

Deuteronomy 22:1-4

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Moses exhorted his fellow Israelites to help preserve his brother's life by taking care of his brother's property. Lost property was to be returned to his brother. This included his brother's livestock, which was many Israelites' livelihood.

Following the treatment of how to dispose of a hanged corpse in order to avoid the LORD's curse ([Deuteronomy 21:22 – 23](#)), Moses then told the Israelites that they were not allowed to *see your countryman's ox or his sheep straying away, and pay no attention to them* (v. 1). The word *countryman* (Heb. "āḥ") is usually translated "brother" in the Old Testament. Implied in this statement is that not only was a fellow Israelite to be watched over like a brother, but his possessions likewise were to be cared for. This reminds the Israelites that the Suzerain God adopted them as His own children, and they were to behave in harmony ([Deuteronomy 14:1](#)). Therefore, they were brothers, having the same God as their spiritual father.

This law underscores that private property was an essential element in the structure of self-governance God had designed for Israel ([Exodus 20:15](#)). When someone respects the property of another, they are respecting that person. To love one's neighbor requires one to care for that person's property as they would care for their own. At this time, to lose your livestock was to lose your livelihood. So this might be the reason these commands are housed within the general framework of the sixth commandment, in that respecting property is a subset of respecting life.

Both the ox and the sheep were valuable possessions in ancient Israel and were a measure of a person's wealth and ability to sustain their lives. The *ox*, a large domesticated beast of burden, was used in Israel for farm work such as plowing, as indicated in v. 10. The *sheep* was also a domestic animal. In ancient times, the *sheep* represented the chief wealth and livelihood of farmers (the more sheep a person owned, the wealthier he was). They were valuable because they provided food to eat, milk to drink, and wool to spin.

Because a stray animal was in a dangerous situation (it could either suffer harm from wild animals or be stolen by someone), Moses told the Israelites that they were to *certainly bring them back to their countryman*. That means

the Israelites were to look out for their brothers, to extend help to each other when needed.

The law also applied when the *countryman is not near you, or if you do not know him* (v. 2). If this is the case, the one finding the stray animal was instructed to *bring it home to his house*, and the animal would *remain with him until his countryman* looked for it. Once the animal's owner looked for it and claimed it, then the one who kept it at home was to *restore it to him*. This is not "finders keepers." It is doing for others what you would wish to be done for you.

But this law was not restricted to lost animals only. Moses told the people *thus you shall do with his donkey, and you shall do the same with his garment, and you shall do likewise with anything lost by your countryman, which he has lost and you have found* (v. 3). In this sense, the "lost and found" box is a biblical concept.

The *donkey* was useful as a beast of burden and was used to carry both goods and people ([Genesis 22:3-5](#); [Exodus 4:20](#); [23:12](#); [1 Samuel 25:20](#)). An Israelite was not allowed to seize a *lost donkey* and keep it for his own personal use. Instead, he was to restore it to its owner. This also applied to someone's *garment* and *anything* which had been *lost*. He was *not allowed to neglect them*, but to take good care of them until the owner claimed them as his property.

In the same fashion, the Israelites were commanded to *not see their countryman's donkey or his ox fallen down on the way, and pay no attention to them* (v. 4). In this manner, indifference was outlawed. Israelites were to care for one another. Moses used *donkey* and *ox* here because they were the two most common beasts of burden in ancient Israel. The principle of caring for one's neighbor's missing animals applied to their injured animals as well.

Instead of ignoring the brother's fallen animal, the people were commanded to *certainly help him raise it up*. An animal could have fallen because it lost its balance when carrying a heavy burden. This was stated also in the book of Exodus where Moses told the previous generation that "if you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him" ([Exodus 23:5](#)).

Along with illustrating the principle of loving one's neighbor as oneself ([Leviticus 19:18](#)), this law was probably meant to teach the LORD's covenant

people that a person's possessions (just like a person's life) were a gift from Him, and no one was allowed to take another person's life or possessions—only the LORD Himself could do that.

In light of the sixth commandment, to jeopardize another person's possessions (wealth) was to jeopardize his quality of life and his ability to enjoy life. In some circumstances, it might even threaten the person's physical life. The LORD did not want His people to ruin another's life, and this principle applies to His people in the Church today ([James 2:15 – 16](#); [1 John 3:17](#)).

Biblical Text:

¹You shall not see your countryman's ox or his sheep straying away, and pay no attention to them; you shall certainly bring them back to your countryman. ²If your countryman is not near you, or if you do not know him, then you shall bring it home to your house, and it shall remain with you until your countryman looks for it; then you shall restore it to him. ³Thus you shall do with his donkey, and you shall do the same with his garment, and you shall do likewise with anything lost by your countryman, which he has lost and you have found. You are not allowed to neglect *them*. ⁴You shall not see your countryman's donkey or his ox fallen down on the way, and pay no attention to them; you shall certainly help him to raise *them* up.