

A SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE



**SEEK**  
**SOCIAL**  
**JUSTICE**

*Transforming Lives in Need*



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# SEEK SOCIAL JUSTICE

*Transforming Lives in Need*

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# Before You Begin...

## Across America, people are in need.

Many struggle in the face of financial difficulty, broken families, and violent neighborhoods. We are called to care for those in need—to serve the poor and to oppose injustice. But where should we begin in our efforts to love our neighbors? Should we sign a petition? Campaign for certain laws? Stage a public march? Give money to charity? Call for a new government program? Start a church ministry?

Regrettably, ideas offered in the name of social justice have sometimes misdiagnosed the problem and had unintended consequences that hurt the very people they intended to help. That's because they have assessed poverty primarily as a material problem. Programs based on this assumption have kept those willing to help at arm's length from those in need, often looking first to government and substituting impersonal handouts for personal care and real transformation. Jumping into action without thoughtful consideration has led to damaging results.

Somehow in the urgency to dedicate our lives—or even a few hours or dollars—to a good cause, we're missing something. We're missing something about who we are at our core as human beings; we're missing something about the complex and relational nature of poverty. Though motivated by good intentions, we need a better framework for understanding and engaging the issues surrounding human need and social breakdown.

When it comes to translating good intentions into actions that really make a difference, we need to understand the nature and context of the problem. That begins with correctly diagnosing the suffering we see around us. In the United States, poverty and social breakdown are often rooted in problems that are deeper than a lack of money or material possessions. The poor in America typically suffer in different ways than the poor in developing countries, where corrupt governments, the missing rule of law, unstable financial systems, food shortages due to famine, and the absence of basic health care systems exacerbate extreme material deprivation. Unique conditions call for a different approach in developing nations.

*Seek Social Justice* investigates how to prevent and overcome the kind of need we see right here in America. It explores

**Four in 10 children in America are born to single mothers.**

**More than 1.5 million children in the U.S. have at least one parent in a federal or state prison.**

**There are thousands of homeless people on the streets in the U.S. on any given night.**

# Almost half of the students in America's major urban school districts don't graduate on time.

the underlying causes of, and the most effective solutions to, the ills that tarnish human dignity and hinder flourishing. The problems are complex—why do devastation and disadvantage spring up in the midst of a society marked by such abundance? The solutions are challenging—what hopes can we have for ex-prisoners when the odds predict that soon they'll be back behind bars? That's why it's so important to get to the root of the problem in order to develop a wise and effective response.

Helping others requires us to know the different players who can best meet their needs. Seeking social justice starts with each of us, but it's an undertaking that requires more than one person or even one large organization. It takes families, churches, non-profit groups, businesses, and government—all playing their distinct roles—to make progress on complex problems. So, in addition to discussing the source of social breakdown, we will explore the various roles of these different institutions. We'll look at how each operates on its own, as well as in relation to the others to achieve common good and transform lives in need.

**“It's just too easy to love ‘The Poor’. It's a lot harder to actually do the hard work of building face-to-face relationships with real people with real needs with real, messy issues.”**

–Dr. Amy Sherman,  
Center for Social Justice  
Trevecca Nazarene University

# Using This Guide

This written guide contains six lessons corresponding to six videos, available on the accompanying DVD or online at [SeekSocialJustice.com](http://SeekSocialJustice.com):

**Lesson One** Rethinking Social Justice: Getting to the Root of the Problem

**Lesson Two** Cultivating Justice from the Ground Up: Marriage, Family, and Friendship

**Lesson Three** Serving the Whole Person: Churches and Ministries

**Lesson Four** Restoring Dignity and Purpose: The Importance of Work

**Lesson Five** Maintaining the Social Conditions for Justice: The Role of Government

**Lesson Six** Breaking Ground: What You Can Do To Seek Social Justice



Begin each lesson by reading aloud the section entitled “**Before You Press Play**.” This brief section will introduce the topic of the lesson and alert you to certain things to look for when viewing the video. You do not need to write down answers to these questions—they are simply intended to guide your viewing.



Next, “**Watch**” the video for each lesson.



After viewing the video, return to the study guide and start the “**Read and Discuss**” section of the appropriate lesson. The written text builds on and refers to the stories and principles presented in the video lessons. One or more people can read the text and questions aloud, or each group member can read the text silently before discussing the questions together.



You’ll have a chance to summarize and reflect on the main take-away points of each lesson in the “**Rethink**” section. Use the final question to think about what you’ve learned and how you might apply it in your own life and community.



“**Read On**” offers a list of suggested resources for further reading. This list can also be found at [SeekSocialJustice.com](http://SeekSocialJustice.com), along with additional facts about each lesson topic and bonus footage featuring experts from *Seek Social Justice*.

Finally, “**Behind the Scenes**” provides some details if you’re curious about the people, programs, or terms presented in the video.



