“Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labor working with his hands that which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth. – Eph. 4:28.

Here is a text that is startlingly practical. “Let him that stole, steal no more.” This marks and advance upon the primitive church, when we reflect that there are few churches to-day in which an exhortation against stealing would be deemed a necessary thing. But the latter half of the text marks an astonishing retrogression from the early church, if the idea of the end of labor here laid down was the then prevalent one – that one is to work simply to be able to give in charity.

So let us consider two thoughts suggested by this last clause.

1. The sanctity of labor.

Anything is sacred to which God has set his seal and sanction. And here he puts his special blessing upon human labor. “Let him labor, working with his hands that which is good.” The monks of the middle ages sought to turn poverty into a sacrament. Because they would imitate the example of Christ who “though rich for our sakes, became poor,” they took their vows of perpetual poverty, and there were orders of “begging friars” who went from house to house in their coarse garb, collecting alms. But they seem to have forgotten that while Christ was poor he was never idle. From the day, when as a boy he learned to drive the saw and the plan in the carpenter’s shop of Joseph, till the day when his divine mission began to be revealed in those words “Wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business,” he was always employed. “My Father worketh hitherto and I work.” He said. Just as his sonship to Joseph made him heir to the trade of a carpenter his sonship go God made him heir to the business of creation and redemption in which the Almighty has been employed fro the beginning; and he who is filial human obedience used the hammer and saw at Joseph’s bench, must when the hour arrives to do cures, forgive sins, and cast out devils in the workshop of Jehovah’s universe. And so exactly with us at the “sons of God through faith,” we are born in to the obligation to be laborers together with God.”

And when I use the words “laborers together with God.” I do not refer to spiritual work merely. For God has revealed himself to us as a manual laborer. “His hand formed the dry land,” we are told. “The heavens are the work of his fingers.” It is said. In the movements of Divine Providence we are told “that the Lord hath made bare his arm in the sight of all nations. So you see that his divine handicraft has to do with natural things as well as spiritual; with the earth and the water and the sky, God’s hand created all these and his voice pronounced them “very good.” And so he turns to man and says, “Let him subdue the earth which I have created, and till the soil which I have formed; and ride upon the winds and waters which I have poured forth; and harness the lightning’s that I have let loose; and weave the fabrics which I have given; and coin the ore which I have hidden in the heart of the earth, and draw out the oil which I have stored on the rock, and hew the trees which I have caused to grow upon the mountains;” and thus the work in which human hands and human capital are engaged, has the sanction of God’s word as distinctly as the most specific of religious work to which we may bend our hearts. This is apparent at once, when we remember that everything spiritual must have a material basis and support. The music that floats in the air, the lightest and most aerial thing which we can imagine, rests down upon a mahogany case, and ivory keys and iron strings, just as
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much as bunker hill monument rests upon its bed of granite. and without this solid material support, the one could no more be sustained that the other. and so every time you hear the exquisite strains of the piano or the organ, remember that unless somebody’s hands had dug in the earth, and worked in the fire, and toiled at the bench, you could not have had this music. hard work comes first. it operates close to nature. it lays the foundation for all spiritual work. so in order that i may [preach my sermon and carry the gospel to souls, and sent the word of life to those who have it not, it is necessary that you, carpenter, should be at your bench, and you, shoemaker at your last, and you, merchant at your desk. it is a solemn and true fact, that always and everywhere the kingdom of heaven rests on the kingdom of cash for its support and propagation; and however we may sing, “fly abroad thou mighty gospel,” that gospel is as wingless as a stone, unless you make pinions for it out of silver and gold.

“whose image and superscription is this?” asked jesus, as he looked at the roman coin. and they said unto him, ”caesar’s, “render unto caesar the things that be caesar’s and unto god the things that be god’s,” was his reply. the gold of which the coin is made is god’s. but even god must borrow caesar’s signature in order to trade in the market of this world. and it is so to-day. before jesus christ can say to the millions of china, that “god so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son,” he must get the coin of china’s emperor with which to pay tribute. and it is your hand christian laborer, and your brain christian merchants that must provide the coin for him. and so do you not see, that your commission to work with your hands that which is good, is just as binding as my commission to proclaim with my lips that which is good? there is no royal road to heaven either for going ourselves, or for the sending others there.

somebody must gather out the stones, or there cannot be any highway for the redeemed to pass over. the streaming sweat and the horny hands of toil must come before “the garlands and the singing robes of glory.” and if god’s faithful workmen at the plane and at the bench, and in the counting room could only interpret their work they would discover that they are working in the same line with the angels before the throne only a little farther down.

in labor’s ballad oft more piety
   god finds than in tedeum’s melody.”

