

Reflecting God The Abundant Giver: 1. Be Honest Stewards of the Gift of Life

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[0 : 00] Well, we come now to our Bible reading this morning, and you will find that in the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 23, verse 15 to 24, verse 7.

That's on page 165, 165 of our church Bibles. Deuteronomy 23, starting at verse 15. Verse 15.

And none of the sons of Israel shall be a cult prostitute. You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a dog into the house of the Lord your God in payment for any vow.

For both of these are an abomination to the Lord your God. You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest.

[1 : 28] You may charge a foreigner, interest, but you may not charge your brother, interest. The Lord your God may bless you and all that you undertake in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it. For the Lord your God will surely require it of you.

And you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what is past your lips.

For you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth. If you go into your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in your bag.

If you go into your neighbor's house, sorry, into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain.

[2 : 35] When a man takes a wife and marries her, then she finds no favor in his eyes, because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house.

And she departs out of his house. And if she goes and becomes another man's wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled.

For that is an abomination before the Lord. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance. When a man is newly married, he shall not go out with the army or be liable for any public duty.

He shall be free at home for one year to be happy with his wife whom he has taken. No one shall take a mill or an upper millstone in pledge, for that would be taking a pledge in life.

If a man is found stealing one of his brothers of the people of Israel, and if he treats him as a slave or sells him, then that thief shall die.

[4 : 07] So you shall purge the evil from your midst. Well, amen. May God bless to us this, his word. Well, let's turn to our Bibles and to Deuteronomy chapter 23 and 24, I think page 165.

Is that right? 165 if you have one of our Vista's Bibles. Now, we've said many times in this series that the Bible is a book all about life because the God it reveals to us is the Lord of life, rich life, whole, fulfilling, flourishing life.

God created life thus in the beginning, and despite man's worst efforts to disfigure, to destroy that life, Jesus Christ came to redeem the life of God for the soul of man.

The thief comes only to steal, to kill and destroy. But I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly.

Not to steal life, but to share his life with us. Note that language of theft. Because at heart, all fallen human beings are life stealers.

[5 : 31] Whereas God is a life sharer and a life saver. Not like all the pagan gods, all the man-made gods, who are takers of life.

Grabbers and getters from human beings to enslave them. Never to liberate them. And so, the people of this true God must, of course, reflect him.

As givers, as sharers of life. Not as grabbers and stealers of life. And hence, this whole last section in Moses' exposition of the way of life for God's people here from midway through chapter 23 to the end of chapter 25 of Deuteronomy that is applying, really, the last three commandments of the Decalogue.

If you read them, you'll see that all through there are references to God giving to his people. So, verse 4 of chapter 24, for example. He is giving them the land as an inheritance.

And verse 18, chapter 24, again, he says, Remember, and again in verse 22, Remember, you were slaves in Egypt. Landless and lifeless.

[6 : 41] But the Lord released you from there. He gave you life in abundance. And the point of all that is clear. All these blessings that you have received vertically from God must be shared by you horizontally throughout your life.

You can't ever be getters, grabbers, stealers of life. You must be generous givers and sharers of life in every way and all God's good gifts of life.

And, of course, the rubber hits the road when it comes to us, especially when we have to deal with the vulnerable. And that's why God's law says that there must always be total honesty in all matters of property and substance.

No stealing. That's the eighth command. And total truth and fairness in all matters of justice. No false witness. That's the ninth. And underlying it all, of course, no covetousness.

The final command. Rather, there's to be the exact reverse. Never among God's people a mercenary self-gain, but always a merciful self-giving.

[7 : 51] Because at the heart of all God's commands is to love him, isn't it, with all our heart and soul and strength. And we show that, says the Lord Jesus, that it's real, by loving also our neighbor as ourselves.

Not stealing from him to diminish his life, but serving him to delight his life beside you. And here's how that will be so in the cold light of day, is what Moses is saying right here in our passage today. And as always, he applies God's commands so as to both help us understand the wideness of its demands on us.

So he gets under our radar. And he wants to get under our skin, too, to prick our conscience. And to provoke our contemplation of everything that God demands of us so we can see just how deep and how wide all of this must be in our thinking about how searching God's commands for his people's lives really are.

