

Restitution

THE FORGOTTEN DUTY

Douglas Wilson

Published by Canon Press
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843
800.488.2034 | www.canonpress.com

Douglas Wilson, *Restitution: The Forgotten Duty*
Copyright © 1991 by Douglas Wilson
Printed in the United States of America.

All rights reserved. This booklet is available for copying, distribution, and transmission under Creative Commons (attribution-noncommercial-no derivative works 3.0 unported) license. For further details of this license, please visit creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/



CONTENTS

Introduction

5

1. The Forgotten Duty

7

2. Restitution and Forgiveness

13

INTRODUCTION

Fools mock at making amends for sin, but good will is found among the upright. (Prov. 14:9, NIV)

A national evangelical magazine once asked my father for suggestions on topics for future articles. He suggested that one area needing to be addressed was the subject of restitution. They said, “Write us an article.” So he did, and sent it in. Later he received a handwritten note from the editor saying, “You’ve got to be kidding.”

Making amends for the sin of theft is very clearly required in Scripture. But the fact that it is clear does not mean Christians are equally clear in their application. Many professing Christians want to say that because we are forgiven in Jesus Christ, we are therefore under grace and not under law. By this they mean that grace changes our obligations to God and our neighbor. But it does not.

Romans 6:14 says, “For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.” Being under grace means that sin does not govern anymore; the Christian is *freed to do right*. The forgiveness offered to us in Jesus Christ *does not* change the nature of right and wrong. It does not, for example, make adultery and theft legitimate activities for Christians. Forgiveness is *forgiveness* of sin, not a *redefinition* of sin. There are some who say that because they are forgiven,

they can now do what they want. They want grace as a cloak *for* sin, not a solution *to* sin.

There are others who say that because they are forgiven, they are free to live in and apply the will of God. When we go to the Word of God, we find that this is the biblical pattern of behavior. How does this pattern look when applied to the manner of restitution?

THE FORGOTTEN DUTY

Restitution is the restoration of a thing to its proper place or owner; it is a reparation for injury or damage. In Scripture, forgiveness is not a substitute for restitution, but rather the foundation of it.

In the Bible, we can find five guiding principles regarding restitution.

1. Restitution accompanies the guilt offering.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: “If a person sins and commits a trespass against the Lord by lying to his neighbor about what was delivered to him for safe-keeping, or about a pledge, or a robbery, or if he has extorted from his neighbor, or if he has found what was lost and lies concerning it and swears falsely—in any one of these things that a man may do in which he sins: then it shall be because he has sinned and is guilty, that he shall restore what he has stolen, or the thing that he has deceitfully obtained, or what was delivered to him for safekeeping, or the lost thing which he found, or all that about which he has sworn falsely. He shall restore its full value, add one-fifth more to it, and give it to whomever it belongs, on the day of his trespass offering, to the priest. So the priest shall make atonement for him before the Lord, and he shall be forgiven for any one of these things that he may have done in which he trespasses.” (Lev. 6:1–7)

In this passage, the person has sinned in some sort of deceitful way. He finds himself in the possession of the property of another, to which he has no right. Presuming he is caught, or is convicted by God and wants to make things right, he must make the guilt offering to the Lord and restitution to the rightful owner.

As Christians, we do not have to go to a priest and present a guilt offering because *Jesus Christ is our guilt offering, and Jesus Christ is our priest*. He died on the cross as a substitute for His people, as an all-sufficient guilt offering. However, we still need to make restitution and do not understand forgiveness unless we do. It is crucial for us to remember that *forgiveness does not transfer property right to the thief*.

2. Restitution includes interest. The Bible recognizes that property does not exist in a vacuum, but in time. The value of it varies based upon how long a person has possession of it. In Leviticus 6, the Bible adds twenty percent to the value of the object.

If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he shall restore five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep.
(Exod. 22:1)

A man does not just own sheep. If he has two sheep for twenty years, he has much more than two sheep; he has *capital*. If he is deprived of that property for some time and the thief is caught (or confesses), then he must not only restore the property, he must *restore the time*. This is the case if he slaughters the animal. If he stole the animal and the animal is recovered, he does not pay four or five times the amount. This is because the capital was recovered.

Exodus 22:4 says, “If the theft is certainly found alive in his hand, whether it is an ox or a donkey or sheep, he shall restore double.” God is interested not only in the value of the property, but its value *over time*. Interest is a God-ordained concept when it comes to restitution. We see this also in Exodus 22:7:

If a man delivers to his neighbor money or articles to keep and it is stolen out of the man's house, if the thief is found, he shall pay double.

3. Restitution is important.

If the sun has risen on him, there shall be guilt for his bloodshed. He should make full restitution. If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. (Exod. 22:3)

We see here that restitution is important enough to demand the rest of someone's life. If a thief has no means of making reparation, then he must give himself up to slavery and thus pay off his debt through service.

I knew of a woman who made her living for years shoplifting around the country. We were talking about thousands of dollars of goods. She then came to Christ. She could not say, "Well, I'm forgiven, so I'll just take it from here."

