

Don't Steal! Steward!

[Note: Since presenting this message to Hope Christian Church on 22 August 2010, several questions have been posed as to the meaning or implication of some statements herein. Therefore, updates have been included --- in brackets and in red --- to clarify these statements and address said questions.]

God Owns Everything

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).”

Ex-nihilo (out of nothing).

“All things were made through Him (Jesus), and without Him, nothing was made that was made (John 1:3).”

“By Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him, and **for** Him (Colossians 1:16).”

Suffice it to say that:

“The earth is the LORD’s, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein (Psalm 24:1).”

God created everything. EVERYTHING. And from His perspective, He owns everything, and we own nothing. NOTHING. As it is written (1 Timothy 6:7):

“For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.”

We own nothing.

[Yet, don't both Scripture and everyday experience indicate that indeed people do own things? From a human perspective, we can use our money to purchase something, such as a car, after which we legally own said thing. At some point in the future, we have the legal right to then sell the thing, and then to keep or use the proceeds as we see fit, indicating that the money is ours. This illustration is found in part in Acts 5:1-4, in which Ananias and Saphira sold a possession and then gave some of the proceeds to the apostles. Thereafter, the apostle Peter rebuked them for lying about the details of this sale and donation, saying (Acts 5:4a):

“While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control?”

This passage implies that humans indeed own things. However, elsewhere the Scripture states, with respect to Christians (1 Corinthians 6:19-20a):

“Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, who you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought with a price.”

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The implication here is that if we own something from the human perspective, God nevertheless owns us from His perspective, such that said thing that we own is truly and ultimately owned by God.

A similar situation exists with respect to sin. For although humans can and do sin against one another, God views all sin against people as ultimately sin against Him. As an example, consider David after he sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1-12:15), after which he wrote (Psalm 51:4):

“Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight, that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge.”

Therefore:]

At best we are called to be interim stewards of God's possessions. We are called for a time to manage that which we receive. We are not called to take that which we want. We are commanded by the Lord of Glory (Exodus 20:15):

“You shall not steal.”

People Steal

And yet, we steal. According to a survey of 15,000 people as reported in the Daily Mail:¹

- 13% of respondents engaged in shoplifting; and
- 80% of respondents had no problem with stealing from their workplace --- 80% !!!

The article author concluded that “the typical Briton is less honest and more confused than most people realize.”

Yet I highly doubt that this problem is uniquely endemic to Britain. I think that it's fair to claim that people of all nations, tribes and tongues are less honest and more confused than most people realize. God has proclaimed (Exodus 20:15):

“You shall not steal.”

And yet, many, perhaps most, possibly even ALL people engage in one form of theft or another at some point in their lives. Oh how God must grieve over the moral depravity of humanity.

Outline

The message is entitled “Don't Steal! Steward!” --- and in this context there are four simple questions to answer :

¹ D.Derbyshire, “How 80% think it's OK to steal from work as study reveals our wavering moral compass,” The Daily Mail, 7 September 2009, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1211629/How-80-think-OK-steal-work-study-reveals-wavering-moral-compass.html>.
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1. What is theft?
2. What is stewardship?
3. Why shouldn't we steal?
4. Why should we steward?

Thereafter, it'll be time to "get practical."

What is Theft (H1591, G2809, G2829)?

Theft, according to the contemporary Merriam-Webster dictionary, can be defined as "the felonious taking and removing of personal property with intent to deprive the rightful owner of it." This definition is suitable for an understanding of theft as depicted in Scripture, provided that property isn't limited to that which is merely material. In this regard, there are several verbs used in English translations that connote the act of theft, including:

- Steal (G2813 - *klepto*)
- Rob
- Defraud
- Withhold (in some instances)

Someone who commits theft is a thief; someone who habitually and perhaps compulsively steals is often known as a *kleptomaniac*. The Lord God --- owner of all --- despises theft, and thus He has declared (Exodus 20:15):

"You shall not steal." (You shall not rob. You shall not defraud. You shall not unjustly withhold.)

This is the "negative" commandment.

What is Stewardship?

The "positive" form of this commandment is this:

"You shall steward."

As it is written (1 Peter 4:10):

"As each one has received a gift (James 1:17), minister it to one another, as good *stewards* of the manifold grace of God."

But what is stewardship?

According to Merriam-Webster, it can be defined as:

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“the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care.”

Don't steal!

Don't engage in “the felonious taking and removing of personal property with intent to deprive the rightful owner of it.”

Steward!

Carefully and responsibly manage everything --- and everyone --- entrusted to your care.

Why Shouldn't we Steal?

There are at least three reasons: Love, Salvation, and Trust.

1. Love / Obedience. Jesus said (John 15:10;14):

“If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love ... You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.”

We shouldn't steal simply as a demonstrable act of love for God and our neighbor.

