

STEWARDSHIP AND FLOURISHING

In general, people flourish when they take responsibility for their own economic success by doing work that serves others and makes the world better.



The heart of injustice is when we violate or suppress the image of God in our neighbors. In economics, injustice involves acting as though our own flourishing matters, but the flourishing of our neighbor does not. The unjust person acts as though his neighbor is not a fellow steward of God's world, but rather raw material to be stewarded.

Unfortunately, much of what we do in the name of justice – including personal actions, programs for the poor in our churches, and public programs – has actually promoted injustice. We have donated money and material goods, often with great generosity, but we have not always respected the image of God in the neighbors to whom we donate. Too often, we have treated our neighbors in need as objects to be stewarded by us, rather than as fellow stewards.

As creatures made in God's image, we are all created to rule the world by loving and serving one another (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15). This requires agency and responsibility. Each of us must have a zone of control – of stewardship – where we are responsible to work for flourishing. Each person must be the steward of his or her own life. Whenever we love and serve, we are asserting our right to a zone of stewardship where we are responsible to work for flourishing.

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In the economy, work and exchange are forms of loving and serving. As we work with and for one another, exchanging our labor and our property, we serve each other's needs and help the world flourish. Therefore, our stewardship is essentially linked to our rights to work, property, and exchange.

One of the most common forms of injustice is taking away the rights of work, property, and exchange from the poor and the marginalized. Around the world, the primary cause of economic poverty is the injustice of political and economic elites who refuse to allow the poor to have stewardship over their own work and property, or to have access to market exchange.

Another form of injustice consists of activities and programs that "help" the poor in ways that dehumanize them. Short-term help for people in distress, and long-term help for those who cannot support themselves, is good and necessary. But such programs can also undermine recipients' agency and responsibility for their own lives. Indiscriminate giving can disconnect the poor from the vast web of exchange through which we love and serve one another in the economy, ruling as stewards.

As Dallas Willard told the 2013 Oikonomia Network faculty retreat, a safety net is fine, but "well-being cannot be handed to people." This is why the Bible sternly demands that all who are able to support themselves must do so (II Thessalonians 3:10; I Timothy 5:8). It is why biblical economic principles of justice focus on rights to work, property, and exchange (Leviticus 19:11; I Corinthians 9:9-11). We see this principle at work in the gleaning laws, which called upon the rich to be generous but also called upon the poor to work and support themselves (Leviticus 23:22). We see it in Jesus immediately leaving after feeding the multitudes, because their response to his provision was to try to make him king (John 6:15). The Bible's relentless demands that we work are not cold legalism but a profound witness for love and justice.