When someone goes back to a merchant or to someone they have wronged with the willingness to make right, it is extremely rare for the original owner to be vindictive. He is usually so surprised by the effort to make restitution that he will work with the thief and make it reasonable for him to pay back what he stole. But that decision is *the owner's* to make, not the decision of the thief. He needs to be willing for the restitution to "wreck his life." If he is obedient, it is not going to wreck his life. Doing what God commands is never a bad idea. If the thief lived in a just society and were unable to make the restitution, he would be sold into slavery, and *that* would take care of all his future plans.

If someone steals a car, wrecks it, and cannot pay, he is convicted and sent to jail. Then the taxes of the victim are raised to pay for the thief's upkeep. This is humanistic law. The victim is not only victimized by the thief, he is being robbed by the system.

In the biblical system, the restitution goes to the *victim* of the crime. In the current American system, imprisonment is slav-

ery, which is allowed for in the Constitution. But even though it is constitutional, it is still unbiblical because the criminal is not enslaved to the victim's benefit, but rather to his detriment.

Now it would be easy to fill a room full of Christians who believe that the civil authorities ought to require restitution. But if they heard a sermon about the restitution *they* had failed to make, we would perhaps find some inconsistency. As self-governing Christians, we need to act upon our beliefs before we can expect the civil magistrates to act upon them.

4. Restitution is required for culpable negligence.

If a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed and lets loose his animal and it feeds in another man's field, he shall make restitution from the best of his own field and the best of his own vineyard. If fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain, standing grain, or the field is consumed, he who kindled the fire shall surely make restitution. (Exod. 22:5–6)

We are not talking about restitution for an “act of God.” If someone were given a neighbor's animal for safe-keeping and a tornado carried it away, he is not required to make restitution. But when the negligence is culpable, restitution is required for it.

And if a man borrows anything from his neighbor and it becomes injured or dies, the owner of it not being with it, he shall surely make it good. But if the owner was with it, he shall not make it good. If it was hired, it came for its hire. (Exod. 22:14)

God's law is preeminently wise and good; it makes *good sense*. If a man borrows his neighbor's lawn mower, and it blows up while he is mowing the lawn, he owes his neighbor a lawn mower. But if he *rented* it from him, the owner is obligated to include the possibility of it blowing up in the rental price. If

he borrows it, and the owner comes along to supervise and it blows up, the borrower does not owe him a lawn mower.

Many Christians agree that we are supposed to love one another, but when it comes to any sharp *definition* of love, all we can come up with is a general idea of warm fuzzies. But when Christians come into hard situations, they need more than that. When we need to know the loving thing to do, we must remember that God's law is consistent with his character. God's law is not an opponent of God's love.

5. Restitution is required when the thief can't repay the original owner or family.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, when a man or woman commits any sin that men commit in unfaithfulness against the Lord and that person is guilty, then he shall confess the sin which he has done. He shall make restitution for his trespass in full value plus one-fifth of it and give it to the one he has wronged. But if the man has no kinsman to whom restitution may be made for the wrong, the restitution for the wrong must go to the Lord for the priest in addition to the ram of the atonement with which atonement is made for him." (Num. 5:5-8)

Verse 6 states that theft is a sin against God. We have perhaps been told by humanists that there is a distinction between human rights and property rights. This is not true. *Property rights are human rights*. When God says in the Ten Commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," He is presupposing and ordaining and blessing the institution of marriage. We do not have the authority to undo that command and create other types of "alterative" unions. In the same way, when God says, "You shall not steal," He is ordaining and blessing the institution of private property.

There would be many Christians who would be upset if someone told them that in some cultures it is all right for a man to be married to another man or to a dog. They would say

that God's institution of marriage is sacrosanct and cannot be touched. But if they get on the subject of communism or socialism, they would say that "it all depends." But man has no right to abolish what God has ordained in *any area*. We have no right to modify the Word of God *anywhere*.

When David committed adultery and murder, he said in his psalm of confession to the Lord, "Against You, You only, have I sinned" (Ps. 51:4). When a man hurts someone else, he has not sinned against them only. It is *God's* law that is violated. Thanks be to God that He has given us a guilt offering, Jesus Christ.

Once a man told me he remembered an incident where he had stolen some items, but he could not remember what house it was or where it was. He had no means of tracking down the original owner. Anyone who has stolen on a wide scale will have a hard time making up a list of all he owes. In such a situation, he would make restitution *to the Lord* (v. 8). This can be done by giving the money owed as a donation to the church or a charitable Christian organization. If the original owner who was wronged is dead, then it should be given to his heirs.

RESTITUTION AND FORGIVENESS

Restitution and forgiveness of sins are inseparable companions. If the sin involves the property of another, then restitution is necessary before forgiveness can be enjoyed. If restitution is absent, so is forgiveness. This connection is not limited to the Old Testament.

Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. Now behold there was a man named Zaccheus who was the chief tax collector and he was rich. He sought to see who Jesus was but he could not because of the crowd for he was of short stature. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him for he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him and said to him, "Zaccheus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house." So he made haste and came down and received him joyfully. But when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, "He is gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner." Then Zaccheus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore four-fold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house because he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." (Lk. 19:1-10)

Notice that Jesus did not say, “Today salvation is come to this household, so don’t worry about it, Zaccheus. All that theft and extortion is ‘under the blood.’ You’ve got the salvation, so keep the money. I used to make people return things under the Old Covenant, but I’m about to die for the sins of the world, and I am here to tell you that you can keep what you have stolen.”

It is true that forgiveness of sins came to that house that day. But restitution also came to that house that same day, brought by Jesus Christ our Lord. We are *Christians*, and we must do what Jesus Christ tells us to do in His Word—Old and New Testaments both.

Grace makes true restitution possible; it does not eliminate the need for restitution. If a man is forgiven, he is cleansed and therefore enabled to make restitution the right way, with the right motivation.

Once there was a university student who had taken some tools from a construction company where he felt he had been mistreated. He then heard a sermon on restitution. As consequence, he loaded all the tools into the car and started driving to the construction site. On the way, he was listening to a Christian radio station and heard someone say something like this: “If you are a Christian, you are forgiven for all your sins. If you stole something, you don’t have to return it.” He turned the car around. We can imagine what he was thinking. “Oh, boy, forgiveness—and the tools, too!” He then went home and engraved his initials on the tools. Some time later he heard the message on restitution again, was convicted again, and finally made restitution.

There are teachers who, in the name of Jesus Christ, have used forgiveness as a means to distort and twist what is right. But forgiveness does not transfer property rights.

Romans 13 says we are to owe no man anything except the debt of love. Suppose someone keeps \$10,000 which he stole from someone else. He says it is “under the blood.” But then suppose God puts a burden on him to witness to the victim. “I want you to witness to this man from whom you have stolen.” Can this Christian then go to him with nothing but the obliga-

tion of love? What is he going to think about the Jesus Christ this man represents, especially if he knows about the theft? There are people who, in the name of grace, *want to change what is right*. These are people who can have their false Jesus and go to Hell with him. Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, loves righteousness, and theft is unrighteousness. So true restitution is made possible by a true understanding of what true grace is.

In James it says that faith without works is dead. Now there is no way to identify living works which proceed from the living faith apart from the revelation that God gives us in His word. This means that works involve restitution. If it were up to *us* to figure out right and wrong from biblical teaching, we could afford to ignore the inconvenience of restitution. But righteousness is not something we define; it is the law of God.

In 1 John we are given a very good definition of sin. 1 John 3:4 says: "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness and sin is lawlessness." We cannot choose *whether* we are going to live under law. The choice we face is *which* law; will it be the law of God or the humanistic law of man?

Remember, the Old Testament passages we considered gave a general "catch-all" definition of theft. Someone might be tempted to say, "I stole the money with a computer, and the Bible says nothing about computers!" But we are talking about forgery, fraud, borrowing things and not returning them, borrowing things and breaking them, finding something and lying about it to the rightful owner, cheating on taxes. All forms of theft are covered.

If someone stole money from a bank and then (with his suitcase full of money), meets up with a street preacher and repents, believes, and receives forgiveness of his sins, is he then justified in concluding that he may keep the money? If he keeps the money, *he is still in his sins*. Jesus Christ did not die on the cross in order to allow us to pilfer someone else's property.

When a man cries out to Jesus Christ, he has to be willing to put whatever is wrong to rights. He must be in a lawful relationship with everyone on this planet, so far as he is physically

able. God teaches us in His Word what a lawful relationship is; we are not required to go through life aimlessly trying to make it up as we go.

Those who reject restitution are walking away, not from a “legalistic” requirement of some particular church, but from Jesus Christ and His Word. If someone is prepared to make restitution, this is what he should do:

- Make a list of necessary restitution.
- Calculate the inflation rate since the theft and factor that in.
- Add 20% to the value.
- Contact the owners, explain what happened, and write them a check.
- If he doesn't have the money, he should contact the owners, tell them what he owes them, and make payment arrangements.
- Do not expect the owners to forgive the debt and do not ask them to.

Perhaps some readers may be embarrassed to go into the various shops to make restitution or may need some help in composing letters. We are willing to help you, but take action on it right away. If you want that help, please write in care of Canon Press to the address on page 2. They will forward your letter on to a church deacon or elder who can assist you. But do not postpone restitution until some more “convenient” time. Do not think you can wait until you save up the money, and then mail it to the owners anonymously. If you do not begin the restitution now, the chances are that the savings program will not be all that successful. It is important to commit yourself to restitution now; obedience requires it.

Once restitution is made, Scripture requires one more thing. That is the requirement for the former thief to begin to work with his hands and to use what he makes for works of charity. This goes beyond the money owed to the victims. Paul says, “Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need” (Eph. 4:28).

May God bless you as *you take it back*.