## Lesson One

# Rethinking Social Justice: Getting to the Root of the Problem

If you haven't done so already, please take time to read the "Before You Begin" section on page one of this guide.



## Before You Press Play

"WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON HERE?" That's the first question to ask when we find people in need. The answers should guide us to respond in ways that can make a lasting difference.

In Lesson One, you'll hear from members of one university community working to transform lives in need. As you watch the video, begin thinking about the idea of *social justice*:

- How should we understand this concept? What problems does it refer to? Who is responsible for addressing them, and how?
- What is the vision of social justice that motivates those in the video to serve others?



## Watch

### **Relational Justice**

(see DVD or watch online at [SeekSocialJustice.com](http://SeekSocialJustice.com))



## Read and Discuss

*An important goal of this first lesson is to develop a solid understanding of social justice. The following lessons will build on the relational approach to the concept proposed in this lesson.*

### **Rethinking Social Justice**

To seek social justice effectively, we need to understand the nature of the problems and the goal we seek to achieve.

Just as doctors must understand the basics of good health in order to diagnose illnesses, we need to understand what makes up a just society in order to understand the nature of social breakdown. In either case, failing to understand both the problem and the goal can lead to further harm.

- 1 In the video, Marvin Olasky observes that social justice is often understood to mean the equal distribution of income. According to that approach, what is the presumed problem, and what is the presumed goal?

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- 2 The commentators in the video propose a different, more holistic way of thinking about social justice. As they point out, true justice is about more than simply economics or government. Dr. Amy Sherman suggests that justice is about right relationships. According to this relational approach, what is the nature of the problems, and what is the goal of social justice?

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*“In the West, with the wealth-creating opportunities that we have, most issues of poverty are at least in part spiritual and moral and social problems, and they aren’t solved unless we deal with those underlying problems.”*

—Dr. Jay Richards,  
Author, *Money, Greed, and God*

## **Relationships: Where It All Begins**

Independence is a cherished ideal in American culture, and has been since 1776. But since then, a more troubling vision of independence has emerged: a kind of go-it-alone individualism that disregards relationships and communities, which are vital to a strong society.

Christian teaching, on the other hand, emphasizes that human nature is relational by definition. You are not an isolated individual but a son or daughter, a neighbor, a student or an employee, a citizen, and a child of God. From the moment you’re born, you’re embedded in networks of relationships that make life possible and shape your identity. Thriving people and communities, the true objectives of social justice, depend in large part on the health of some basic relationships.

- 3 What are the different kinds of relationships that Amy Sherman says make up this kind of justice?

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- 4 Amy Sherman suggests that this view of multi-faceted relationships as central to human flourishing resonates with biblical teaching. Choose one of the following Scripture passages and identify what kinds of relationships (spiritual, familial, communal, material, internal) are mentioned: The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13, Luke 11:2-4); The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17, Deuteronomy 5:6-21); The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).
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### The Real Root of the Problem: Broken Relationships

It's common to approach poverty as a narrow issue of physical or material hardship and to calculate it solely in terms of dollars and cents. But poverty is much more than financial need or inequality. It has to do with a lack of both the tangible and intangible resources that people need to thrive. Amy Sherman says that, from a biblical perspective, poverty has a lot to do with brokenness in the foundational relationships of life.

- 5 Jason, who teaches boys at Son Farm, says that seeking social justice *with* someone is different from imposing it *on* someone. Talk about an example of each of these approaches around us today. Why does Jason think it's important that efforts to help people be face-to-face?
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- 6 Robin, the nurse who provides volunteer health counseling at the apartment complex, says that helping residents build relationships of trust with people like health care providers is one way to assist them in moving out of poverty. Why do you think that is the case?
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Some needs arise because of natural disasters or the harmful actions of others—dramatic external forces that can turn life upside-down. Some needs come from

*“Justice is more than just the law. It's more than the enforcement of the law, of finding people guilty of crimes. Justice infers right relationships between human beings.”*

—Sean Litton,  
Vice President of Field Operations  
International Justice Mission

the conditions—in the family, community, school district, etc.—in which people are born and raised. And some needs stem from a person’s own bad habits, poor choices, and irresponsible actions. These can have far-reaching effects in a person’s life. Drug and alcohol addictions, for instance, prevent many people from being able to hold down a job, save money, form a healthy marriage, and stay on the right side of the law. All of these causes can strain or rupture the basic relationships that people need to flourish.

This brokenness can have significant consequences on the health of not only an individual but an entire society. Where we see social breakdown, we’re likely to find that foundational relationships are missing or dysfunctional.

**7** What do the following verses say about the various causes of economic poverty? Proverbs 10:4, 13:18, 19:15, 21:5.

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*“Social justice is the sum of millions of acts of relational justice.”*

–Dr. Marvin Olasky,  
Editor-in-Chief  
WORLD Magazine

**8** Marvin Olasky says that social justice is the sum of millions of acts of relational justice. What do you think he means by acts of relational justice?