[That is to say, if we have been saved by grace, through faith, in Jesus as Savior and Lord, then we will be filled with the Holy Spirit, equipped and able to lovingly obey God's commands].

2. Salvation from Wrath. To steal from anyone is ultimately to steal from God. And He has warned us through the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 6:9-10):

“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 homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.”

[In this context, Paul was rebuking those in Corinth who claimed to be Christians --- transformed by grace through faith in Jesus --- yet acted to the contrary. For prior to these verses, he wrote (1 Corinthians 6:8):

“You yourselves do wrong and cheat, and *you do* these things *to your* brethren!”

Paul was reminding those in Corinth that those who claim to love Jesus need to demonstrate that love through obedience to Him --- see 1. Love / Obedience. With regard to theft :]

Did you catch that? Thieves are tucked neatly into the middle of this non-exhaustive list, meaning that those who habitually engage in theft, those for whom stealing is characteristic of their nature, are at a risk of the eternal wrath of God. So then, we shouldn't steal as a matter of self-preservation (self-interest)!

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[Is the implication here that human works -- such as obeying the command to not steal -- accomplish our salvation? Certainly not! The Scripture is clear (Ephesians 2:8-9):

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

However, if we have been saved by God's grace through faith, then we recognize that (Ephesians 2:10):

“We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”

One such “good work” is to not steal. After the apostle Paul rebuked the church in Corinth and reminded them that “the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9),” he immediately followed up with (1 Corinthians 6:11):

“And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.”

The teaching here is that once you are saved by God's grace and the Holy Spirit enters into your life, you cease to be a habitual sinner (though you may still periodically sin). Therefore, a person who claims to be a Christian yet has a habitual lifestyle of sin, such as habitually engaging in theft, is effectively providing evidence that he/she may not actually have been washed, sanctified, or justified. That is, said person is at risk of the eternal wrath of God. Therefore, said person -- truly all people -- need to]

3. **Trust** : [that] **God has Promised to Provide Everything We Need**! Jesus put it this way (Matthew 7:7-11):

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”

This is a marvelous promise! But note that God hasn't promised to provide everything that we want. For some (James 4:3):

“You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.”

The apostle John has provided the clarification (1 John 5:14-15):

“Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.”

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Therefore, we shouldn't steal because if there is anything that we need, we can simply ask the Lord in faith and He will provide it.

Why Should we Steward?

Why should we carefully and responsibly manage everything and everyone entrusted to our care? If something is ours, can't we do what we want with it? Sure, that makes sense. But we've dealt with this issue already.

"The earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein (Psalm 24:1)."

God created everything. EVERYTHING. From His perspective, He owns everything, and we own nothing. O.K. then, so why should we steward? The simple answer is obedient love. We should steward out of love. But let's return to Peter's 1st epistle (1 Peter 4:10-11):

"As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, *let him speak* as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, *let him do it* as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen!"

Don't Steal! Steward! Why? To glorify the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! As it is written (1 Corinthians 10:31):

"Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

Let's Get Practical

This is good; it makes sense. Don't steal! Steward! But thus far all has been a bit ethereal. It's now time to get practical by looking at some of the ways in which we steal, and then conversely, how we should steward.

1. Stealing Possessions / Property

Example: When Jacob left the household of Laban, his wife Rachel stole the household idols (Genesis 31:19), soon after which Laban gave chase, caught up to Jacob and asked (Genesis 31:30b):

"why did you steal my gods?"

Setting aside the foolishness and sinfulness of idolatry, the fundamental principal behind the question is sound: don't steal someone else's property. There are numerous, obvious ways in which people steal possessions and property today; here's one subtle example:

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- Spending time at work “social networking” (texting, sending e-mail, twittering, etc.), when you should be focused on that which you’re being paid to do! This is stealing time and \$ from your employer!

So then, what should you do? As it is written (2 Corinthians 9:6-7):

“But this *I say*: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. *So let each one give* as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.”

And don't just give out of your abundance. Jesus once said (Luke 3:11):

“He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.”

Jesus was radical, and He knew that everything belongs to God. He knew, and He knows, that people tend to accumulate “stuff” that --- while potentially useful to others --- often merely sits unused, collecting dust around our homes. So then, what should we do? Clean house! If you don't actually need something that you have --- consider your wardrobe, or your tools, or your furniture, anything else --- then cheerfully give it away to someone who does, or sell it and give the \$ to those in need or to those who minister to the needs of others. A good example of this, of course, was our Rummage sale yesterday to support Rueben's ministry in Chelsea!

The bottom line: Don't steal someone else's possessions, cheerfully steward and give away your own!

2. Withholding Wages

It is written (Leviticus 19:13):

“You shall not cheat your neighbor, nor rob *him*. The wages of him who is hired shall not remain with you all night until morning.”