And God, of course, needs to do that for us because as human beings, naturally, even as God's people, we are so quick, aren't we, to limit God's demands, to find loopholes, to find wriggle room to get out of what he wants from us.

[9 : 16] Jesus challenged the very experts in the law of Moses in exactly that way, didn't he? He said, you have an amazing capacity to strain out the gnats and yet to swallow the camels so that you're neglecting completely the really important things that God wants you to be concerned about.

And we have to be careful about that. And so we need to be challenged ourselves to be truly honest stewards of God's goodness in all of life.

Never hatefully stealing life, but always honestly sharing life in all its fullness, as God would have us do. And as he, of course, has done for us.

And this section here this morning helps us, I think, to see that. It comes at us sideways, if you like, to catch us unawares. And it does that by presenting us with all sorts of routes to getting and to gaining, which would be quite unjust and quite wrong for us.

And so, as John Calvin says, so pronouncing all unjust measures of gain as theft. We are to have no unjust gain from exploiting our relationships with others, with others in their misfortune, or our relationships in mutual ministry together, indeed, our relationships of marriage.

[10 : 38] Because all such robs people of their dignity, their stability, their security in life. And all of that actually then is tantamount to murder.

And that's the stark message of the last two verses, six and seven of chapter 24, that we'll come to. So let's look more closely then at all of these verses before us. First of all, the first three examples in verses 15 to 20 of chapter 23, which are all tied together by what we might call situations of misfortune and misery.

And in a fallen world, alas, there are plenty of both of these. But, says Moses, we must never exploit loss. There's to be no stealing in situations where we have a relationship that involves misfortune or misery.

Now we'd like to think, wouldn't we, we'd never do such a thing. But the sad fact is that we are often very capable of deluding ourselves and deluding other people into thinking that we're actually doing good to others at our expense, whereas in fact, we're just trying to do good for ourselves at other people's expense.

And that's the case in each of these examples here of slavery, prostitution, and of lending money.

Outwardly, in each case, you're pretending to be exercising pious generosity.

[12:03] But in fact, inwardly, you're just expressing personal greed for your own gain. So take the runaway slave there in verses 15 and 16. Most likely, it seems, who's a foreign slave who runs away and takes refuge in Israel.

Now all the international laws and treaties of the day demanded that such a slave would be returned. And so if you did that, you'd be doing the right thing in the eyes of the world.

And you'd no doubt curry favor with a slave's owner and very likely, you'd get yourself a reward. But no, says God, you shall not give him up to his master for that reward.

An utterly unique law, by the way, in the whole of the ancient world. And moreover, says the Lord, neither are you to say, well, you can stay here, but come and be my slave now and you have a much better life than you had before.

It'd be very easy to convince yourself, wouldn't it, that you were being very generous and helpful by doing that. I'm sure many people round about would say, well, that's very kind of you. That's very generous of you. But in fact, what would be the truth?

[13:11] The truth would be you're actually bagging yourself, a windfall, aren't you, of free labor, or at least very cheap labor. But look at verse 16. Not so, says the Lord. No, no, no. He shall dwell wherever he chooses as a free man among you.

You will not wrong him by stealing from him greedily. No, you shall share generously with him. So no hypocrisy.

No pretending that you're doing righteously in this situation of human misfortune, but simply exploiting it greedily for yourself. No. Now that makes us think, doesn't it?

Of course, this is talking about an occasional happening, and it's not talking about a sort of flood of economic migrants, just like we're seeing today across the continent of Europe. And of course, these are personal commands, aren't they, for God's people.

They're not policies for governments, but still, they tell us something about God's priorities, don't they? That people are not mere property. That their needs matter a great deal more when they're vulnerable, and the rights that other people might have over them, or to gain power, or to gain from them.

[14:23] It's perhaps no accident, is it, that the loudest voices demanding free-for-all immigration into our nation and others, the loudest voices are very often the big businesses, aren't they?

Whose fat cat bosses have the greatest to gain from all that cheap immigrant labor that they have access to. But God's people are not to exploit people's misery and misfortune for gain.

says Moses. And it's the same focus on wrongful gain, or worse, the perverse hypocrisy of dressing something up with a spiritual justification while actually just being immoral and idolatrous.

