

Mishpatim: Exodus 22

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Lees Summit
By Bob Mendelsohn
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Thou shalt not steal

Introduction

Thank you to all who welcome me today. Some are familiar as you have made your way to visit like I am tonight. Thanks to Gavriel and Jan, and Shmuel, Joe and all here at Beit El Echad and to Ohr Haolam, the mother congregation.

READ EXODUS 22 (text at the end for those reading online)

Stealing takes from everyone involved; it takes from the person robbed and takes kindness and love from the thief. Society loses as does history and the future. Everyone loses when a thief is allowed to carry on. That's why the Bible says in verse 9; he whom the judges condemn shall pay double to his neighbor. Eventually we all lose when thievery happens. For instance, the story is told of Emmanuel Nenger.

Come with me to 1887. The scene is a small neighborhood grocery store. Mr. Nenger is buying some turnip greens. He gives the clerk a \$20 bill. As the clerk begins to put the money in the cash drawer to give Mr. Nenger his change, she notices some of the ink from the \$20 bill is coming off on her fingers, which are damp from the turnip greens. She looks at Mr. Nenger, a man she has known for years. She looks at the smudged bill. This man is a trusted friend; she has known him all her life; he can't be a counterfeiter. She gives Mr. Nenger his change, and he leaves the store. But \$20 is a lot of money in 1887, and eventually the clerk calls the police. They verify the bill as counterfeit and get a search warrant to look through Mr. Nenger's home. In the attic they find where he is reproducing money. He is a master artist and is painting \$20 bills with brushes and paint! But also in the attic they find three portraits Nenger had painted. They seized these and eventually sold them at auction for \$16,000 (in 1887 currency, remember) or a little more than \$5,000 per painting. The irony is that it took Nenger almost as long to paint a \$20 bill as it did for him to paint a \$5,000 portrait! It's true that Emanuel Nenger was a thief, but the person from whom he stole the most was himself.

Some statistics

In 1989, in the US, 5% of what you spend goes to cover business losses from theft. Approximately \$140 billion of material and time is stolen from employers every year. *Eternity, April 1989, p. 15.*

In "Time theft" by Robert Half International (headquartered in Menlo Park, Calif.) Half estimates that time theft costs U.S. businesses \$230 billion a year. These crimes cover the fake sick day, getting someone else to punch in your card on the time clock, making personal telephone calls, conducting private business in the workplace. *Parade Magazine, May 27, 1990, p. 7.*

Remember the point of our study today is to remind ourselves about protecting the innocent, and stealing just doesn't do it!

Stealing, legal style: The role of the tax collector

Now let's talk about our other lead character in today's readings, Zaccheus, from Luke 19.

In our world, there is stealing which is unauthorized and stealing which seems to be authorized by governments and such. Neither is right in God's eyes.

Many will remember the TV show "The Weakest Link," a show I found irritating, especially the lady presenter from the UK.

In Bible days, being a weak link was no great honour. In fact, the weak were the dismissed, the tossed, and the vacant. Weakness invited contempt. Weakness allowed others to conquer. And in contrast, God was seen as the God who conquered, the God of strength. Listen to these quotes,

And he said, The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; 2 Samuel 22:2

The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower. Psalm 18:2

The name of the LORD is a strong tower: the righteous runs into it, and is safe. Proverbs 18:10

Into that situation, the Son of Man, Y'shua enters and since the beginning has been calling the weak and underprivileged, the outcast and dismissed into His family. The tax collector is welcome. There are conditions as we will see, but remember this phrase, which could

have been made by Y'shua, as the TV presenter in the First Century, "You are the Weakest Link, Hello."

Taxes were collected everywhere in the First Century by the Romans. Just like the GST, and the ATO today bring up images of being contemptible, so it was then. Tax collectors were charged a certain amount for each person, then they in turn asked for more than that from each person. Another favorite trick of theirs was to advance the tax to those who were unable to pay, and then to charge large interest on what had thereby become a private debt.

The Roman world at the time of Y'shua was in financial crisis. Jewish tax collectors were in bad ways. Jewish leaders often declared tax collectors incapable of bearing testimony in a Jewish court of law, of forbidding to receive their charitable gifts, or even to change money out of their treasury (*Baba K. 10.1*), of ranking them not only with harlots and heathens, but also with highwaymen and murderers (*Ned. 3. 4*), and of even declaring them excommunicate. Indeed, it was held lawful to make false returns, to speak untruth, or almost to use any means to avoid paying taxes (*Ned. 27 b.; 28a*). And about the time of Y'shua the burden of such exactions must have been felt all the heavier on account of a great financial crisis in the Roman Empire (in the year 33 of our era), which involved so many in bankruptcy, and could not have been without its indirect influence even upon distant Judah.