The act of withholding wages from someone who has provided services to you isn't the only problem identified; the failure to promptly pay for said services rendered is also a problem! Therefore, don't withhold payment --- from employees, your utility company, your credit card company, or from anyone else that has provided you with services --- promptly pay, on time, and in full.

3. Withholding Tax Payments

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There are some people --- both outside and inside of the Christian community --- who withhold tax payments, primarily due to either laziness or choice. Thankfully, Jesus was once posed with this question (Matthew 22:17):

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

His answer was plain and simple (Matthew 22:21):

“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

The apostle Paul expounded on this teaching (Romans 13:1-2;5-7):

“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 resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. ... Therefore you must be subject, 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 therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.”

Don’t steal from the government by withholding tax payments; pay taxes promptly, and pay in full! And while you’re at it, give thanks and pray for those who love the Lord and labor within the IRS!

4. Withholding Tithes and Offerings

God once declared to the house of Israel [under the Old Covenant] (Malachi 3:8-9):

“Will a man rob God?
Yet you have robbed Me!
But you say,
‘In what way have we robbed You?’
In tithes and offerings.
You are cursed with a curse,
For you have robbed Me,
Even this whole nation.”

Remember:

“The earth is the LORD’s, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein (Psalm 24:1).”

[Note that there are two principles in these verses in Malachi that apply to Christians under the new covenant :]

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God desires that we return a portion of our \$ and possessions to Him, and He considers the withholding of such offerings as theft! So then, what do we [those saved by grace through faith under the New Covenant] do? Let's read on in Malachi (3:10):

“Bring all the tithes into the storehouse,
That there may be food in My house,
And try Me now in this,
Says the LORD of hosts,
'If I will not open for you the windows of heaven
And pour out for you *such* blessing
That *there will not be room enough to receive it.*”

[Herein there is a marvelous promise that applies today under the New Covenant. Specifically, God promises to bless those who return a portion of their \$ and possessions to Him. As has already been shared (2 Corinthians 9:6):

“But this *I say*: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”

But how much should a person (or married couple) sow or return to the Lord? Is the implication here that Christians are obligated to pay a tithe (i.e., one tenth of their income)? No! The tithe was a commandment under the Old Covenant. If someone were to command Jesus' disciples to tithe, you could rightly ask said person (Acts 15:10):

“Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?”

So then, what is the Christian to do? As has already been shared (2 Corinthians 9:7):

“*So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.*”

Specifically:]

Enter into a discernment process with your spouse, if you're married, and more importantly with the Lord, independent of your marital status, and determine if you're stewarding your \$ and possessions accordingly, or

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if you need to return more to Him (e.g., to HCC, parachurch organizations, ministries, or missionaries [**or someone else**]). Give generously to God and His work, and then get ready for His blessing!

Biblical Financial Stewardship Class Announcement

These four examples of theft and stewardship --- which are just scratching the surface of Biblical stewardship --- aren't unique to any particular socio-economic or "other" group; they're common to people of all stripes. Therefore, if you struggle in any area related to Biblical financial stewardship, or if you simply want to learn more about Biblical financial stewardship, then I encourage you to contact either Scott Schuh or Steve Watson to discuss and register for their Fall class.

There are several more examples in Scripture of theft and stewardship; let's focus on just two more:

5. Robbing of Justice

God has declared (Isaiah 10:1-2):

“Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees,
Who write misfortune,
Which they have prescribed
To rob the needy of justice,
And to take what is right from the poor of My people,
That widows may be their prey,
And *that* they may rob the fatherless.”

Although people may periodically directly rob one another of justice -- such as in the administration of excessive punishment to a child or a subordinate at work for some sin -- most people participate in the robbing of justice indirectly, through our elected officials and those (in particular judges) whom said officials appoint. Our God is a righteous Judge ; therefore, let us not be complacent in these matters. Let's "judge with righteous judgment (John 7:24)," at home, in the Church, at work, and in society, and let's actively participate in the process of shaping our government, that it would better reflect our righteous King.

6. Stealing Words

The theft of written words is commonly referred to as plagiarism, which is an obvious sin. I've personally been the victim of plagiarism. However, there's a type of word-theft more grievous than plagiarism: stealing the words of the Lord (Jeremiah 23:30-32a; 36):

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“Therefore behold, I *am* against the prophets,” says the LORD, “who steal My words every one from his neighbor. Behold, I *am* against the prophets,” says the LORD, “who use their tongues and say, ‘He says.’ Behold, I *am* against those who prophesy false dreams,” says the LORD, “and tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies and by their recklessness.” ... (For they) have perverted the words of the living God.”