It's exactly the same thing we see in verses 17 and 18, in this case of prostitution. Now, it goes without saying, of course, that God's people would have nothing to do with this cult prostitution.

That is, the fertility rites that were the way of worshipping Baal and the other idols in Canaan and so on. You worship God by going along paying money to the shrine prostitute and having sex with them.

[15:35] That would be the thing that would guarantee a great crop and a great fertility among your animals. You can beat that for worship that's going to appeal to the masses. You can see why it was so popular.

But you see, the key here is in verse 18. Look, it's the fee for that prostitution. And actually here, it's not just cult prostitution, but any prostitution, male or female.

The word there is different from the one in verse 17 about the cult prostitute. It's all common prostitution. What he's saying is this. Don't think that you can justify dirty practices by telling yourself that, well, if I do well out of this, I'll give some of the money to the church.

That's what a vow was all about. Give generously to God's worth. That's what's being said here. But what Moses is saying is God doesn't need your money. And what you give to God through all your giving to Him is in thankfulness to God's provision for your life, to His generosity to you.

And if you have gained from things that are an abomination to God, you can't possibly give that as a gift to Him. That can never be received by God.

[16:47] What is it the Lord Jesus teaches us? Our Heavenly Father who sees in secret rewards us when we give to Him. When He gives, when we give rather what He wants us to give in the way He wants.

But He does see and He does know. He knows where our givings come from. This is a very stark example Moses used here to make the point. It's like saying to us, don't think you can justify bank robbery just because you're going to tithe your proceeds for the church.

But it's to make us think, isn't it? If you run a business, it can be tempting to think that you could sail close to the wind, you could justify what really just amounts to sharp practice and exploiting people. Because you'll think to yourself, well, the more money my business makes, the more I can give to the gospel ministry of the church. Actually, actually, people who think like that and justify that to themselves rarely in the end really give money to support gospel ministry.

But people can think that. But we all need to think about it, don't we? Because if you have investments, you have to think. The sex industry today is just as popular as it was among the cults of Moses' day.

[18:04] Indeed, it's the great winner of the World Wide Web and the internet, isn't it? And if you've got investments and you happen to find out that, well, the biggest earner in your eyes of this year has been a company that gets a lot of its money through exploitation of sex in various ways, well, it won't solve your conscience by saying, oh, well, I'll give some extra to the church Christmas appeal.

Or if you're making a lot of money through other things that cause damage and misery and misfortune to people's lives, like the gambling industry, for example. We need to think, don't we, because that isn't sharing your wealth with God's people.

It's actually stealing from people for yourself. And worse, actually, it's dressing up something to look as pious, which in fact is absolutely the reverse. It's quite perverse.

We need to think about those things. Not, of course, to become so obsessed that we can never touch any business or any investment or never go into any shop in case we discover some aspect that's questionable down the line somewhere.

We'd have to leave the whole world, wouldn't we, if that was the case? But there are some things that are clearly so abhorrent to God that they must be totally out of bounds for God's people in any terms of seeking gain from those things.

[19:25] And no manner of pretending can ever justify that. However much we might gain. Well, again, you see, verses 19 and 20 are another challenge not to exploit the losses of another and to add to their loss by stealing further from them.

So here it's a brother in need and you lend him some money. And it looks like you've been helping your brother. But in fact, you've actually just been helping yourself.

You've been making a tidy profit out of his misfortune. And in fact, you've just been adding to his problems by miring him in even greater debt. Apparently, we're told the interest rates in the country surrounding in those days were between 20 and 50%.

So you can imagine just how crippling those debts would very quickly become. You know, you double your debt in 15 years if the interest rate is 5%, but in less than 2 years if it's 50%.

And in just 10 years at that rate, your debt would be 50 times what you first owed. Massive loss to your brother. Massive gain to yourself.

[20:33] And that's what this ban on interest is about. It's not banning commercial finance. Verse 20 makes that clear. International trade and so on with foreigners could involve loans on commercial terms.