“What are you doing there?” i ask of the man in the iron foundry, as with black hands and streaming face, he draws out a red-hot bar of iron from the furnace, “doing,” he says, pausing to wipe the sweat from his brow, “i am preaching the gospel to the regions beyond,” you think him crazy, because you know not what is passing in his soul. but he has studied the labor problem to some effect; for he is a christian man and he was just thinking as you spoke — thinking that the missionary could not make swift haste next week to his distant field were it not for the iron rail along which the car is to speed; and he happens to be making one of those rails to-day. oh, “fire and hail, snow and vapor, stormy wind fulfilling his word, mountains and all hills, fruitful trees and all cedars, beasts and all cattle, praise ye the lord.” for the mountains must yield the coal, that kindles the fire, that makes the vapor, that drives the engine, that ploughs the deep, and bears the gospel of peace to the gentiles. and the hills must yield the cedars, that build the ship, that sails over the waters before the stormy wind fulfilling his word. let everything that hath breath praise the lord, and let the dumb elements join in the chorus:
for all are instruments of his glory I the hands of man who “: labors, working with his hands that which is good.”

And then mark the qualification “working that which is good.” No dishonest schemes for money making can find shelter here; no questionable or semi-questionable modes of accumulating cash; no methods of whisking money into one’s pockets by sleight of hand, instead of toil of hand; no style of business in which men are busy only in the arts and methods of over-reaching and out-witting. Oh, hurrying, feverish nineteenth century! How much of thy work is only a method of getting wealth into the hands without toil! How much of it consists in brilliant artifices for picking money out of another’s pocket instead of delivering with hard labor to dig it out of the soil! So you see that there is an unsanctified kind of toil as well as sanctified. If you are a Christian, Christ says to you; “Ye are not of this world even as I am not of this world.” And then he adds, “As the Father hath sent me into the world so have I sent you into the world.”

And now comes the question whether you will use the world for God, or let the world use you for the Devil. You can employ the business of this life in such a way as to be as truly serving the Lord and furthering the Gospel of Christ in your business as any minister does by his study and preaching of the word. And the whole test is whether you use this world or are used by it. A Christian in the world is a missionary. The world in a Christian makes him as apostate. Just as a ship in the water uses the water to buoy it up and to bear it up and to ear it onward with its rich freight of goods; but when the water gets into the ship it sinks it; so the disciple of Christ makes the world his servant if he rightly uses it; he becomes its victim if he permits it to use him.

So my text has a wonderful application to all time. “Let him that stole seal no more.” Don’t engage in any scheme of popular commercial pilfering even; “but let him work with his hands that which is good.” Honest toil to a good end. Of course working with the hands includes everything that is real toil. He who holds a pen in his hand may work as hard as he who wields a sledge hammer; he who drives a quill as an accountant or an editor may toil as severely as he who drives a yoke of oxen or holds a plow. Only let us be able to say that we are working, and the Lord can use us to the utmost extent in his service.

1. The end of labor. “That he may have to give to him that needeth.”

I am sure that many of you never noticed that before. “Let him labor working with his hands, that he may have to give to him that needeth.” “Why,” you say in surprise, “I thought I was to labor to get rich, and lie in a fine house, and have all the luxuries, and enjoy life? Does it say anything about that, Mr. Preacher?” And I again look at the text. I search it very carefully. I bring to bear upon it the microscopic eye of exegesis, and I cannot find anything of the kind.

Well, it’s barely possible that Paul may have said something else on this point. Let us look back. Yes in his farewell to the elders at Ephesus he spoke about it. See him holding up those hands that bear in the palms “the marks of the Lord Jesus,” those hands that are soon to be manacled with Roman fetters, and he says, “These hands have ministered to my necessities, and to them that were with me.” I have showed you all things, how that so laboring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus how he said, “It is more blessed than to receive.” There it is again, you see. Laboring with the hands in order to support the weak; and in order to carry out Christ’s words, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”
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If, therefore, we draw out the philosophy of the gospel in regard to industry it is this: we are to labor not to produce inequalities, but to rectify them; not to increase the piles of wealth that have already begun to grow up around us, but to fill up the hollows of poverty and want that are between the extremes; with one hand to take from her rich brethren, and with the other go give to the poor? If she could exercise this mediation thoroughly she could nearly banish human wretchedness, except that which is needless and culpable, of course. They tell us that if all the wealth that is hoarded up uselessly in the churches and cathedrals of Italy could be distributed and invested in houses and lands for the people, in one year Italy would be turned from a land of poverty to one of comparative comfort. And they tell us that if the American Protestant Churches were to give according to the full ability, there would not be a missionary, or pastor, or lay worker, who could not have ample support in any field to which he should be sent. As it is, hundreds are half paid, hampered, and half starved in the work, while hundreds more with willing hearts, are debarred from entering it for want of funds. This is a dreadful fact for us to face, when we remember that we are acting under the great commission, and are to be judged by it. And when by and by the Lord shall come into his garden, and point to this bare spot, and to that, he will not say as in the first garden, “Cursed be the ground for man’s sake;” but, “Cursed be gold laid up in a napkin, when it might by being distributed have made the wilderness bud and blossom as the rose.”

