

## Property and God's Law

Exodus 22:1-15

### Have you ever bought something new or at least new to you?

Every time I do that I notice that I tend to treat things that are brand new a little differently than things that are a little older.

That especially seems to happen when I have to change vehicles.

A couple of years ago one of our family cars needed to be replaced and so we started car shopping.

For a variety of reasons we ended up buying a used pickup truck that can seat six people.

It has been great for a number of reasons, but I have to confess when we first got it I was a little over protective.

### I'm not someone who washes their car on a regular basis, but when I first got the truck I washed and waxed it.

It is pretty normal for our children to snack on car rides, but when I first got the truck I was adamant about no eating to keep the interior nice a clean.

Of course that rule had its limits.

The first time we went on a long trip there was eating in the truck.

Everyone with children knows that snacks and electronics makes for a much more peaceful adventure than hunger and boredom.

I'm pretty sure we stopped at Tim Horton's for lunch that day and while I can't tell you what I ate for lunch I can tell you that I had a bottle of 7UP to drink.

### You may be wondering how I can still remember what I had to drink.

I remember because after all of my lecturing about everyone else to be careful about eating and drinking in the truck I was the first one to drop my drink all over my lap and the driver's seat.

Thankfully 7UP doesn't really stain, but it was a chilly reminder about the need to have a good perspective on the things that we own.

While being a good steward means taking good care of things, we need to be careful what place they hold in our hearts because no matter how meticulous we are about the stuff that we own all of it is temporary.

[As we continue our journey through Exodus we find in the first fifteen verses of chapter 22 more practical applications of the Ten Commandments to everyday life. Stealing, coveting, murder, bearing false witness, and having no other gods all play a factor here as God speaks to His people about their property. These verses give us some important perspective on the things that we own. These things are really important for us in the place where we live because it is so easy where we live for stuff to hold too much sway in our hearts. Right away in verses 1-4 God gives us some important perspective. He shows us that...]

**Point #1 – People are more important than property.**

While it is important to hold people accountable for crimes that concern material possessions, it is important that a person's desire to protect their things is restrained.

*Stealing something is a direct insult against God and His sovereignty and we see here in verse 1 that the LORD takes it very seriously.*

God wants the thief who is caught to make things right.

We see this idea illustrated in the New Testament when Jesus meets a man named Zacchaeus.

He was a tax collector and tax collectors were known for taking more taxes than they were supposed to in order to line their own pockets which is stealing.

When Christ gives him the chance to repent of his evil ways, he does so saying, "...if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back **four** times the amount."

Notice here in verse four that even if the thief is found with whatever he stole he must still pay back double.

It's serious, the penalty is costly, but what these penalties are very different from the laws we see in regards to taking someone's life rather than their property.

*Unjustly taking someone's life costs the criminal his life, but taking someone's property does not cost the thief his life.*

**Verses 2-3** make that even more obvious.

Why the difference between day and night here?

Because if someone breaks into your house in the middle of the night you are probably going to be waking up from sleep, plus the darkness makes it difficult to see and therefore difficult to assess the intruder's intent.

During the day it is easier to see which makes it possible to tell the difference between a thief and a murderer.

If you know that it's just a thief God permits you to retrain him, but not to kill him.

Why? Because even though he is a thief his life is more important than your property.

[My brother and I were in a car accident when we were teenagers. We hit some ice and ended upside down in a ditch. When the car came to a stop and we were both still alive the first words out of my brother's mouth were, "Dad is going to kill me!" When I first saw the look on my dad's face I thought he might be right, but very quickly I realized I couldn't have been more wrong. Dad didn't care about the car at all in comparison to his sons being o.k. I never questioned which my dad thought was more important.]

It's very easy for us to understand this principle when it comes to people we love isn't it?  
But what about people we don't know, or even worse people we don't even like?

Oh there is no question that there needs to be a consequence for stealing, but  
is needs to be a measured response.

A response that shows that people (even thieves) are more important  
than property.

I don't know if you have ever had anybody steal anything  
important from you, but just imagine that has happened.

Imagine the thief has been caught, he has been forced to  
pay back what was stolen and then some, and somehow  
he becomes a Christian and not knowing that First  
Baptist is the church you attend he shows up here one  
Sunday.

Would you be able to welcome him? Would you  
be glad that he is a believer and a part of your  
church?

[How you answer those questions in your heart tells you a lot about the place material things  
have in your life. I had a good friend remind me earlier this week that people's souls go on  
forever either in heaven or in hell. There is no material thing in this universe that will last  
forever, which makes everything we own less valuable than people. That is not to say we  
shouldn't care at all about material things. They are gifts from God and should be treated like  
it, especially when we are talking about the property of others like we see here in verses 5-6.  
These verses show us that...]

## **Point #2 – Property needs to be respected.**

The possessions of others must not be damaged by our complacency.

*Owning animals like sheep, cattle, and goats was extremely commonplace in the ancient world  
and all of those animals needed to eat.*

Likewise clearing land and controlling underbrush growth is also critical and for a long  
time people used fire to do that.

What God commands here is that people be responsible with how they go about  
those common tasks (**Verses 5-6**).

Notice what it says here about paying back someone with the “best of the  
field.”

You can't make up for what is lost with second rate stuff and keep the  
good stuff for yourself, no you must part with the best and give it to  
the one who has suffered loss.

*The point is don't just let your sheep out of the pen and let them wander all over the place  
eating whatever they want.*

Pay attention to them. Keep them where they are supposed to be.

Don't just set fire to stuff all willy nilly like. Make sure you know what you are doing (it's actually a skill).

In other words make sure you are looking out for your neighbor's property.