This is not about a business seeking capital, but a poor man seeking help whose plight must not be your profits, says Derek Kidner. So you're to give help to your brother in need, but with no strings attached.

That's the point. Whether it's strings as here of financial leverage over him or indeed of merely emotional or moral leverage over your brother or sister.

It's easy to do that though, isn't it? To help somebody, maybe you do a favor for somebody, perhaps it is a financial favor, perhaps it's another thing. But you do it in such a way as they are made to feel that they owe you something.

That they're in your debt. And then you exploit that because you have a hold over them. It might be in all sorts of subtle ways. It might be over a long period of time.

[21 : 40] But consciously or unconsciously, if that's what you're doing, you're banking that debt, aren't you? And you're expecting it to be repaid with interest someday. And that kind of emotional blackmail is something that it's easy to do.

But you see what this is telling us is that is actually lending to your brother and sister with compound interest attached. And it's not really giving at all.

It's not generous. It's actually gaining. And it's greed. And it's stealing from your brother. It's unjust gain.

And according to Jesus, that's just hypocrisy. That's why he says, isn't it, when you give to the needy in that way, not even your left hand is to know what your right hand's doing.

In other words, you give and forget. You cut all strings. You're looking for no return. You just give. And indeed, says the Lord Jesus, it is your Father in heaven who sees in secret, who sees.

[22 : 45] And he will reward you. Not with the selfish gain that your greed would reward yourself with, which only rusts and fades in the end anyway, but with real spiritual gain, with a heavenly treasure that can never be stolen away.

So you see, very clear, three examples here to make us think, to make us examine our own hearts. No exploiting loss. No taking advantage of situations of misfortune or of misery.

And likewise, you see, in verses 21 to 25, we must never exploit our relationship with the Lord himself or with the Lord's people. There's to be no stealing in what we might call our life of mutual ministry together, of serving God and serving with his people.

The first example in verses 21 to 23 is about honoring vows, about commitments we've made to God. That was normally about bringing sacrifices to God. In other words, you promise to give to God and to his temple.

And outwardly, you can make a great show of that, pretending great piety, you see, but inwardly, it can all be phony. Because really, as Jesus says so pointedly on the Sermon on the Mount, it's not about pleasing God, it's actually about promoting your reputation before others, promising great things.

[24 : 10] But never really delivering. And Jesus says in that situation, well, you have your reward, you have your reputation for generosity with other people that you want, but it's all a fraud.

And don't forget, your Father in heaven does see. And he hears your great promises. So when a Christian says, oh well, I've come into some money, and I've got a great gift to give to the church, I'm going to give a very sizable gift to gospel work.

Well, I've heard that many times over the years and many, many times also, nothing's ever come of it. Very often, it comes to nothing. But God hears and God doesn't forget.

Because God regards your yes as yes and your no as no. Jesus says, anything less than that comes from the devil, from the evil one. And so what Jesus is saying is that if time passes and nothing ever comes of your great promises, then as verse 21 says here, God will regard you as guilty of sin.

You see, for Jesus, it's not the thought that counts, is it? He's very clear about that. It's the deed that counts. Many will say on that day, says Jesus, Lord, Lord. And he says, no, no, no.

[25 : 26] It's the one who does the will of my Father in heaven who will enter his kingdom. You didn't have to make that vow, says Moses. You did it to convince yourself and to convince others that you were sharing God's gifts with him and with his people for his kingdom.

But the fact is, you weren't, were you? You were stealing from God, directly exploiting your relationship with him. Rather like Ananias and Sapphira in Acts chapter 5, wasn't it?

Who wanted that reputation with the church as generous givers without the actual requirements of real generosity. And they were stealing from God for their own gain.

But God heard and God saw. And we need to be careful, don't we, not to exploit our relationship with the Lord himself. Don't promise the Lord great things to share with him and share with his people, but actually, in the end, just steal that back.

He will take our vows seriously, even if we don't. Maybe we better just check that we have, in fact, followed through on all the great promises we've made to give to God, to give to his church, to give to his kingdom.

[26 : 44] But it's just as easy also, isn't it, to exploit our relationship with the Lord's people, which is what verses 24 and 25 are about. Pretending that we're all about sharing together with God's goodness and provision in the church, but we treat the fellowship of sharing, in fact, as a front for stealing.

