

Pillar Passages – Eph. 4:28
Jed Brown
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Well, hello and welcome to another edition of Pillar Passages. Today we are looking at just one verse; Ephesians 4 verse 28.

I want to ask the question of this passage, “When is a thief no longer a thief?” When is a thief no longer a thief, according to this passage? Again, we’re looking at Ephesians 4:28.

Here’s the passage: *Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.*

Now we need to understand the context. The first 3 chapters of Ephesians lay out the gospel; what is, what God has done for us in Christ, His grace poured out in Christ. And the last 3 chapters are the application—the so what? So here, Paul is working that out. Working out how we ought to put off our old self, in verse 22 which belongs to your old manner of life which is corrupted through deceitful desires. To be renewed in the spirit of our minds to grow into who we already are—into the likeness of God—in true righteousness and holiness.

Paul puts out different commands here that are applications of the gospel. The gospel is this: we are this. We have a new identity in Christ in the gospel. Here is part of ‘the so what’ in verse 28.

So, when is a thief no longer a thief?

The passage puts it this way. The thief is still a thief, of course, when he’s still stealing, so he needs to stop stealing. But that does not, now, make him no longer a thief. A person can remain a thief in their heart. Therefore, repentance for a thief looks like not just stopping to steal but also beginning to labor. Then doing a certain quality of labor—labor of *honest* work. Then honest work with his own hands—contributing something with his own hands. He’s not sitting on his shovel watching others work, not manipulating others, but doing his own work with his own hands, by the sweat of his own brow,

But even that is not enough. He must do so such that he has an overflow—a surplus. That must be his aim. A surplus. But that surplus—the goal of the surplus—must change. The goal of the surplus is *not* for him. But it is for others—to share. The goal is to become generous where there once was a covetous heart.

But not only this. Even this is still not enough. To be generous with anyone—whether they have earned it or not—*in need*. With anyone in need. Now the person’s life—the life of this thief—this person who was once a thief—takes on an entirely different shape. It takes on the shape of the gospel.

The gospel, where God sent with His own hands the help that we needed and was infinitely generous with us by giving us Christ when we were in complete need—we who were once dead in our trespasses and sins. God did not leave us there, but in mercy and in grace gave us the most infinite generosity in the form of His Son. So now the thief's life takes on the very shape of the gospel—and until it does this, he is still a thief.

Now the principle here has to do with the fact there is such a thing called external idolatry and internal idolatry. Let me show you this in Colossians chapter 3. Colossians being a related and very similar book to Ephesians. Paul uses the very same logic, because you have been raised with Christ, therefore, seek the things that are above. Be who you are now in Christ. Be who you are. Set your mind on things above, because that is where you are seated with Christ, for you have died. There's the gospel. Your life is hidden with Christ in God so then live out of that by seeking the things that are above.

So then, practical comments here—practical implications, verse 5—*put to death, therefore, what is earthing in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and—lastly here—covetousness*. Covetousness when is the heart of every thief.

Paul does something here that we need to understand. He says covetousness and then he adds to it this phrase; *which is idolatry*. Idolatry being, taking anything—anything that is created—and putting it in the place of the Creator in our mind and in our hearts. Elevating that which is created. Idolatry is elevating anything that is in the created realm to the place of the Creator in our life. To function as a functional god in our life. Which is exactly what thieving—what stealing—is acting out. Stealing is acting out covetousness. It is acting out, therefore, idolatry. Which is the opposite of being shaped by the gospel—being a life shaped by God. It is life shaped by a false god; the idolatry of covetousness.

But the problem is there is such a thing as external idols. External idols like a physical idol, or in the case of a thief, the things that you steal. That is an external idol. But the problem is just putting that away does not solve the problem of idolatry, because there is idolatry that we can so easily harbor in our own hearts.

One famous reformation theologian said that our hearts are idol factories. We can make anything in the created realm a little “g” god that supplants *the* God in our minds and in our hearts. So, we must all take the lesson of the thief. We must all realize just because I—for instance, to give an example—I stopped spending too much money; or I stopped watching too much TV; or stopped eating too much, that does not mean that that particular idolatry has left me. There is still idolatry in my heart that I must labor to eradicate—to get out that inner idolatry of the heart. That can take many, many forms. Often times, what we do is we shift from one idol to another. We give up one habit, but the means by which we give up the one habit is by taking on another habit. Which is not entirely a bad except sometimes all we are doing is shifting from one less socially acceptable idol to, perhaps, one that is more socially acceptable in our social circles.

The key here is to eradicate idolatry down to the bone. This takes woke, and this is not a one and done process. But in the end, it will always in end where chapter 4 verse 28 ends. It will always end in a life that is shaped by the gospel and therefore is in lived in generosity to others. No matter what the idol is in your heart or mine, the eradication of that idol will always go down this path in service to others. But a service to others that is driven by the service that was rendered to us by God at the cross. Our lives will take on a cross-shaped life and therefore they will be lives of thankfulness; live of jolly faith; of courage; and of humble self-forgetfulness live out in generous service to others.

So, as you think about the idols you wrestle with in your life, pray for these things, because as you pray for these things you are at the same time praying against your idols. You are loading up the forces of heaven to do real battle against those idols that beset you and the power of heaven *will* win. God will do it. Take heart, fight, and resist. Resist with thankfulness and a jolly faith, courage, and a humble heart that is grateful for what the Lord had done for you in Christ.