

Thou Shalt Not Steal, Unless We're in a Recession

reflection

During Holy Week of 2008, I participated in a delegation of clergy, labor leaders, and workers who met with the manager of the Phoenix Recycling Center in Memphis, Tennessee. The company owed 12 of its workers over \$8,000 in unpaid wages. The owner simply stopped paying the workers one week, saying that he would get them their money when his next contract came through. Months had gone by, and pressure from the workers and Workers Interfaith Network (WIN) had not brought any results. After the delegation, some of us remained outside and talked with neighborhood residents passing by. We soon found out that not only had the owner stolen wages from the Latino immigrant workers who had contacted WIN, but that he had also employed many African-American workers from the neighborhood, and stolen wages from them as well.

When members of our delegation entered the owner's office, he greeted them wearing a baseball cap that proclaimed "Jesus is Lord." We hoped this would be a promising sign. Yet even after conversations with the delegation about the moral and legal obligation he had to repay the wages that he

had stolen, the owner only paid \$1,000 of what he owed the workers. "Jesus is Lord" is the bold claim made by Christian scripture, and this claim is echoed by millions of Christians in our nation. When Christians state that Jesus is Lord, whether at their baptisms or on baseball caps, they are saying that there will be no part of their lives where they allow some other god, whether greed, selfishness, patriotism, or hatred, to rule.

When Christians state that Jesus is Lord, whether at their baptisms or on baseball caps, they are saying that there will be no part of their lives where they allow some other god, whether greed, selfishness, patriotism, or hatred, to rule. Yet many act as if their economic lives are exempt from Jesus' Lordship.

Yet many who claim the Christian faith act as if their economic lives are exempt from Jesus' Lordship. Instead of being a violation of "thou shall not steal," wage theft from workers who gave precious labor becomes seen as a business decision, forced by lean times. When any in our community practice their faith publicly, while trying to declare our economy a morality-free zone, Jesus' words in Luke 11:42 ring out: "Woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others."

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