

Lesson Two

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



Before You Press Play

In Lesson One, we looked at poverty and social breakdown, seeking to diagnose the problem at its roots. We noted how the roots of poverty in America are often not primarily material in nature—poverty is not caused simply by a lack of money.

Material need is typically a symptom of deeper problems, such as the breakdown of marriage and family. Consider these facts:

- Roughly 80 percent of all long-term poverty occurs in single-parent homes.
- Nearly four in 10 children are born to single mothers. Seven out of 10 black children are born to an unwed mother. These children are seven times more likely to experience poverty than those born and raised in a home with their married parents.

How should we respond to problems such as poverty and social breakdown? What is an effective strategy for seeking social justice?

First and foremost, an effective strategy must target the root of the issue: brokenness in the foundational relationships that are essential for individuals and communities to succeed. This type of approach requires getting to know people personally—caring for them up-close and dealing directly with their core needs. It calls for more focus on rolling up sleeves in our own communities than on rolling out new government programs. How we view the power of personal relationships will shape the way we seek social justice.

Effective responses begin at the ground level with strengthening marriage and the family, building friendships, and investing in one person at a time. In the video for Lesson Two, you'll meet Roderick and Lisa and their friends, Cheryl and Ron. As you watch their story, begin thinking about:

- What enabled Roderick to transform his life, his family and community?
- What sort of influence did Roderick have on his children's chances of ending up in poverty or prison?
- What kind of transformation did Cheryl and Ron help bring about simply by becoming friends with Roderick and Lisa?



Watch

The Power of Family and Friends

with commentary by Rudy Carrasco, Former Executive Director, Harambee Christian Family Center (see DVD or watch online at SeekSocialJustice.com)



Read and Discuss

Families can be the source of both our fondest memories and our deepest wounds. The pain many have experienced in their own families can get in the way of picturing family's positive role in society. You may find it helpful to set a separate time for your group to talk through their own family experiences. To get the most out of this study guide, try to focus on the key themes and all the questions presented below.

The Power of Relationships

When we speak of injustice, we often think of social forces that hurt people or hold them back. Because these forces are often beyond the control of any individual or group, because they appear so broad and powerful, the best response we can normally muster involves supporting or protesting the issue of the day—typically at a distance from the people in need. While rallies may be called for in some cases, opportunities to invest directly in people and relationships lie within our reach and we must not ignore them.

An effective social justice strategy cultivates the ground in which healthy relationships can bloom, heal, and thrive. Cultivation is the act of preparing soil for future growth—creating an environment that nurtures and enables flourishing. Isaiah 45:8 includes this imagery in its call to “let justice spring up” (NAB) or “grow” (NIV) or “sprout” (ESV). The pursuit of social justice should start with the people we have the opportunity to know and care for on a regular basis.



Who are the people in need who cross your path daily?



How might you help equip members of your own small group, congregation, family, or community to better know and care for one another?

The Power of Starting Small

In the Bonton section of Dallas where Roderick lived, lives were changed—not by a bulldozing, top-down intervention, but by a few simple seeds that produced lots of fruit. For Roderick, those seeds were marriage and friendship: a commitment to his wife that was unusual in his neighborhood and a friendship with the Murffs that crossed socio-economic and racial lines.

At first glance, it might seem like parenting a couple of kids or starting a friendship can't contribute much toward social justice, since it limits one's influence to a very small arena. But tending to the growth and development of a single friend or family member can have positive and dramatic effects on an entire community for generations to come.

- 3 If someone asked you the question that the Murffs asked Mike Fechner—"What can we do to make a positive difference in a hurting neighborhood?"—how would you respond? How did Mike respond?

- 4 In addition to the more obvious sacrifices, what small gestures did the Murffs make to help Roderick and Lisa? How did the Murffs try to nurture Roderick's relationships (financial, physical, marital, and spiritual)?

The Power of the Personal

Every person is different by design and each person needs different things at different times. That's why one-size-fits-all approaches do not lead to the most caring or effective solutions. Only if we understand the specifics of a situation can we best understand how to tailor a solution to meet a person's particular needs.

That kind of personal knowledge is likely to be fostered in families, close friendships, and mentoring relationships. These are relationships in which people

"The family is an integral part of social justice because it is the starting point of social justice."

-Rudy Carrasco,
Former Executive Director
Harambee Christian
Family Center

see each other often, know each other by name, make themselves vulnerable to one another, and help each other with the mundane and personal aspects of life. These relationships form the roots of a just society.

5 Cheryl had a knack for keeping things in order, so she bought containers and helped Lisa organize her home. What gifts, talents, and resources do you have that could help you serve others in a personal way?

6 In what ways did the Murffs' own marriage serve as a role model for Roderick and Lisa's relationship?

"We just wanted to stand along beside them and encourage them, and be a part of their family and them be a part of our family. We've learned from them and they've learned from us."

-Cheryl Murff

7 According to Cheryl, the benefits of friendship flowed both ways. What sort of lessons can we learn by serving those who are different from us?