Zachheus: Unlikely Hero

So here is the unlikely hero on the Gospel story, Zaccheus, one of 'those people' who is viewed by Y'shua and called to join him. Zaccheus says, "If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back 4 times as much." (V 8) Excellent. The ministry of God is getting into Zaccheus' heart. He is learning what Moses wanted him to learn 1500 years earlier. That a tax collector had no right to steal any more than any other Jew did from anyone else. It's dishonoring and it's a lose/lose situation.

What tree was he in? A sycamore tree, which in Israel is a variety of fig. The word *fig* in Greek is *sukon* and the word used in verse 8 (Luke 19) is very important. It's the word *falsely accused* or *defrauded*. The Greek word is *sycophant*, the word we translate into a 'yes' man. [Sycophant— [εσυκοφαντησα](#), from [συκον](#) a fig, and [φαινω](#), I show or declare] for among the primitive Athenians, when the use of that fruit was first found out, or in the time of a dearth, when all sorts of

provisions were exceedingly scarce, a law was made that no figs could be exported from Attica. Then this law (not being actually repealed, when a plentiful harvest had rendered it useless, by taking away the reason of it) gave occasion to ill-natured and malicious men to accuse everyone they found breaking the letter of it; and from them all busy informers have ever since been branded with the name of sycophants. [POTTER'S Antiq. vol. i. c. 21, end.]. In other words, the sycophant turned someone in to the authorities, and thus carried the favor of the king or leader.

Here Zaccheus says in the place of the fig tree, that figging someone in (as they might have said it in our parlance) was no longer the way of life, but following Y'shua was. He admitted to being a weak link, Y'shua agreed, and welcomed him.

Thus Zaccheus is an unlikely hero, but one who well understood the ministry of Y'shua, and the purpose of the Torah from its beginning.

Other thieves

Of course, when Y'shua died, some thieves were involved weren't they? Judas, who had been one of his followers, betrayed Y'shua (John 12:6) and collected 30 pieces of silver, which he couldn't even keep in his bank overnight. The jailed thief Barabbas benefited temporarily from the choice of Y'shua over him (Mark 15:7, John 18:40). An earlier arrest and trial of two thieves caused them to be crucified with Messiah. While they were being crucified, one of those thieves berated him (Luke 23:39), and one believed in him (Luke 23:43).

From this we see that thieves have a chance to repent and make right their wrong. God is always gracious [I will hear him, for I am gracious." Exodus 22.27] and God's nature is always to forgive and help people to make a new career of it. He wants repair to be our word and our calling. He is the God of the 2nd chance.

From the other side

The role of the thief we have seen. It damages this person to no end. A few words, if I might, on the role of covenant in this relationship between thief and stolen-from.

Throughout the text in Exodus 22, we see the phrase 'his neighbour' and are given to think in terms of location and next-door

persons in our suburbs today. But the role of neighbour was one of commitment in ancient days, certainly among the Hebrews. A neighbour was someone with whom you shared covenant, not necessarily a property line. It meant you were bonded to him in a particular way and thus when he took from you, there was damage to the relationship which is much more crucial than to the pocketbook.

One last comment from our text today

“And you shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you afflict him at all, and if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry; and My anger will be kindled, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.” (21-24)

Do you hear how God is involved personally in the abuse or lack of regard of the downtrodden and innocent? He takes it personally and will not tolerate this kind of power domination. The Lord welcomes the weak, and you should do no less.

In the text of our passage today in Exodus, reparations were required again and again. How can we do less in our days?

Lessons learned

I believe we should see applications from our stories today.

- 1) God’s concerns for society to run smoothly required an honouring of each other by each citizen
- 2) Lying about what is ours or what is another’s will only result in death and evil and problems in our worlds
- 3) Abusing the widow and orphan is so serious, God himself will require it of the dominator
- 4) Forgiveness is available for all who repent and turn to God, even for thieves, and even for you and me.

Invitation

So, if you are not yet a believer, let me ask you a question. Have you met this Messiah Y’shua, the One who welcomes weak links; the

One who forgives sins and who tells us to forgive others? Do you know the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost, and that was you? Will you become a follower of Y'shua today? Will you choose to line up with God's choices and give your life to our Messiah today? Will you believe...will you trust God, and not yourself, or will you compromise what is true for your own conveniences? He wants to change you from the inside, and to give you release from your own bondages to sin and self-centeredness.

I want to offer you the choice to join us, to identify with and confess Y'shua as your Saviour. If you would like to be delivered from your bondage, this time to sin, then pray this prayer and receive His love and grace. Father, forgive me in the name of Y'shua for all my sins. He was the Saviour and the fulfillment of all prophecies about Messiah. He is the one and the only one who can save me from my selfishness, from my sin. I acknowledge Y'shua as that one who wants to free me, and who alone can free me. I repent of my sin and accept Y'shua as my deliverer. By faith I am now born again by the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer, please talk to me after the service is over, [\[or email me if you are reading this online\]](#) so we can talk about growing in this knowledge and this relationship with God.