We take the privilege that is ours through being part of God's family, and here it's a privilege to help yourself to somebody's grapes when you're hungry, and we turn that privilege into presumption.

So you bring along your bag for life from Asda, and you fill it as full as you possibly can of all your neighbor's grapes. Or you bring along in your backpack your handy little folding sickle, and you swipe it to the grain and take as much as you possibly can.

But that's not fellowship, is it, anymore? That's fraud. That's not sharing in the Christian life anymore. That's stealing from your brothers and sisters. And it's easy in the church to do that, isn't it?

To abuse the hospitality, the generosity of brothers and sisters so that it becomes all one-way traffic. We become takers all the time, consumers, grabbers, one-way traffic.

[27 : 55] It's about me, me, me, me. It's an attitude, isn't it, when we begin to think that the fellowship of the church is all there to serve me and my needs and my wants and to do it my way.

Well, yes, we do have great obligations to one another as Christian brothers and sisters. Peter the Apostle is very clear. Practice hospitality, he says, without grumbling.

That's our obligation. We are to share our lives and our substance with one another. But the New Testament is just as clear. We're not to abuse that. Paul says to the Thessalonians, you're to work and not just be dependent on others.

He says, you're not to be idle. People are to eat their own bread and not just be sponges off others. He says to the Ephesians, you're to put thieving right behind you and do an honest day's labor in order that you have something to share with brothers and sisters.

You see, sharing, not stealing from one another. The attitude is to be one of giving selflessly, not of grabbing selfishly. Not to exploit that relationship that we have, the privilege of being the Lord's people.

[29 : 11] That's easy for us as Christians in all sorts of ways to do that, isn't it? You can think when you have somebody in the church who's got a particular trade or business or skill that they can offer, you can think, oh, I'll ask so-and-so to do that for me because I'll get it on the cheap.

And I can embarrass him into not charging me too much because I'll keep on saying how hard up I am and I really need it done as cheaply as possible. And he'll be embarrassed to actually do anything other than give me something on the cheap.

What am I doing? I'm stealing from my brother, aren't I? And in my experience, people who do that are usually far better off than the people they're stealing from. There's no wrong, of course, in doing business with fellow Christians or folk in the church, but not if you want to exploit them.

Sometimes, of course, it's the other way around. Sometimes Christians so need to be needed, they offer their help to others and put people in their obligation and it works the other way around. It's all about an attitude.

Is it for me or is it really for you and for the Lord? Not stealing. Thirdly, in verses 1 to 5 of chapter 24, you see, we're told not to exploit our relationships of love.

[30 : 25] There's to be no stealing from the institution of marriage, but rather, we are to do everything to strengthen marriage. Verse 1 to 4 gives us the negative and verse 5 gives us the positive.

Now, this is not a discussion of divorce in general. It's an example of a very specific situation. And the reason for it here is that, again, you see, it pretends to be a very meticulous and proper divorce, but in fact, it's really a case of merciless dehumanizing of a woman, of using her, passing her back

and forth like a piece of property, stealing her dignity as a human being in the image of God. Now, divorce was only permitted at all, as Jesus tells us, because of the hardness of the human heart. And so, the law sought to recognize that sad reality and sought to protect the most vulnerable, which was always the woman.

And so, that must be done properly. And in this case here, you see, it is done properly. The certificate of divorce is given that allows her to be free to remarry. She's not tainted. She's not destitute.

To remarry is not, in that case, adultery. What the indecency is in verse 1, we can't be sure. It wasn't adultery. That was a capital crime.

[31 : 45] It must be something quite serious all the same. Nor is it exactly clear why, in this case, the woman is described in verse 4 as having been defiled after being married for that second time.

Seems somehow or other that the sequence of events of having two unfortunate and failed marriages inevitably left her with some sort of stigma. But you see, the chief point of this law, regardless of all of that, the chief point is to protect her from exploitation.

From this first husband who now might think, well, he can have her back at a discount, as it were. Kind of reduce her to something of a concubine or even as a slave. And, cashing in on what has now happened to her.

