

Bethel Seminary's Work with Purpose Initiative
Church-Based Course Series

THE ECONOMICS OF FLOURISHING

A BIBLICAL LOOK INTO THE
BASICS OF ECONOMICS AND
FLOURISHING FOR EVERYONE

Developed by TediAnne Hasapopoulos

Edited by Andrew Gross



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Economics and Flourishing for Everyone

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Bethel Seminary's
Work with Purpose Initiative
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St. Paul, MN 55112

<https://www.bethel.edu/seminary/about/initiatives/work-with-purpose/>

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PREVIEW

Introduction

The Economics of Flourishing

This course seeks to be both informational and formational in its approach. It is designed to help Christians better understand the intimate role economic exchange plays in everyday life, in the service of others, and in bearing witness of the Gospel by examining the connections between economic exchange, Biblical principles, our faith response, and the impact on our personal flourishing and the flourishing of others.

Course Outcomes

Engaging and discussing the content of this course will help each person:

- Develop a broad conception of the ways in which exchange of our work for the goods and services produced by others advances societal well-being.
- Develop a sound theology of production and consumption that reflects Biblical principles.
- Develop an interconnected understanding that economic choices made by individuals, families, local communities and governmental policies are instrumental in serving God by honoring His mandates for humans to serve Him and to serve others.

Major Course Topics

Lesson 1 – The Great Story of the Bible and Everyday Economics

Lesson 2 – Exchange: Relating to Each Other, Economically

Lesson 3 – Work: How We Labor, Together

Lesson 4 – Consumption: Worshiping God by Choices of What I Need and When I Need It

Lesson 5 – Property: What Does the Bible Have to Say About What I Own?

Lesson 6 – Concepts of Growth: When Wealth Happens, Who Really Wins?

Lesson 7 – Flourishing Society: Three Pillars of Support

Course Structure

The course is intended to be mainly discussion-based. Short video clips that help explain economic concepts are included to introduce the lesson. Brief stories illustrating these concepts help put the economic concepts into the context of everyday life. Much of the group's time together is to be spent working through the discussion questions. Depending on the size of the group (and the relative percentage of introverts and extroverts), the leader may want to divide people up into groups to process the questions, sharing the result with the whole group, and/or allow people some quiet reflection time before group sharing.

Each of the six lessons contains the following content to help the leader and group to explore important concepts about economics and how biblical principles inform our thinking on these topics.

1. An opening video and discussion questions to encourage people to begin thinking about the lesson's topic and relating it to their own lives
2. Stories about people whose lives and decisions illustrate and help explore the issues surrounding the topic, with discussion questions
3. Biblical and theological material related to the week's topic, with discussion questions
4. Commentary that links the biblical and theological material with economic concepts to help connect biblical wisdom to economic decisions
5. A closing exercise to encourage people to make application of the topic to their own lives.
6. Links to short videos (3 to 5 minutes) that can be sent via email sent mid-week to participants to encourage continued reflection on the topic.

Each lesson is meaty. It is likely that in order to explore and discuss the topic well, an hour and a half timeframe is needed. If less time is available each week, it is recommended that the topic be explored in two sessions. Session one would discuss the introduction, stories and Bible references. Session two would examine the commentary and discuss the closing exercises.

Lesson 1

The Great Story of the Bible and Everyday Economics

Opening

Begin with a video from the Theology of Work project website.

Web link: RightNow Ministries, “Work as Worship”, 2.5 minutes.

<https://www.theologyofwork.org/resources/work-as-worship/>

According to the video, what is the value of your everyday life? What new ideas did it spark about your role as a Christian in regular, day-to-day life?

Points for You to Remember

- **We were created to bear God’s image, by being *creative, productive, and in charge*. In other words, by working for human flourishing.**
- **The Fall added “toil” and “sweat” to work but didn’t remove its dignity.**
- **Our lives in the new heaven and new earth will include work that is *creative, productive* and keeps us *in charge*, as we co-rule with Jesus.**
- **“We were given stewardship over the world so our work would make it flourish for God’s glory.”**

Hearing from the Bible: Genesis 2 and 3

As we work, going about our everyday lives, we engage in an important purpose that God has for humans – the bringing about of flourishing for all people. To understand this, it is always wise to look at God’s thoughts on these subjects. It is wise to consult the whole counsel of Scripture as our guide.

When we view everyday faith, work and economics through the framework of the Bible’s great story, we see how our everyday lives are of value to God. The Bible begins with the Genesis story, “In the beginning, God created...” The story then explains the source of our current difficulties: our Fall Genesis 3 and its ongoing effects on creation and humanity. But the major part of the story centers on Jesus and His work to redeem humanity and all creation from that Fall. The Bible ends with a vision for the world to come, in which Jesus restores creation to its original state and He restores humans to perfect union with God, Creation and their uncorrupted purpose.

