

Principles for Transformation: Connecting Personal and Public Life

By Dr. Art Lindsley



Why have some societies led to so much human suffering? One foundational reason for the collapse of so many of these countries has been the lack of respect for private property in all forms.

The reality is that private property laws have been a key—maybe even *the* key—to the economic flourishing of the West. Why is this? Can the Bible help us understand why private property is so important to human flourishing?

Biblical Emphasis of Private Property

Two of the Ten Commandments implicitly uphold private property. “You shall not steal” and “You shall not covet” prohibit both the desire to steal and the actual theft of private property (Exodus 20:15; 20:17). Minimally, the prohibition against stealing means that it is wrong to take someone else’s property without his or her permission.

Divine prohibitions against moving boundary markers occur five times throughout the Old Testament.

- Deuteronomy 19:14 says, “You shall not move your neighbor’s boundary stone which the ancestors have set.”
- This injunction is repeated in Deuteronomy 27:17: “Cursed is he who moves his neighbor’s boundary mark.”
- Proverbs 22:28 says, “Do not move the ancient boundary which your fathers have set.”
- Proverbs 23:10 warns, “Do not move the ancient boundary or go into the fields of the fatherless.”
- Note also Job 24:2, which includes in a list of those that do evil: “Some remove the landmarks; they seize and devour flocks.”

God also addresses theft in 1 Kings 21. In this classic example, King Ahab saw Naboth’s vineyard, which was close to his own, and coveted it. Ahab offered either to exchange another vineyard for Naboth’s or to buy it from him. Naboth firmly refused, saying, “The Lord forbid me that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers” (1 Kings 21:3).

Ahab's wife Jezebel devised a plan to kill Naboth and steal his land. The plan was executed and it succeeded. The prophet Elijah, however, pronounced severe judgment on Ahab and Jezebel for this wicked deed.

Naboth's concern to preserve the inheritance of his fathers is underlined again in Leviticus 25:23: "The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine." In the broader biblical picture, God is, strictly speaking, the owner of all of the land. He appoints believers as his stewards and expects them to exercise creative rulership or dominion with the land they are given. (Genesis 1:26-28).

In the context of Leviticus 25, the Promised Land was divided among the tribes and among families within the tribes. The original plots of land were to remain perpetually with the original owners.

The [Jubilee laws](#) set out by the Old Testament mandated that no matter how irresponsible a family member might be, the land would come back to the biological family every fifty years. The Jubilee laws underscored the sanctity of private property in that time in an agrarian society where land was crucial for prosperity.

The prohibition against stealing was not, of course, unique to the ancient Jews. Old Testament scholar Walter Kaiser [notes](#) that "Rome made this crime one that was punishable by death, so seriously did they view such an action."

The New Testament Christians inherited this prohibition:

- In the New Testament, Jesus reiterates some of the Ten Commandments including, "Do not steal," to the rich young ruler. (Mark 10:9; Luke 18:20).
- After meeting Jesus, Zacchaeus promises fourfold restitution to those he has defrauded. (Luke 19:8).
- In Romans, Paul argues that the eighth commandment is part of what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. (Romans 13:9).
- In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul lists *habitual* thieves as those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Paul clearly states, "He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need" (Ephesians 4:28).
- Even the controversial passage in [Acts 2-5](#) is no exception. In this instance, the early believers retained private property while *voluntarily* sharing what they had through what seems to have been a temporary arrangement.

From this, it is evident that the New Testament restates emphatically the prohibition of theft which clearly implies the upholding of private property.

Implications

While there is near-universal prohibition against theft in various religious traditions, it should come as no surprise that private property laws would be most richly developed in the Christian West. These laws follow quite naturally from the Christian worldview, and are essentially a political and economic interpretation of this biblical truth. The biblical teaching on private property has implications for our economic perspective. To put it bluntly, if private property is good then Marxism is bad. Marx declared in his *Manifesto of the Communist Party* that "the theory of the communists may be summed up in a single sentence: Abolition of private property."

Private Property and Poverty

Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto addresses the centrality of property rights in addressing poverty in his book titled, [*The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else*](#). He argues that even the poorest nations have more than enough assets to be successful.

So why do so many remain so poor? Land only becomes property when there are property and titling laws in place that are widely recognized. De Soto argues that the ownership of the land under the feet of the poor—much of which lacks formal ownership—needs to be formalized through property laws that allow these assets to be used for credit like allowing mortgages, loans, etc. This is the mystery of capital that has allowed so many countries to eradicate absolute poverty and enjoy widespread wealth.

We take these things for granted in the West. Theologian [John Schneider](#) puts it well:

In the United States an ordinary teenager lacking all maturity, insight, or any remarkable skill at anything, can slide a credit card into a gas pump slot and draw immediately on the magical mystery of capital. His parents take for granted that they can have a mortgage, or loan on their business, that will enable them to secure among many other things, the requisite four years in college.

But in order to have this kind of credit, one needs secure private property laws, a fixed address for sending bills and collecting taxes, a basis for checking credit history, access to public utilities, and a basis for mortgage based on securities that can be sold. Since we have inherited all these things, we often take them for granted.

In poorer nations, these conditions either do not exist or exist in a very imperfect form. The process to acquire formally owned property can be daunting in these places.

De Soto says:

Imagine a country where nobody can identify who owns what, addresses cannot be easily verified, people cannot be made to pay their debts, resources cannot conveniently be turned into money, ownership cannot be divided into shares, description of assets are not standardized and cannot be easily compared, and the rules that govern property vary from neighborhood to neighborhood or even from street to street. You have just put yourself into the life of a developing country or a former communist nation.

Clearly, establishing easy, quick access to clearly documented property rights is a crucial pre-condition for moving a country from poverty to prosperity.

Conclusion

Signs that designate private property in the West are more than mere taboos. They symbolize a whole system of laws and cultural mores that have developed over time. These are rooted in biblical teaching and should provide an interpretive key to our economic views.

Private property laws also point toward the solution. A key to addressing poverty worldwide is an establishment of clear and enforceable private property laws.

Many Western states enjoy private property laws and have flourished because of them. The next time you see a private property sign, remember that this has been a biblically based key to the West's success, and it is one that we should commend to the developing world.

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