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Actual text

Luke 19.1 ¶ And He entered and was passing through Jericho. And behold, there was a man called by the name of Zaccheus; and he was a chief tax-gatherer, and he was rich. And he was trying to see who Jesus was, and he was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in

stature. And he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way. And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, “Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house.” And he hurried and came down, and received Him gladly. And when they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, “He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.”

Luke 19.8-9 And Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

The reading from the Older Testament

Ex. 22.1 ¶ “If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for the ox and four sheep for the sheep. If the thief is caught while breaking in, and is struck so that he dies, there will be no blood-guiltiness on his account. But if the sun has risen on him, there will be blood-guiltiness on his account. He shall surely make restitution; if he owns nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. If what he stole is actually found alive in his possession, whether an ox or a donkey or a sheep, he shall pay double. If a man lets a field or vineyard be grazed bare and lets his animal loose so that it grazes in another man’s field, he shall make restitution from the best of his own field and the best of his own vineyard.

Ex. 22.6 ¶ “If a fire breaks out and spreads to thorn bushes, so that stacked grain or the standing grain or the field itself is consumed, he who started the fire shall surely make restitution.

Ex. 22.7 ¶ “If a man gives his neighbor money or goods to keep for him, and it is stolen from the man’s house, if the thief is caught, he shall pay double. If the thief is not caught, then the owner of the house shall appear before the judges, to determine whether he laid his hands on his neighbor’s property. For every breach of trust, whether it is for ox, for donkey, for sheep, for clothing, or for any lost thing about which one

says, 'This is it,' the case of both parties shall come before the judges; he whom the judges condemn shall pay double to his neighbor.

Ex. 22.10 ¶ "If a man gives his neighbor a donkey, an ox, a sheep, or any animal to keep for him, and it dies or is hurt or is driven away while no one is looking, an oath before the LORD shall be made by the two of them, that he has not laid hands on his neighbor's property; and its owner shall accept it, and he shall not make restitution. But if it is actually stolen from him, he shall make restitution to its owner. If it is all torn to pieces, let him bring it as evidence; he shall not make restitution for what has been torn to pieces.

Ex. 22.14 ¶ "And if a man borrows anything from his neighbor, and it is injured or dies while its owner is not with it, he shall make full restitution. If its owner is with it, he shall not make restitution; if it is hired, it came for its hire.

Ex. 22.16 ¶ "And if a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged, and lies with her, he must pay a dowry for her to be his wife. If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the dowry for virgins. You shall not allow a sorceress to live. Whoever lies with an animal shall surely be put to death.

Ex. 22.20 ¶ "He who sacrifices to any god, other than to the LORD alone, shall be utterly destroyed. And you shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you afflict him at all, and if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry; and My anger will be kindled, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

Ex. 22.25 ¶ "If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest. If you ever take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you are to return it to him before the sun sets,

Ex. 22.27 for that is his only covering; it is his cloak for his body. What else shall he sleep in? And it shall come about that when he cries out to Me, I will hear him, for I am gracious. You shall not curse God, nor curse a ruler of your people. You shall not delay the offering from your harvest and your vintage. The first-born of your sons you shall give to Me. You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep. It shall be with its mother seven days; on the eighth day you shall give it to Me. And you shall be holy men to Me, therefore you shall not eat any flesh torn to pieces in the field; you shall throw it to the dogs.

Extra notes from a sermon on Luke 19 given several years ago in Sydney.

We think of the taxmen as the weakest links in a free flowing economy, don't we? Back then, the tax collectors took in Harbor-dues that were higher than ordinary tolls, and smuggling or a false declaration was punished by confiscation of the goods. Thus the publicans also levied import and export dues, bridge-toll, road-money, town-dues, etc. If the peaceable inhabitant, the tiller of the soil, the tradesman, or manufacturer was constantly exposed to their exactions, the traveler, the caravan, or the peddler encountered their vexatious presence at every bridge, along the road, and at the entrance to cities. Not because of the fear of anthrax, but due to taxes, every bale had to be unloaded, and all its contents tumbled about and searched; even letters were opened. It must have taken more than Eastern patience to bear their insolence and to submit to their "unjust accusations" in arbitrarily fixing the return from land or income, or the value of goods. There was no use appealing against them, although the law allowed this, since the judges themselves were the direct beneficiaries by the revenue. They before whom accusations on this score would have to be laid, belonged to the order of knights, who were the very persons implicated in the farming of the revenue.

Of course, the joint-stock company of Publicani at Rome expected its handsome dividends; so did the tax-gatherers in the provinces, and those to whom they on occasions sublet the imposts. All wanted to make money of the people; and the cost of the collection had of course to be added to the taxation. We can quite understand how Zaccheus, one of the supervisors of these tax-gatherers in the district of Jericho, which, from its growth and export of balsam, must have yielded a large revenue, should, in

remembering his past life, have at once said: “If I have taken anything from any man by false accusation” — or, rather, “Whatever I have wrongfully exacted of any man.”¹⁴ For nothing was more common than for the publican to put a fictitious value on property or income.