



"The best way to teach morality is to make it a habit with children."
—Aristotle

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Teaching Respect for Property

From last week's essay, it is apparent that Constitutional protections of private property ownership have been eroded over the past several decades, not just by major Supreme Court decisions, but also by the steady encroachment of socialism into American culture. At the end of the day, socialism is about state control, if not outright ownership, of the wealth-producing mechanisms of a country, and as the axiom says, all wealth ultimately comes out of the ground. When government begins to confiscate private properties and businesses in order to nationalize huge sectors of the economy, socialism is entering its final stages. The United States is, thankfully, not there quite yet.

Nevertheless, the groundwork has been laid. This is seen, first, in the general acceptance of governmental powers, particularly federal power, in areas that the Founders of this nation would be aghast to discover. Originally, federal power was severely limited to three major areas: defense, justice, and foreign policy. Beyond these, Congress was given the power to make necessary laws, coin money, and collect taxes. It was thought that the separation of powers and the various checks and balances would inhibit the growth of the government's power. However, we now see the government regulating everything from car seats to cold medicine. The U.S. has so many arcane

laws - federal, state, and local - that every citizen is a lawbreaker in one way or another.

The basis for full-blown socialism is also seen in the attitudes of the average citizen, especially young people, toward private property. One of the most visible manifestations of this attitude is the proliferation of insular, planned communities in which powerful homeowners' associations police property owners on such "vital" matters as flagpole and fence heights, paint colors, and yard décor. Does a person really own his property if he can enhance and maintain it only according to the directives of an oversight committee? This is socialism in action.

It is becoming more obvious that children are not being taught to respect private property. Perhaps this is a failing on the part of parents and/or a product of government schooling, which was set up in the early- to mid-1900s by socialist educators like John Dewey. Whatever the cause, children no longer recognize boundaries between, say, public roads and private yards. Back in the day, parents taught their children that a neighbor's driveway was his property, and that they should not use it unless they had a specific reason to be there and had the owner's consent. They were also taught not to use neighbors' yards as a short cut to somewhere else. It was also a given that a neighbor's yard was not to be regarded as a trash dump for their candy wrappers, drink cans, and other assorted litter, nor was it a community garden in which they could dig holes, take topsoil, and remove mulch, flowers, leaves, branches, and fruits and vegetables at their whim.

Why are so many parents not teaching their children these basic principles?

Perhaps the primary reason is that they do not consider it all that important because they themselves do not have a great deal of respect for others' possessions. In the great game called "keeping up with the Joneses," diminishing the neighbor's property increases one's own. Envy and competition, hallmarks of rabid American materialism, can cause normally good neighbors to exhibit less-than-stellar attitudes and behaviors, which children are quick to mimic.

Another reason stems from the quickening pace of life; there is just so little time anymore to pass on these necessary principles. Parents are harried from

the time they awaken to the time they fall wearily back into bed at night, and much of their time in between is spent away from home, not with their kids. Many parents likely justify this neglect by saying, "Who has time to take little Johnny aside and teach him the [wisdom](#) of the ages? Aren't they supposed to be doing that at school?" But just the opposite of this latter question is true: Public schools, heavily influenced by "social studies" and liberal policies advocated by the teachers' unions, push social values that sound as if they come from the *Communist Manifesto* rather than the Bible, the Constitution, or the Declaration of Independence.

Yet a third reason, perhaps the most elusive to define, may be a nagging feeling among many adults that they do not really control anything, even what they supposedly own. This malaise arises from a multitude of factors present in American society: the aforementioned ubiquitous government power, oppressive personal and national debt, constant and fruitless bickering among politicians, the constant drumming of the media on bad news, increasing awareness of crime and terrorism, frequent and deadly natural disasters, the looming specter of recession or unemployment - in a word, a kind of hopelessness. Why teach Jimmy to take care of the car when the bank is just going to repossess it anyway? Why scold Sally about defacing her school locker when the government has billions of our dollars to fix things just like that? Why get all hot and bothered about passing on such values when life is worth so little and it may be snuffed out tomorrow? Too many believe that events are spinning out of control, and they are fatalistically just along for the ride.

Despite these purported reasons not to do so, teaching our children to respect the property of others is a righteous activity. The eighth commandment, "You shall not steal" ([Exodus 20:15](#)), acts as the underlying principle of this responsibility, for trampling another's rights of ownership is essentially stealing from him. At its mildest, it is abrogating his privilege to say how his property is treated. At its worst, it is downright robbery.

In the Gospels, our Savior says a great deal about [stewardship](#), the overarching concept regarding the maintenance, use, and development of property, either one's own or another's (see, for instance, [Luke 12:35-39](#); [16:1-8](#); [19:12-27](#); also, from the apostles, [I Corinthians 4:1-2](#); [Titus 1:7](#); [I Peter 4:10](#)). It is our duty as Christian parents to instruct our children about proper

stewardship of first our and their possessions, and then the treatment of other people's belongings. This will lay the right foundation for the more important stewardship of God's gifts and blessings that leads to great reward in His Kingdom ([Matthew 24:45-47](#)).

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Division, Satan, Humility](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The prevailing mindset in human society is one of contention, division and disagreement. The source of division and separation from the source of life is sin that has become practiced as a way of life. Throughout the course of Biblical history, whenever sin appears, confusion, division and separation are the automatic consequences (James 4:1-2). The Day of Atonement pictures the means to bring back unity with God- the covering of our sins with the blood of Christ. Virtually none of the world's spiritually malnourished churches realizes the significance of the Day of Atonement. We are encouraged to humble ourselves before God, resisting pride, the propelling force of sin.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Separation and Oneness With God](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Throughout the generations since Adam and Eve, war has been humanity's solution to problems between people, groups, and nations. Millions have died by the sword because sin drives people into conflict and denies them the means of reconciliation and harmony. Is there any hope for humanity? John Ritenbaugh gives the comforting answer: Oneness with God is possible through Jesus Christ!

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