[Every now and again I get my hands dirty working on things. That is especially true when I'm working on things that are covered with oil and grease. Now when my hands are as filthy as can be I don't go into the house and use the everyday hand towels to wipe them off. Why? Because if I do the towel will get ruined. That would be careless of me and I would have to buy some new towels.]

We are not to be careless but instead respectful of other people's property.

Sure we may not own cows and burn underbrush, but the principle here is important.

Don't let your kids hit baseballs into your neighbor's house.

Don't let your dog dig holes in your neighbor's lawn or chew up someone else's stuff.

If your ladder falls over and dents someone's car then you need to make it right.

This also means we should be very careful about the kinds of things that we support.

When I see buildings on fire in the nightly news and then I see people supporting the groups responsible I am deeply troubled by it and want to encourage believers to avoid supporting such things.

[Christians should be known for being courteous rather than careless. No believer should ever say something like, "It's not mine so it doesn't matter." God in His sovereignty gives to each one according to His will and we should honour that by being respectful of what other people own. That theme continues in the next few verses where we see a third principle about property which is that...]

### **Point #3 – God's people should treat borrowed property like their own.**

When someone lends us something we need to make sure we use it like we paid for it.

Verses 7-8 and 10-13 deal with giving someone something for safe keeping while verses 14-15 deal with borrowing something from someone.

This would have had to happen all the time in ancient Israel.

If something came up where you had to take a trip and leave your home unattended it would be wise to not leave valuable things unattended.

In addition to things of value like silver and gold animals would need to be looked after as well and asking a neighbor to do that makes a lot of sense.

In agreeing to do that the neighbor is taking on the responsibility to keep the property safe and if something goes wrong depending on the circumstance he may be responsible to replace whatever is lost.

Likewise borrowing things/animals was very common in Israel.

You may find yourself without oxen during the planting season and need to borrow some.

Now look with me at **verses 14-15** and notice the difference between the borrower being held responsible and not.

The difference is whether or not the owner is present.

If the owner is there and sees how you are using his animal and does not object it means you are using like he would use it and you are not responsible and I believe that is the principle that we need to apply.

[Back when I was growing up my brother and I shared a room and we slept in bunk beds. My brother was really into transformers at the time and had a few transformer toys. I used to watch the cartoon when I was a kid and in the cartoon transformers could fly so I thought I would see if my brother's toys would fly so I started tossing them off the top bunk. I found out that they could not fly and that my brother was a little unhappy. Of course I didn't throw my own toys because they might have gotten broken.]

People tend to care a little bit less about things that they do not own, but that should not be the case for the Christian.

If someone asks us to watch their pet, we need to be extra diligent about taking good care of it.

If someone gives us something for safe keeping, then we need to go the extra mile to keep it safe.

I am a big believer that when you borrow something you should return it in the same condition or better than when you borrowed it.

[Most of us have a really good idea about how to treat other people's stuff. All we need to do is ask ourselves if we would be happy to have someone treat our stuff like we treat other people's stuff. I am amazed at how often that leads me to an answer than lines up with what we see in these verses. There is one more thing in this morning's text that is of great benefit in putting material things in their proper place. It comes from verses 10 and 11 which teaches that we need to fourthly...]

#### **Point #4 – Trust God with all material things.**

Whether we own very little or a great deal we must view everything we have in the light of God's rule and reign over the universe.

Verse 10 gives us the situation and Verse 11 shows the people what to do about it (Verse 10-11).

You go away on a trip and ask your neighbor to look after your donkey only to return home and find out your donkey has been lost or it has died.

Instead of replacing your donkey your neighbor says, "It's not my fault, I don't know what happened, and I am not responsible to get you a new donkey."

For whatever reason you think your neighbor is not being entirely honest, you think that he might have sold it or had it for supper last week.

What are you supposed to do then?

[If this were modern day and we had a security camera system at our farm we might go to the computer and play back all the footage from the night of the disappearance. Cameras are good for that sort of thing. As long as they are working they are able to tell us what happened in the past and the evidence they produce is difficult to escape. In this case there were no video cameras. It was impossible for the owner of the property to know for sure what happened.]

What are you supposed to do then? According to verse 11 you are to ask your neighbor to go before the Lord and make an oath saying that he is telling the truth.

And that is it! That is supposed to be enough to satisfy the one who has suffered the loss of the animal.

Somebody is probably thinking, "That's it! What about calling the police? What about doing an investigation? I'm just supposed to accept a promise that my neighbor makes before the LORD?"

*Right here is where our theology (what we say we believe about God) becomes incredibly practical to everyday life.*

You see God is far better than any video camera. God is omnipresent and He is omniscient.

Nothing escapes His view and He will bring everything He sees before His judgement throne and bring perfect judgement on everything everyone has ever done according to Hebrews 4:13 **"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."**

I don't know about you but the only reason that is a comfort to me is that I know Jesus as my Saviour! Nothing we have done wrong has escaped God's view. Without His Grace in Christ we would all be lost to hell forever!

In addition to showing our need of our LORD and Saviour, God's unlimited presence and knowledge teach us that we can rest in His judgments.

If your neighbor is lying to you even if he gets away with it in the here and now, he hasn't gotten away with anything because God will hold him accountable.

*It's never fun when things get lost or stolen, but at the end of the day we can trust God with it all.*

That is what I want to leave you with this morning.

No matter how blessed in material things you happen to be, trust in the LORD rather than things.

No matter how little you may have, trust in the LORD because His riches are far better and eternal.

It is this trust in God that will allow you to value people more than property, it is this trust in our Sovereign God that we motivate you to respect the property of others like it is your own, it is this trust in God that will put temporary things in their proper place.