That's the key thing, you see. If she's divorced again because her second husband hates her and it implies that he just wants to get rid of her, he would have to pay a divorce price. And the first husband might well have his eyes on that.

Or, if the second husband had died, as the second suggestion is, well, she might very well have inherited a good bit of property. Well, the first husband thinks, I fancy a piece of that. I'll have her back. But God will not have that.

[33 : 01] Chris Wright says, this law protects the unfortunate woman from being a kind of marital football passed back and forward between irresponsible men. God will not have a woman to be treated as property, as a mere chattel.

Because that involves stealing from her, stealing her dignity as a human being in the image of God. And, it involves stealing from God's holy institution of marriage itself.

It is marriage itself that is the great loser from cheap and easy divorce. And you see, marriages that end that way always do so because selflessness has given way to selfishness in either one or both partners.

if you become selfish in marriage, you become a stealer from marriage. You become a stealer from your spouse. You become a stealer from God himself.

But you see, by contrast, God's law does not want us to be taken up with marriages ending, but with marriages enduring. Hence, verse 5. It's a total contrast here, isn't it?

[34 : 10] Focusing not on stealing from marriage, but on strengthening, on supporting marriage. A man must not go to war in his first year of marriage. Why? Lest he be stolen away from his wife with an untimely death.

Nor is even onerous public duty to steal him away from his wife. He's to have time, it says, to be happy with his wife. In fact, the text actually says to make his wife glad.

Not just mutual happiness, of course that's so, but it's a stark, deliberate contrast to verses 1 to 4. The emphasis in marriage is not to be on a man being callous about marriage, but cherishing his marriage.

Seeing his wife not as something to give him gain, but seeing marriage as something whereby he is to make his wife glad. All the married women in the congregation say, Amen.

Preach it, brother. Well, that's what it says, and men, we need to note that. The authorised version is even better. He is to cheer up his wife whom he has taken.

[35 : 20] Well, men, are you doing that frequently and often? Cheering up your wife. And by the way, there's no wriggle room here. The point here is not that you only have to do it for the first year, then you can forget it.

The point here is you learn how to do it properly in the first year, so you keep on doing it. So ladies, I'm going to ask you all at the door here, is your husband cheering you up?

When did he last cheer you up in that way? But this is a serious point here, isn't there? And it is that marriage needs support.

It needs strengthening. Even among God's people because friends, you know as well as I do, that left to ourselves, our hearts are selfish and not selfless. And left to ourselves, what we will tend to do naturally is steal from marriage and not support and share in marriage.

So we need to have God's clear reminder not to be passive, but to help one another do that all the time. And today, friends, there are just as many hurdles as in Moses' day, perhaps even more.

[36 : 26] So many young couples getting married today, alas, don't have the role models of a stable marriage in their own home to look to. And so naturally, therefore, they are lacking in a key strengthener of marriage.

And if their own family has not given that help, then the church family must step in and help, mustn't it? Some couples are met with great problems early on in their marriage.

Sometimes it's problems of a sexual nature. Well, in the long term, marriages will not survive those kind of problems. And if you don't take those things seriously, they will steal the life out of your marriage in the long term.

So you need to get help. And the church needs to help and encourage people who are married to get help. Psychological help, medical help, spiritual help. Lots more things we could say on that. But God wants his people and his church together to be committed to strengthening and supporting marriages in every way possible. Not stealing from them. And that will mean practical things just as verse 5 here is extremely practical.

[37 : 40] To help establish good and stable and enduring marriages among his people. Marriage preparation before marriage. Marriage strengthening, enrichment, and so on in marriage.

Frankly dealing with all the things that are needed in marriage for husbands and wives so that they cheer one another up instead of dragging one another down. We need to be doing that actively, purposely in Christ's church.

We must ensure that we're not acquiescing in exploitation of love relationships and stealing from God's gift to humanity.

We're to be energizing and equipping marriages and that's how we will enrich God's blessings of life. And you see, life is always God's ultimate concern because life is the most important thing and above all the human life of God's precious people.

And that's why God's law is never a thief. It's never killing and stealing and destroying. It is to give life and life in all its abundance. That's why we have all these commands about property and about work and about livelihood and so on.

