Lesson Eight

Private Property

LESSON IDEA

The right of individuals to own and control property is essential to freedom. The fact that property rights are one of the most important rights of all was well recognized by our Founding Fathers.

VISUAL AIDS

None recommended for this lesson.

LAST WEEK we discussed the importance of being able to keep and enjoy the fruits of your own labor. Basically, this means that individuals should have the right to hold and control private property.

Private property may be defined as anything a person produces which he chooses to keep, or which has come into his possession by voluntary exchange or voluntary giving.

The most basic property a person possesses is his or her life, which is a gift from God. The taking of innocent life has always been recognized by civilized societies as a terrible crime. Murder is the ultimate violation of a person's most basic property right.

Needless to say, if a person has a right to life, then he has the additional right to maintain his life. But how can he do so? What can he do to obtain the food, clothing, shelter and other things he needs or wants?

For example, let's assume that you wanted some fish for dinner. How could you obtain them? [Encourage each family member to list some ways that fish can be acquired, such as at a supermarket or by fishing.]

Basically, there are four steps you could take:

First, you could acquire them yourself. For instance, you might cut a tree limb for a rod, dig up some worms, get some string and a hook, and go down to the nearest lake to catch them.

Second, you could receive them as gifts from someone else. Perhaps an uncle who went on a fishing trip caught more than he could use, and would give some to you.

Third, you could trade something you already have with someone who has more fish than he wants. You could, for instance, visit a supermarket and exchange some of your money for fish the manager wants to sell.

Fourth, you could steal them from someone who already has them.

Of these four possibilities, you will note that only the first three are morally permissible. There is nothing wrong with making something yourself, or exchanging something you have for an item you would sooner have, or receiving a gift. But it is clearly wrong to steal. In fact, theft is condemned by all of the world's great religions. Two of the Ten Commandments, for instance, specifically deal with coveting and stealing:

> Thou shalt not steal. (Exodus 20: 15)
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> Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's. (Exodus 20:17)

But what is it that we are not supposed to steal or covet? The most obvious object of theft and covetousness is the property of others. In fact, stealing can be defined as the taking of a person's private property without his consent. And if stealing is wrong, it is apparently because ownership is good. The right to own private property is a basic, underlying assumption of the Ten Commandments.

The question sometimes arises about whether it is justifiable to take property from one person without his consent, and give it to someone else who may appear to be more deserving. Karl Marx endorsed this approach when he laid down the communist principle of taking "from each according to his abilities" and giving "to each according to his needs." But a contrary view is implied in the Biblical account of the Good Samaritan. [Have someone in the discussion read the following parable.]

FOR YOUNGER AMERICANS

Youngsters are capable of understanding the importance of private property at a very early age. To emphasize the principle, have young family members list some of the items they consider to be their personal property. The list might include toys, games, bicycles, clothes — even a pet.

Then ask each what it is that makes a particular item his or her property. How was it acquired? How would they feel if someone took one of their prized possessions with permission?

Disputes among youngsters over who should play with which toys at a particular time are common. Tonight's lesson offers a golden opportunity to discuss an important corollary of the principle of private property: voluntary sharing. For example, a child may think twice about refusing to let others share his toys when he realizes that they will likely refuse to let him play with theirs — or may not want to play with him at all.

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

And by chance there came down a certain priest that way; and when he saw them, he passed by on the other side.

And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.

But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion on him,

And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

And on the morrow, when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him: and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. (Luke 10:30-35)

The first question we might ask as we consider this parable is: "What were the motives of the thieves who robbed the traveler?" They apparently believed that they could put the traveler's possessions to better use than could the traveler himself. Let us suppose, for the sake of our discussion, that their motives were very good, and that they intended to give the stolen raiment (clothing) to the poor. Would even such a worthy goal have justified the theft?

A second question that comes to mind involves the Good Samaritan himself. Do you think he would have been justified in using force to compel others to help the injured traveler? Suppose, for instance, that he had rushed to catch up with the priest and the Levite, and had forcibly taken money from them to use in caring for the injured man. If the Good Samaritan had done so, in what way would his actions have differed, morally speaking, from those of the thieves who robbed the traveler?

The parable of the Good Samaritan emphasizes that we should assist those less fortunate than ourselves. But it also seems to tell us that such help should be given on a voluntary basis, free of force or coercion.

AT THE BEGINNING of tonight's discussion, we defined private property, but our definition is not quite complete. To illustrate what we overlooked, consider the following incident:

A few years ago, a member of the Marine Corps was assigned to serve overseas for six months. He owned an automobile, and after thinking about what he should do with it while he was out of the country, he decided to let his younger brother use it. Thus, for that six-month period, the Marine still owned his car, and was obligated to pay taxes and purchase insurance and license plates for it. But his brother controlled its use. Who do you think was better off during that time — the man who owned the car or the one who controlled it?

As you can see, the control of property can at times be even more important than mere ownership of it. We said that private property could be defined as anything a person produces which he chooses to keep, or which has come into his possession by voluntary exchange or voluntary giving. But to make private ownership meaningful, it is necessary that a person be able to control his property. He must be able to do with it as he wishes (as long as he does not harm others) or his ownership is incomplete.

Can you think of a system of government that