

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)

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.]