[38 : 56] These are all things that are vitally connected to a person's life. And that's what matters above all to God. People are always, always more important than property.

Life is always more important than mere things and mere money. Human dignity created in the image of God is something that transcends all others. And that's what's driven home so clearly in these last two verses, six and seven.

After all these examples that we've had, they tell us starkly the take-home message. Don't exploit human life at all. Because stealing, you see, that harms someone's life, even his livelihood, is tantamount to murder.

To take a millstone, that's the means of a family's bread, is to take life and pledge against the loan. And even the lowliest life is worth far, far more than even the greatest possible loan.

And to steal a person, verse seven, to enslave them, well, that is as good as murder. And that is why the punishment for that crime here is capital. There is no capital punishment for any property crime in the whole of the law of God.

[40 : 09] Only for crimes against God himself or terrible crimes against the human person, murder or sexual violence. Because life is so precious and it mustn't be exploited that way.

That's why you can't loan someone here something that they need in such a way, though, as to make the threat to their life even greater, to make the burden on their life even greater. You take his millstone away.

Or in today's terms, your loan is secured with such high security that you put somebody's home, their business, their family, everything at risk. No. That is a huge challenge, isn't there, for society there?

Because unemployment is a dehumanizing thing for people. It damages people. But of course, often the welfarism that is there to meet unemployment's need actually just makes things worse because it further dehumanizes people and de-skills people, makes them utterly dependent, makes

them unemployable so they don't even know how to use a millstone any longer so long since they saw one.

many things for us to think about and to ponder. All life is precious to God but especially the life of his beloved children.

[41 : 31] Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. But you see, what these verses are telling us is you can murder without actually physically killing.

by threatening somebody's livelihood as verse 6 testifies or by so exploiting life, so stealing from a person as to impoverish them and slave them while you are enriching yourself.

Or indeed, as the Lord Jesus says to us so pointedly, you can kill even by harboring anger and hatred of your brother in your heart. Or even by speaking bitterly about your brother or sister with your lips.

That attitude says the Lord Jesus belongs not to heaven but to hell. It's the fatherhood of the devil, isn't it? Who was the murderer from the very beginning.

He stole from man the life that God given him through his lies because he was the father of lies. But we, says Jesus, we are sons of our father in heaven.

[42 : 39] And so says Moses all through this chapter they speak with one voice. And so do the whole scriptures. And all through they say to us, we as God's people are to reflect not the father of lies and of murder but the father of life, our father in heaven, the abundant giver of life.

We are to be honest stewards of all God's good gifts of life. And above all, of course, honest stewards of his great gift of everlasting life. You see, it was a terrible thing to steal a fellow Israelite in slavery here like verse 7.

Not least because slavery inside the promised land was illegal to sell him. You would have to sell him outside like Joseph's brothers did.

Beyond the realm of God's kingdom blessings. And so you were stealing not only his earthly life and inheritance but you were stealing from him his stake in his eternal inheritance from God in God's kingdom.

And there's no greater crime on this earth than that according to the Lord Jesus Christ to steal away somebody's future inheritance in eternal life. Better take that millstone I'm talking about put it around your own neck and be cast into the depths of the sea than to cause one of these little ones of mine to stumble and lose their way to that life.

[44 : 03] This is eternal life, said Jesus, to know you the Father in heaven and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. Imagine if you or I or us as a church by our words or by our deeds things we've done or things we've failed to have done imagine if we were to be stealing away the way of life from people instead of opening and sharing that way of life with people.

But you see what we learn here is we cannot be generous givers sharers of God's life with others while at the same time being grabbers and getters and stealers of those gifts in life for ourselves. So we need to heed God's warning don't we? And his great encouragement here to be sharers and not stealers to be honest stewards of his gift of abundant everlasting life.

Well may that be so. Let's pray. as each has received a gift says Peter use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace.

So help us Lord we pray to know that it is indeed better to give than to receive and better to be therefore those who reflect your abundant and generous heart of love and of life.

[45 : 51] Help us we pray. Guard us and keep us in your way of life. For Jesus sake.

Amen.