Story: Not One Bite

She did think he sounded a bit slippery. Her first inclination was to be curious as the serpent spoke to her, because she had never encountered another creature who could speak other than Adam. But what he said made her wary. Why would any creature question what God, their Creator, had said? Eve resolved to trust the testimony of Adam and to ignore the tempting words of that odd creature. She skipped eating the apple. Not one bite touched her lips... end of the story!

She and her husband had been tasked with some serious work. God had given them the mission to, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” As “Image Bearers” they had been given authority from God to be in control of Creation and harness the incredible productive capacity of the earth into useful benefit for the multitude of humans who were to soon inhabit this wonderful place.

Adam and Eve quickly learned that sheep and goats produced sweet, nutritious milk to fortify the bodies of their three growing boys, Cain, Abel and Seth. Adam learned that pruning grape vines produced larger fruit, so he fashioned pruning tools. Eve discovered the delicious taste of the roots of carrots and potatoes. They came to understand that the wonderful bodies that God gave them thrived on a variety of fruits and vegetables. They were learning to subdue the earth and leverage its bounty to provide for their needs and the needs of their growing family. Cain developed great skill as a farmer. Abel had a knack for shepherding the domesticated animals that had been brought into full time service for the family. The family learned to use things of the earth to fashion beautiful works of art to offer God in thanksgiving for His good bounty. They learned that voices could make songs and that simple papyrus reeds could be played. They created music to give praise to God.

It wasn't long before the family became a clan of many families. Some families branched out and multiple clans arose. Clans became a tribe. Soon multiple tribes existed. Families, clans and tribes gathered together to create associations of shared responsibilities. They divided the fruitful labor of subduing the earth. In this way they began creating different culture for families, clans and tribes that allowed each person to use his or her image bearer gifting. One family produced milk products. Another produced grain for bread. Others produced works of art or performed musical entertainment. People exchanged equitably and happily the fruits of their labor. And all people flourished in perfect shalom.

Group Discussion

This fanciful tale continues the story of Genesis 1 and 2, with a different outcome for Genesis 3. It imagines what Eden would be like if Adam and Eve simply obeyed God and fulfilled His instructions to subdue and multiply. In what ways would people subdue the earth and use natural resources to create things? How would people “consume” the bounty of the earth? How would they inter-relate with one another as they learned new things, created new products, and developed social systems to guide their exchange?

The Story Continues: What Really Happened

Eve took the bait! That odd talking creature tempted her inner longing to be independent of God. After all, she bore His image, making her wiser than the other creatures she and Adam had encountered. If God had made them that smart, surely they could control their own destinies! Adam quite agreed, but both soon discovered the disastrous results of their idolatrous decision. God removed them from the easily obtained bounty of the Garden. Now they were to bring forth well-being from the bounty of the earth outside the Garden where chaos was not completely held in check by God's gracious hand. Oh, plants certainly grew abundantly, but the inedible grew faster than the edible. Yes, the butterfly was lovely, but now its larvae fed on the fruit of the vine. Rain that was once a daily occurrence in the Garden now came down unpredictably. Either too much came down at once and caused destruction. Or too little came down and left the ground parched and rock hard.

The worst was yet to come. It seemed at first that deep brotherhood and camaraderie had developed between their sons, Cain and Abel. However, it wasn't long before envy became murderous and the first parents grieved the loss of their son and the banishment of the other. From that point on, as people sought to be in relationship with one another, success would be centered on relationship with God. Those families, clans and tribes who abandoned God created harsh societies for their people. Though Adam and Eve told their story to successive generations of sons and daughters, few would listen. But should they be surprised? It seems that it is the human way to fall into the serpent's trap – believing that humans can control their own destiny better without God.

Group Discussion

The consequences of the Fall create a real and somewhat bitter impact on our lives until Jesus returns. While the earth is abundant and brings forth all that humans need to flourish, this abundance is not easily attained. Toil is required (Gen. 3:17 and 19). In what ways do you see the consequences of the Fall challenge our ability to bring about human flourishing? Your personal ability to bring about your own flourishing, and that of others?

Commentary

The creation narratives show us that through work humans are image bearers. We bear God's image by being creative and productive. We have dominion over the things of the earth. We have been charged with creating cultural systems that honor God as we seek to bring about human flourishing – well-being for us and for others.

So what does it mean to be created in the image of God? Like God, every human being is creative, productive and in charge. We are called to take the raw materials of creation and leverage our creativity and ingenuity to make things. We are to bring about culture and civilization. We are to work the land to maintain order. We are to do our part to bring about human flourishing, the ability for all people to find economic well-being through purposeful work and balanced living. Humans are **image bearers**. We are to be **creative, productive and in charge** over creation.