The misrepresentation of God and His word is a grievous sin that He equates with theft and judges accordingly. For example, in Numbers 20:1-13, we learn that Moses' misrepresentation of God before the people of Israel resulted in His exclusion from the promised land! At the end of Revelation it's written (Revelation 22:18-19):

“For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and *from* the things which are written in this book.”

Don't steal the words of the Lord; don't misrepresent Him or His revelation! [**Do not add to His words, Lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar (Proverbs 30:6)!**] Steward His word : protect the Church from those who infiltrate it with false teaching --- oral and written (Jude 3b):

“contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”

Interim Summary

We've looked at six ways in which people, in which we, violate the 8th commandment, either from the perspective of theft or failure to steward, including:

1. Stealing \$ or material possessions
2. Withholding wages
3. Withholding taxes
4. Withholding tithes and offerings
5. Robbing of Justice
6. Stealing of Words

This is a non-exhaustive list (see the appended Supplement for three additional examples)!

Self-Examination

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So then, are you a little uneasy? Are you sensing the depth of the commandment (Exodus 20:15)?

“You shall not steal.”

Are you feeling the weight and burden of the law? Then it's time for some self-examination. I'll start with myself (Romans 2:21):

“You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal?”

That's a good question. Have I ever stolen? Robbed? Defrauded? Unjustly withheld? Have I ever failed to properly steward? Yes. How about you? You may not be a teacher, but the question is the same: Have you ever stolen? Robbed? Defrauded? Unjustly withheld? Have you ever failed to properly steward?

James has written (James 2:10):

“For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one *point*, he is guilty of all.”

Do you feel the weight of the law? Have you stumbled on even one point? Do you feel guilty before God?

Jesus

While you ponder those questions, let's paint a picture, of Calvary.

Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews, was nailed to a cross at a place named Golgotha (John 19:17). There were “two others with Him, one on either side, and Jesus in the center (John 19:18).” According to Matthew, these two others were robbers, both of whom reviled Jesus (Matthew 27:44). Isn't it interesting that of all types of criminals that could have been punished alongside Jesus, both were thieves? While these three were suffering on their crosses, one of the robbers was changed; he no longer reviled Jesus. On the contrary, he began to rebuke the other thief who continued to revile Jesus (Luke 23:39-43):

“Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, ‘If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.’ But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.’”

Both thieves were guilty. Both deserved their punishment. And they knew it. But there was one key difference between them. One of them, after gazing upon Jesus during the day, came to know Him as His innocent,

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blameless, Lord and King. As a consequence, Jesus gave him assurance that despite his imminent death, he would be with Jesus thereafter in Paradise!

Beloved, does this picture not represent the world in which we live today? We all to one extent or another identify with these two thieves. I guarantee that we've all committed theft, or failed to properly steward, at some point or another in our lives. We're ALL guilty of breaking God's law. We're ALL slowly dying and shall soon be dead as a consequence of sin (with the exception of those who experience the rapture of the saints). The key question is:

Do you acknowledge the gravity of your depravity and look upon Jesus in faith as your innocent, blameless, Lord, Savior and King?

If so, then (1 John 1:9):

“Confess (your) sins, (for) He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

And listen closely to the apostle Paul (Romans 8:1-11):

“*There is* therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God *did* by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those *who live* according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace. Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. And if Christ *is* in you, the body *is* dead because of sin, but the Spirit *is* life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.” Amen!

There is no longer any need to feel the weight and burden of the law! Turn to Jesus in faith, surrender to Him as Lord and Savior, and be set free from condemnation, now and forever!

Conclusion

Therefore (Ephesians 4:28):

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“Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with *his* hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.”

Don't steal! Steward! By grace, through faith, with His law written on our hearts! By the power of His Holy Spirit within us, may we cease to be thieves, and become increasingly righteous stewards, for the glory and honor of our mighty King. Amen!

SUPPLEMENT

1. Stealing a Life (Murder)

This is of course the 6th commandment (Exodus 20:13), and we heard a sermon on this two weeks ago. Don't steal someone's life ... a prized possession given to people by the Lord of life ... steward your own! As it is written (1 John 3:16):

“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren.”

In what ways are you willing to sacrifice yourself --- your desires, needs, and possibly very life --- for the benefit of another?

2. Stealing Sexual Purity

This has become a worldwide epidemic, including within the Christian community. Either through pre-marital relationships, extra-marital relationships, pornography, or our simple thoughts, people constantly rob one another of sexual purity. The apostle Paul has a commentary on this matter (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8):

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord *is* the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects *this* does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.”

Enough said.

3. Withholding Correction

As it is written (Proverbs 23:13a):

“Do not withhold correction from a child.”

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And why is that? For if you do, you're robbing a child of that which is necessary for knowledge, wisdom, maturity, and sanctification. Therefore (Proverbs 22:6):

“Train up a child in the way he should go,
And when he is old he will not depart from it.”