

September 13, 2015

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Living the Word, "Hands Off! Hands Out!"

Raise your hand, please, if you think the answer is "Yes,"
and keep your hands down if your answer is "No."

- Does God know how much money you have in your wallet or purse today?
- Does God know how much money you have in your bank account?
- Does the Lord know how much money you're putting in your offering envelope today?
- Does he care more about the big givers than the small givers?
- Is God concerned if you shoplift a little bit?
- Does God know if you bring home office supplies from your employer?
- Does he care about such things?
- Does God know it if you fudge your income tax return here and there?
- Does he know if you get too much back in change at the mall and you decide to keep it?
- Does God care about things like that?

Yes, God certainly knows all about our financial status, our money dealings, and our fiscal fudging. And, yes, God definitely cares about that part of our lives, too. He wants to have a say, and he wants to help shape our attitudes toward our money and our possessions.

God starts by laying down the 7th Commandment: "You shall not steal." The Lord clearly, forcefully prohibits in his Word any kind of stealing. And he absolutely expects you and me to live by his Word. No stealing! If it doesn't belong to you, hands off!

God is really serious about stealing. Remember the story of Achan, in the book of Judges, chapters 6-7? Achan was put to death for stealing. And in 1 Corinthians 6:10 we read, *“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor THIEVES, nor the GREEDY, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor SWINDLERS will inherit the kingdom of God.”*

Yes, our God is very serious when he tells us, “You shall not steal.” The Law tells Christians like us, loud and clear, “Hands off!”

But there’s more. There’s the Law, and there’s the Gospel. The Law teaches us to keep our “hands off” of what doesn’t belong to us; but the Gospel also empowers us to live with our “hands out” toward those who need our help.

A Lutheran pastor that I know has made many trips overseas. Whenever he’s in a marketplace, where it’s common practice to bargain with the merchants, trying to get the price down as low as it can go, this pastor instead always offers the merchant more than the asking price. Why? He says, first, he’s still getting a great bargain. Second, he can afford that little bit of extra money while the merchant is probably depending on it for his survival. And, third, this little act of mercy tends to open the door to great conversations and discussions about Jesus.

Think about Jesus, and how he literally put his hands out on the cross to save us. Think about Jesus, and how he gave up all the riches and glories of heaven to take on our humble human flesh. Think about how our Savior was a friend to tax collectors, and how he died on a cross next to two robbers.

Friends, because Jesus' hands have reached out to us with grace, God grants us forgiveness and mercy in super-abundant measure. Our Lord is so generous with us, and his hand provides spiritual and material riches to us every day. God's overwhelming goodness and compassion pour into our hearts so that we can be forgiven and saved; but also so that our hearts can be changed. God really wants for our attitudes, our behaviors, and our lifestyles to be converted, too.

Even when it comes to money. Even when it comes to sharing our blessings with others. Even when it comes to loosening our grip on what is "ours," and reaching out that hand toward someone else.

Martin Luther once talked about how every Christian needs three conversions. First, there's the conversion of the heart. Then, there's the conversion of the mind. And, finally – and this is often the most difficult for us – there's the conversion of the purse, or the wallet.

Does God know how much money you have in your wallet or purse? He does. Does he care how you spend it, how you manage it, and how stingy you are with it? Sometimes we Christians like to think that God doesn't need to be involved in our "stuff." We'd like to keep our religion on a much more "spiritual" level. As if our money and possessions should somehow be exempt from living the life of discipleship?

I'm sorry, it doesn't work that way. God's Law tells us, clearly, "Hands off" of anything that doesn't belong to you. And the Gospel empowers us to live with "hands out" toward those who are really in need.

Remember the story of Zaccheus, in the Bible? Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector for the Romans. That meant that he was a chief thief, because the tax collectors were famous for

cheating and swindling their own people. But one day Jesus comes to Zaccheus' town. The Lord invites himself into Zaccheus' home, and everybody grumbles about this, saying, "*He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.*" But Jesus invites himself into Zaccheus' heart that day, too. Christ's love changes that sinful man. Zaccheus stands up, and says to the Lord: "*Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.*" And Jesus says to Zaccheus, "*Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost*" (Luke 19:7-10). Thanks to Jesus, Zaccheus started living with his hands out, didn't he?

How about you? Have your heart and mind been converted? How about your purse, your wallet? You don't have to give half of your net worth to the poor. You don't have to go down to the IRS office on Monday morning, and restore to the government fourfold anything you're feeling guilty about. But you and I do need to come to Christ, to be honest about our sins and all the commandments we've broken. We need to receive from Christ receive all the incredible grace and mercy of God, and all his blessings; and then to share them more freely and joyfully in his name.

So hear the Law today: "Hands off!" But live by the Gospel: "Hands out!" Amen.