not merely to take care of their own needs, **but to assist in meeting the needs of others also!** This is the most radical thing about verse **28**.

The word “*steal*” is a translation of the Greek word **kleptó**: (**klep’-to**), which means “to take by stealth.” It means to take secretly and without permission the property of another. Paul uses the word **klepto** as a noun in the present tense, indicating that the action of stealing is one’s character trait. The sentence in the Greek is, “The one who is stealing, let him no longer be stealing.” The sin of theft was still being committed by some of the members of the Ephesian church! But stealing is part of the **old man** that we are to **put off**. It is part of the corruption that comes from deceitful desires.

God has ordained **work**, not stealing, as the way of getting what we need. Work is a blessing, not a curse. In **Genesis 2:15**, we read the following: “*The LORD God took the man and placed him in the orchard in Eden to care for it and to maintain it*” (**New English Translation**). Adam was working **before the fall**. Work itself is a gift of God. How could it be otherwise since God is the greatest worker of all? Paul says that, “*we are his creative work, having been created in Christ Jesus for*

good works that God prepared beforehand so we can do them.”
(**Ephesians 2:10, New English Translation**).

The words “*no longer,*” are the translation of a Greek word which means “no more, no further, not hereafter.” There were persons in the Ephesian Church who had been thieves prior to their conversion, and some of them were still engaged in theft! And yet remarkably, in chapter **1** and verse **1**, Paul refers to them as “*saints,*” and “*the faithful in Christ Jesus.*” He was aware that no convert to Christianity, including himself, is ever the finished product on this side of eternity. He knew that we are all works in progress, still under construction, gradually being conformed into the image of Jesus Christ. The Apostle does not condemn them. Instead he admonishes them and exhorts them to allow the Holy Spirit to transform them. In offering a corrective to stealing he writes, “*Instead he must labor, doing good with his own hands, so that he will have something to share with the one who has need*” (**New English Translation**).

At first Paul seems to be focused on what we **do**. He says, “*The one who steals must steal no longer; instead he must labor, doing good with his own hands,*” But in the last clause of the verse his focus shifts from working to the **motive** for working. He says, “*so that he will have something to share with the one who has need*”

Paul’s argument is that the goal and purpose of God for His people is not simply that they stop stealing. Neither is His goal and purpose realized when they labour diligently in order to supply **their own needs**. He says that the goal and purpose of God for His people, in all their gainful employment, is realized when they work hard in order to supply **the needs of others also**.

We would have expected Paul to have said, “The one who steals must steal no longer; instead let him work that he might take care of **himself** and not be tempted to steal anymore.” Instead, he lifted human labour to a much higher level. He urges them to work so that they might be able to help **others**! Brothers and sisters, when we steal, we **hurt** others;

therefore, we should work that we might be able to **help** others. Paul knows that even honest labour can become a selfish thing and so he appeals to a believer's love for his brothers and sisters. The motivation given for work was not to accumulate wealth but to have something to share with others. From the biblical perspective, therefore, **work becomes profitable, fulfilling and God glorifying when it enables us to help others!**

Piper says "This is utterly revolutionary. Do you see what it does? It takes the whole of your life, including your secular job, and turns it into a work of grace. Paul wants you to think of your secular job as a means to display God's grace. No more **stealing** in the service of **illegal** greed. No more **working** in the service of **legal** greed. But now **everything is in the service of grace not greed**. Don't steal to have. Don't work to have. But work to have in order to give.

Why? Because this is what it means to walk by faith. The very essence of faith is the delight of the soul in the experience and display of God's grace. And so faith is the power, by grace, to be content with what we have. And faith is also the power, by grace, to be discontent with what others don't have. And so faith doesn't have to steal or hoard in order to be happy. But it does have to give and share in order to be happy. The inflow of God's grace satisfies the heart of faith, and the overflow of God's grace satisfies the needs of others. And faith is utterly addicted to these experiences and displays of the grace of God."

Someone has said, "We make **a living** by what we **earn**; we make **a life** by what we **give**." We can live to **get**, either illegally or legally. Or we can live to **give**.

Wayne Barber, commenting on verse **28**, made the following remarks: "Let's look at **Ephesians 4:28**. I become one who is a giver and not a taker. That is the new disposition. This is the new garment. I don't lie.

My temper is under control. I am frustrating the tempter. Now I am a giver instead of a taker...The difference in wearing the new garment and the old garment is, **the old garment wants to be ministered to. The new garment wants to minister. It wants to give. It doesn't want to take. It wants to give.** The new garment changes everything about your disposition towards all relationships whether at home, church or wherever you are."

John Phillips in his commentary, "*Exploring Ephesians and Philippians*," wrote, "What greater proof of a changed heart and life could there be than for a former thief to seek honest employment, become concerned about those unable to work, and give of his own wages to alleviate the problems of the poor?"

We began our Lesson with an excerpt of Ray Stedman's sermon entitled, "*Living In Focus*." We will conclude with a quotation from the same sermon:

"The world is not impressed by Christians who simply stop stealing, for, at that point, it is very difficult to distinguish between a **conscience of conviction** and a **conscience of convenience**. Even worldlings will stop stealing if the liability of getting into trouble is clear enough, and yet they may be operating only from a **conscience of convenience** as do many Christians....So merely to stop stealing is not particularly arresting. Many Christians stop right here in their Christian experience and expect the world to be amazed, to be impressed by this fact. We are honest. We do not steal. We do not deprive another of his property. There are many Christians who have reached only this stage. They are honest, they do not steal, but no one is impressed. Why? Well, because that is only half the process of living as a Christian. That is **putting off the old**, but go on, **put on Christ**.

What does the rest of the verse say? '*... rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he will be able to give to those in*

need.' Now that is putting on Christ. That is what is impressive. It is not the negative virtue of being honest, but the positive one of being generous, of pouring out to those who are in need, of helping those around from a positive concern and compassion. **That is when life begins to come into focus.** When the image of Christ is no longer blurred, the heart gives joyously, generously, hilariously. That is why Paul writes to the Corinthians, '*God loves a cheerful giver,*' (2 Corinthians 9:7). There is no joy like the joy of giving, for it manifests a heart that is concerned with others' needs. And that is positive Christianity. Put off the old, yes, but put on the new, put on Christ."