



PRODUCTIVITY AND OPPORTUNITY

Households, businesses, communities, and nations should support themselves by producing more than they consume.



What are the biggest problems of the poor today? Believe it or not, money isn't one of them. The poor among us have dire problems that urgently call for help, and faithfulness demands a response. But in general they also have food, clothing, shelter, cars, televisions, phones, and computers. If money could solve their biggest problems, it would have done so by now.

The most important challenges facing those in need are a lack of dignity and right relationships (especially relationships of family and work). Restoration will involve the Christian virtue of *productivity* – being a net contributor, producing more than you consume. We are all made in the dignity of the image of God to be creators and contributors (see Element 3). Likewise, right relationship requires us to be serving those around us rather than solely being served by them. To return to the words of Dallas Willard, “well-being cannot be handed to people.”

The virtue of productivity is essential at every level. At all levels of social organization – from the individual and the household to the business and the local or national community – we must strive to produce more than we consume. This is why it is good for a business to turn an honest profit. Christians should be just as pleased

to see ethical businesses making profits as they are displeased to see unethical businesses making profits. This imperative to productivity is also why ethical economic growth at the local and national level is good and should be encouraged.

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However, we most urgently require a recovery of this virtue among those in need. In our personal behavior, our church programs, and our public programs we have become far too comfortable seeing our neighbors living in economic dependency. The message we send is, “You have nothing to contribute; we expect nothing from you.” Obviously those who cannot work must rely on those who can. But with all others, we can respect our neighbors’ dignity and help them restore right relationships by encouraging and reminding them that they are called to be productive.

It is out of love that the Bible commands all who can support themselves to do so (II Thessalonians 3:10; I Timothy 5:8). And it is also out of justice, because dependency among those at the bottom goes hand-in-hand with a merciless pride and privilege among those at the top. Those who are dependent are viewed as objects over whom the rest of us have stewardship, not fellow stewards made to be creators and contributors alongside us.

The church can and must take action to help those in need return to dignity and right relationship, in large part by helping them become productive. And we can and must bear witness against the emergence of a two-tier society, with stewards at the top and dependents at the bottom. Our culture has a long and deep history, informed powerfully by the Bible, of affirming the virtue of productivity as a standard for all. The church can help renew this tradition and restore love, hope, dignity, and flourishing.