8 Read James 2:1-9. What does this passage have to say about showing favoritism in regard to those we befriend?

The Power to Shape Vision and Hope

It's difficult for people to thrive if they can't envision a successful future. For example, they may not know anyone who has held down a job and may have no idea about the practical steps that are necessary to seek and keep employment. Family and cultural norms influence people's standards for living and what they consider

worth pursuing. Relationships shape expectations, desires, and ideas about what's possible. Parents, friends, and mentors have a significant role to play by modeling the kind of character and success to aim for.

- 9 In the video, Roderick explains that seeing his three-year-old son mimic him rolling a joint was part of what prompted him to change. Prior to Roderick's transformation, what was his son's likely long-term path? What, or who, shaped his expectations, desires, and vision of the future?

- 10 Roderick had never seen a wedding ceremony before getting married himself. Do you think growing up in a culture that values marriage and family makes any difference in fighting social breakdown? Why or why not?

"There are many people in the city who want to have a family, but so often they've never seen what a family is."

—Mike Fechner,
H.I.S. Bridge Builders

The Foundation of Family

The family is foundational to human flourishing. As we've seen, it can focus attention and commitment on a small number of people, facilitate personal knowledge of their needs, and foster a healthy and hopeful vision for their future. The family is where the pursuit of social justice must begin.

The Family and Social Justice

From the moment a newborn enters the world, family members typically provide and assist in all aspects of life. The family bears responsibility for a comprehensive range of needs. Parents act as doctors, teachers, chefs, janitors, accountants, and spiritual advisors in their homes. No parent fulfills all of these roles perfectly, and some may decide to delegate a few of these tasks to others. But parents and families bear all these responsibilities up front and are usually the best equipped to carry them out.

The benefits of strong marriages and families extend beyond their own members to society at large. It's in the family that we learn to look out for the good of others, to share, and to accept the fact that we can't always have things our way. It's where we learn a good work ethic, trustworthiness, and honesty—the habits that make a healthy and prosperous society possible.

- 11 When you hear people talking about social justice, do you hear much about the family as part of the solution to social breakdown? Why do you think that is the case?

- 12 Read Isaiah 1:17. Consider the command to seek justice for the orphan and the widow. What do their situations have in common? What is the primary cause of their need?

If parents abuse or neglect their children—a severe example of the broken relationships we’ve been talking about—law enforcement and government agencies that exist to protect the lives of all citizens have a responsibility to protect those children. We’ll see more of how this plays out in Lesson Five when we look at the role of government.

Family Breakdown and Poverty

Broken family relationships hinder healthy development, distort values, and damage a person’s sense of hope. The breakdown of marriage and family is one of the most significant predictors of hardship in the life of a child, neighborhood, or community.

About 38 percent of single-mother families are poor. By contrast, only about seven percent of married families with children are poor.

Regrettably, government policies have made this problem worse. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, the welfare system contained unintentional disincentives for marriage. Recipients only qualified if their household incomes were below a specified level. If a single mother were to marry an employed husband, she could risk losing her benefits. From 1965 to 1995, the unwed birth rate quadrupled, from less than eight percent to 32 percent.

Children raised by married parents are less likely to experience crime, unwed pregnancy, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol use. Studies have shown that many aspects of well-being, including physical and mental health, stress management, and educational performance correlate with growing up in a home with married parents.

- 13** In the video, what does Velma say is the result of government welfare support on a household?

- 14** How do you see the breakdown of marriage and family affecting your own community?



Rethink

We need to cultivate social justice from the ground up, beginning with the kind of close-up relationships provided by friends, mentors, and family members.

Healthy marriage and family relationships are especially important for people to thrive. These institutions have the capacity and responsibility to care for a comprehensive range of needs in personal ways. When a family falls apart or fails to form in the first place, the consequences are often devastating for the individuals involved and the surrounding community. Fractured family relationships are a leading cause of poverty and social breakdown in America.

An important place to start seeking social justice is working to ensure strong, supportive, intact families, and pursuing meaningful relationships.

- 15** How might it change your perspective and involvement with your church or community if you approached family and close relationships as the foundation of social justice?



Read On

Learn more about cultivating social justice from the ground up through marriage and family. Visit SeekSocialJustice.com for hyperlinks to these and other resources.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Ephesians 6:1-4

1 Timothy 5:8, 16

Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage, Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas

Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps, Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur

Losing Ground, Charles Murray

“The Effect of Marriage on Child Poverty,” Robert Rector, Kirk A. Johnson, and Patrick F. Fagan, The Heritage Foundation

“Reducing Poverty by Revitalizing Marriage in Low-Income Communities,” Robert Rector, The Heritage Foundation

Behind the Scenes

What is H.I.S. BridgeBuilders?

H.I.S. BridgeBuilders is a ministry that operates several programs in Dallas, including GED classes, recreational activities, Bible studies, and an eye clinic that offers free exams and trains people to make glasses. Clifton works at the BridgeBuilders Eye Clinic.

How did Ron and Cheryl get to know Mike Fechner?

Ron and Cheryl Murff worship at Prestonwood Baptist Church in North Dallas. Both Cheryl and Mike Fechner have offices in the church, which is how they got acquainted.

What is “DTS”?

When Velma mentions that “DTS” students volunteered for H.I.S. BridgeBuilders, she is referring to Dallas Theological Seminary.

What does Roderick do now?

Roderick now works on staff at H.I.S. BridgeBuilders.