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## **Inadequate Solutions: What Doesn’t Work**

Our understanding of the nature and causes of poverty shapes how we respond. A failure to recognize fundamental needs will lead to inadequate approaches.

That’s why it’s important to understand the real nature of poverty in America. While situations of serious material need do exist in America, the typical household described as “poor” according to government statistics has more living space than the average European household, as well as amenities considered luxuries just a couple generations ago—cars, washers and dryers, dishwashers, and televisions. It’s true that even in these conditions, the situation of the poor might be far from thriving. But in these circumstances the nature of poverty is usually deeper and more complex than a lack of money or material possessions.

As a result, strategies that focus solely on giving handouts to the poor only treat one dimension of need and don’t reach down to the root of the problem. They ignore the multiple broken relationships that often lead to material need in the first place.

**9** “If a woman’s here for just two hours, they need to know, at least, that we said to them one time that ‘you have value’ and ‘you have worth,’” explains

Theresa Boyd about the approach of her ministry that works with former female prisoners. Why do you think this approach rather than material support is the priority?

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- 10** Have you or has someone close to you suffered in ways that may not be material in nature, but are every bit as painful and crippling?

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Different kinds of assistance shape attitudes and behaviors in different ways. Approaches intended to help people can actually encourage them to make unhealthy choices and reinforce actions that damage relationships and prevent healthy relationships from developing. Regardless of good intentions, assistance that encourages wrong choices is wrong. It doesn't advance social justice.

- 11** How can it actually hurt a person in need to provide handouts without certain expectations, accountability, or guidelines?

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- 12** In our efforts to help those in need, how can we incorporate the idea of restoring relationships *and* give generously in terms of money and material goods?

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*“Social justice is not a tip off of the excess that we have toward the poor so that we somehow salve our own guilt. It is a true stewardship of the resources that God has entrusted us with.”*

–Dr. Dan Boone,  
President  
Trevecca Nazarene University

### **A Strategy that Works: Consider the Needs of the Whole Person**

Because people often have many different needs—physical, emotional, social, etc.—effective responses must be multi-dimensional. Some institutions are better

than others at tackling the wide range of a person's needs.

The best approaches heal wounds while also inspiring, challenging, and enabling those in need to pursue a better course by restoring relationships. Seeking social justice should start with efforts to strengthen those spheres of society in which healthy relationships can grow.

- 13** Which institutions and spheres of society does Amy Sherman suggest have responsibility for seeking social justice?

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- 14** Read 1 Corinthians 13:2-3. How do the people and organizations highlighted in the video embody what these verses say about the way we give of ourselves and our possessions?

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## Rethink

Thriving depends on healthy relationships, so the roots of poverty and social breakdown typically can be found in absent or broken relationships. The problems of poverty and social breakdown are multi-dimensional and usually include material, interpersonal, and moral/spiritual needs.

Complex problems usually call for solutions that are relational and tailored to the specific person in need. Preventing and overcoming social breakdown depends on people and institutions exercising proper responsibility and relating appropriately to each other. We'll take a closer look at some of the most important relationships and institutions in the following lessons.

Social justice doesn't come about primarily through protests, pickets, and public marches or by imposing new programs from the top down. A relational approach means that social justice is best cultivated from the ground up.

- 15** How might it change your perspective and involvement with your church or community to see restored relationships as the foundation of social justice?

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## Read On

To explore the root of the problem further, check out the following resources. Visit [SeekSocialJustice.com](http://SeekSocialJustice.com) for hyperlinks to these and other resources.

Proverbs 14:21, 31

*Prosperity and Poverty: The Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity*, E. Calvin Beisner

*The Problem of Poverty*, Abraham Kuyper

*The Tragedy of American Compassion*, Marvin Olasky

“Defining Social Justice,” Michael Novak (*First Things* Dec. 2000)

“Name That Idea: Try a Little Social Justice,” Marvin Olasky (*WORLD* July 26, 2008)

“Understanding and Reducing Poverty in America,” Robert Rector, The Heritage Foundation

## Behind the Scenes

### **Who are the students referenced by Amy Sherman who appear in the video?**

The students attend Trevecca Nazarene University, in Nashville, Tennessee, which houses the J.V. Morsch Center for Social Justice. The Center hosts events that equip young leaders to serve those in need, such as sponsoring teams of students to clean-up a local stream or weed a community garden.

### **When Chuck Colson and Amy Sherman refer to “shalom,” what do they mean?**

*Shalom* is a Hebrew word usually translated as “peace” or “well-being” (see Jeremiah 29:7) which conveys a sense of full or complete harmony of the foundational relationships of life.

### **Who is Robin and what does she do at the Mercury Courts housing development?**

Robin Jewett is an instructor in the physician’s assistant program at Trevecca Nazarene University. At Mercury Courts she helps residents live a healthier lifestyle and get established with a primary health provider they trust.