The story about the Fall reveals human tendencies toward idolatry. It explains why work is so hard and at times, unproductive. It reminds us of how quickly humans make an idol of their own desires. Adam and Eve disobeyed so they could “be like a god.” The first humans chose their own way over God’s way. Has much changed in the thousands of years since Adam and Eve? The result of choosing for ourselves is that we live outside the easy provision of God. God still provides. But human effort to translate that provision into value has increased exponentially. Getting results is now more difficult. So we have radically new, and harsh, conditions for work.

But the good news is that there is not a change in the *value* of work. Human dignity is still nurtured by work. You see this when someone is involuntarily unemployed. It becomes a struggle for that person in that situation to maintain a sense of positive self-image. This is because we have been created with the desire to contribute to our own well-being and the well-being of others.

So work is still the means through which humans express the divine image. We demonstrate that we are created in the image of God through the work that we do. In spite of the Fall and human failure, God has ordained that humans continue to be **creative** and **productive**. And we are still **in charge** of Creation.

Thankfully, Christ’s work redeems human work and empowers believers to press against the effects of the Fall. We are to serve as Jesus’ agents and ambassadors until He returns. Then He will bring about the fullness of His victory over sin, death and the power of the evil.

And what do we see at the end of the Biblical record? The apostles John and Peter paint pictures of “the new heaven and the new earth” (Rev. 21:1, 2 Pet. 3:13). In many respects these will resemble this current heaven and earth, even though they will be transformed because of the presence of God (Rev. 21:3-4 and vs. 22-23). In this new heaven and earth, there will be some degree of “carry-over” from God’s original creation. Paul hints at this in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 when he describes how some of our work for God will survive His purifying fire. So, God will not totally destroy the present earth and heavens, even though we can expect Him to purify them when He rids creation of the effects of sin. The old heaven and earth will leave an imprint on the new heaven and earth because “what you do in the present ... will last into God’s future”¹ when all is transformed into the new heaven and a new earth. There will be some continuity with the present earth as the New Jerusalem is built with earthly resources.

Jesus will one day restore humans to perfect union with God, creation and their uncorrupted purpose. Work in the eternal Kingdom will be industrious and fulfilling. Good work today, work that honors God, is a foretaste of what is to come, the full restoration of human flourishing. It is *shalom* in the whole breadth of its meaning. Humans in the New Earth will continue to be *creative, productive* and *in charge*, ruling over creation under Jesus’ fully revealed authority.

Jesus modeled good work in the years He spent on earth. We see Jesus spending most of his earthly life fashioning tables and drawers, not as a hobby, but to make money to support his family! That means he dealt with suppliers and customers. He was concerned about profit

¹ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, (New York: HarperOne, 2008)

margins and the bottom line. Jesus was an “economic man” for many more years than he was an itinerant rabbi. Being Christ-like is also to be economically wise.

If work today is a foretaste of what is to come, then work must also seek human flourishing. It must seek the wholeness of life that includes physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and economic well-being. When work reflects faith, believers are also working toward *shalom* well-being for themselves, their families, their communities and the greater common good.

The *Economic Wisdom Project* sums this up:

“We were given stewardship over the world so our work would make it flourish for God’s glory.”

1. We have a stewardship responsibility to flourish in our own lives, to help our neighbors flourish as fellow stewards, and to pass on a flourishing economy to future generations.
2. Economies flourish when people have integrity and trust each other.
3. In general, people flourish when they take responsibility for their own economic success by doing work that serves others and makes the world better.²

Group Discussion

So, in what ways do Biblical principles inform the economic thoughts, values and actions of a Christ-follower in light of the whole counsel of Scripture? This course explores the answers. Bible teachers, economists, and every day people will offer their thoughts and share stories as we learn more on how our economic choices bring about human flourishing in light of God’s great story.

Closing Questions to Reflect on the Lesson

What are two or three key ideas you are taking away from this session? What might these ideas mean for how economics has Kingdom connections? What new ideas might you have for your own Kingdom work through your everyday life?

During the Week Video (link to be sent to participants along with reminder to attend next session.)

- Web link: “Everyday Economics: The Hockey Stick of Human Prosperity”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9FSnvtcEbg#t=34>

² *The Economic Wisdom Project*

Points for You to Remember

- We were created to bear God’s image, by being *creative, productive, and in charge*. In other words, by working for human flourishing.
- The Fall added “toil” and “sweat” to work but didn’t remove its dignity.
- Our lives in the new heaven and new earth will include work that is *creative, productive* and keeps us *in charge*, as we co-rule with Jesus.
- “We were given stewardship over the world so our work would make it flourish for God’s glory.”

Resources

Marginal Revolution University, George Mason University, “Everyday Economics: The Hockey Stick of Human Prosperity” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9FSnvtcEbg#t=34>.

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