Well, we cannot set the whole church of God right upon this matter, but we can each one of us put himself right before God. And in order to do this, let every one look to himself; to his means, to his prosperity, to his duty. Let every man look to himself, for here is the enemy that needs watching lest he steal the Lord’s money. This great vortex of self, with its whirling current of greed, and ambition and pride and avarice, it will suck into its hungry maw everything we have if we are not careful. Thousands of dollars, millions of dollars, all drawn in to feed this one little self that is here today and gone tomorrow; rich now, only to wander penniless and bankrupt through eternity, unless it has laid treasures in Heaven. Oh my brethren, the time hastens when we shall meet the Lord face to face; and it may be that some of us may hear him say to us then, “I was a-hungry and ye gave me no meat; thirsty and ye gave me no drink; naked and ye clothed me not.” And to your astonished question, “When saw I the a-hungered, or a-thirst, or naked, and did not minister unto thee?” And he shall say, “In yonder church in the year of our Lord 1881, when I confronted thee with the question, “How much owest thou thy Lord? And with the demand ‘pay what thou owest me to my poor brethren. The heathen hungering for the bread of life, the unprivileged thirsty for the water of life, the lost naked of the garments of salvation and you giving out of your abundance only a pittance, of your ingratitude only a shrug of the shoulders!” “Inasmuch as ye did it not unto these ye did it not unto me.” And now there are two ways by which you may hold yourselves to your duty on this point. First, by a perpetual remembrance of the Scripture text. There is nothing like a word of Scripture to fight you sluggishness with, and rein yourself up to duty.

Write it, then, on every bond you accumulate, on every profit you acquire, “That I may have to give to him that needeth.” Write it on your daily earnings and on your weekly pay, “That I may have to give to him that needeth.” Write it on your investments and on your income, the great amount or the little amount “That I may have to give to him that needeth.” Write it upon your ledgers, on your workman’s tools, on your seamstress'
Spools and needle-case, "That I may have to give to him that needeth." Here is the end of toil and labor. Make self he end and you will kill yourself spiritually, as certainly as one would kill himself by closing the pores of his skin to prevent evaporation.

And then sacredly pledge yourself in solemn bargain to God what you will do, if he shall enable you. I do not approve of pledges generally; but here is one where you will have every pressure and every reminder brought to bear on you to keep it. Human nature cannot be trusted to carry out its generous impulses. If I should succeed this morning in winding you up to the determination to do things you would run down again before next Sunday, unless your resolution is fastened by a ratchet. That is what a solemn promise to pay made to God amounts to: a ratchet to hold one up to the pitch which we have brought him to at the beginning of the year. Talk as much as we please about leaving every one to give according to his religious impulses. Experience has proved how little men will give on that plan. Human nature is given to cheating the Lord. If it were not so he would never have asked that starting question: "What, will a man rob God?" and then answered it with the charge, "But ye have robbed me in tithes and offerings."

I believe in dealing with the Almighty on systematic principles. What if you should say to your grocer or your market-man, "Please don't put me down on your books. I do not like to pledge myself to pay my bills. I like to do it voluntarily." He would probably advise you to trade somewhere else, then. But I believe you are just as much bound to pay your debs to God as to man. And the church the keeps his treasury, has a right as a faithful steward to ask you name on her account books; then if, in the absence of the steward, or by detention from church you fail to make your offering she may send the Lord's bill to you for payment. And now, how much do you owe?

End

This sermon was preached by Rev. A. J. Gordon, D.D., Pastor of Clarendon Street Baptist Church, Boston.

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"WHATSOEVER YE WOULD THAT MEN SHOULD DO TO YOU, DO YE EVEN SO TO THEM!"

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