

Lesson Four

Restoring Dignity and Purpose: The Importance of Work

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Before You Press Play

We've explored the role of families, churches, and ministries in building strong relationships and overcoming brokenness. Work is another essential element in human flourishing.

Work provides a sense of purpose and accomplishment and offers people opportunities to exercise their gifts. Treating people justly means relating to them as beings created with the capacity to work, with something to contribute to society. Treating them otherwise can be demeaning and dehumanizing.

In the video for Lesson Four, you'll hear about Men of Valor, a ministry to help men transition out of prison. You'll meet Carl Carlson, an ex-prisoner who founded Men of Valor, and Curt Campbell, manager of the ministry's pre-release program, the Jericho Project. You will also hear from the Men of Valor staff who help men after they are released from prison, including employment coordinator Andrey Brinson and aftercare manager Raul Lopez. As you watch the video, consider the following questions:

- What does Men of Valor teach prisoners about work and why does the ministry staff think this is important?
- In what ways do released prisoners benefit from a job? In what ways do others around them also benefit?



Watch

Working Toward Justice

with commentary by Star Parker, President, Coalition for Urban Renewal and Education, and Chuck Colson, Founder, Prison Fellowship and BreakPoint (see DVD or watch online at SeekSocialJustice.com)



Read and Discuss

This lesson spells out some potentially unfamiliar economic principles. You may find it helpful to read these explanations before your group meets.

The Importance of Work

Christianity teaches that people are made in the image of the Creator and are therefore naturally creative beings, called by God to work and produce. Work and creativity are fundamental to human existence. Work is good in its own right, not just because it produces positive material and social outcomes.

- 1 Read Genesis 2:4-7 and 2:15. What do these verses imply about the significance of work?

“If a man takes work really seriously—the concept of work in and of itself—it provides him with dignity and self respect, meaning, and purpose in life.”

–Carl Carlson,
Director
Men of Valor

- 2 As we hear in the video, Curt Campbell teaches that God commanded humans to work *before* the “Curse” or the “Fall.” How should this affect our understanding of work?

Work, at a minimum, helps people avoid boredom by giving them something to do. But more important is work’s positive contribution to a person’s sense of dignity and accomplishment. Work is a means of exercising personal responsibility and providing for family. Ultimately, Christian teaching views work as a way to glorify God through good stewardship of the physical creation and the individual gifts we’ve been given.

- 3 In the video, what reasons do Men of Valor staff give for making work an essential component of their ministry to prisoners? What sort of difference do you think this might make for the way prisoners think about themselves and their responsibilities?

- 4 Based on comments from the video, what tends to happen to released prisoners when they lack a sense of purpose or accomplishment that work provides?

Loving Our Neighbor Through Work

The Bible teaches that work can be a form of loving our neighbor. Building houses, running a business, or creating a useful product are not just ways to make a profit—they are tangible ways of serving others. Work allows people to provide for the needs of their own families, but it also enables them to contribute to the common good of society.

- 5 Read Ephesians 4:28. What reason does Paul give for urging people to do honest work with their own hands?

- 6 What relational and community benefits of work does Star Parker describe in the video?

“When you take work off of the table, you take worth off of the table. You’ve taken the dignity from the person’s life to contribute to their own well-being and to their community and society.”

–Star Parker,
President
Coalition for Urban
Renewal and Education

Hope, Growth, and Opportunity

Economic opportunity is critical for people escaping poverty, and a job is a key step toward that goal. Businesses provide jobs, and when businesses grow, so do job opportunities. In a free market system like that of the United States, employers have an incentive to pay and treat their employees well, because workers have the freedom to look for better opportunities.

- 7 Chuck Colson suggests that organizations that help to employ people coming out of prison promote not just kindness but social justice. Why do you think he believes that?

- 8 What examples of business initiative did you see in the video and who benefited from them?

We tend to think of the economy like an apple pie. In apple pie economics, if somebody gets a huge slice, the rest of us end up fighting over crumbs. But in reality, the economy isn't like a 9-inch pie to be carved up in a win/lose scenario. The economy grows, and when it does the available income increases and spreads. The primary way an economy grows is through business activity—and that's good news for all of us, including those currently living in poverty.

Instead of apple pie, think of Apple Computer, Inc., a company that has revolutionized personal computing and, in turn, created countless opportunities for those who create and benefit from their technology and products. The Apple IIe desktop was one of the first computers to appear in American classrooms. Today, if a classroom doesn't have a computer, we would probably consider those students disadvantaged.

By developing these technologies, Apple has helped to unlock the capabilities of children, no matter their background. In so doing, it has helped increase the standard of living for all of us and contributed to expanding human potential. At the same time, the company's success has created numerous jobs, generating income that employees spread to their families and communities. Apple's profitability has led to increased wealth for stockholders and opportunities for Apple engineers to develop innovations like the iPhone, starting the whole cycle of growth again.

Human ingenuity is staggering. Given the freedom, human beings will constantly innovate—especially when they have the incentives of enjoying the fruits of their own labors and being able to share those rewards with people around them.

- 9 If a growing economy is essential for fighting poverty, what habits, attitudes, and actions make that possible? How can we encourage these?

- 10 It's true that many corporate leaders are motivated by the goal of increasing profits more than helping those in need. But why is it important that a company whose leaders want to help the disadvantaged first run a financially successful business?

In addition to encouraging innovation and economic opportunity, the free market also advances human dignity, responsibility, and healthy relationships. It provides strong incentives for people to use their gifts. In its simplest form, the free market is represented by the single mom who wants to get off welfare by opening a daycare in her home. By encouraging free exchange—when the daycare provider sets a price and her neighbors choose her service—the free market meets a variety of needs and harmonizes diverse interests. It enables workers to provide for themselves, their families, and the greater good of the community around them. In all these ways, the free market advances social justice by contributing to healthy community relationships.

Regrettably, our fallen human nature is vulnerable to greed and materialism. As a result, many people engage in corruption or treat others unfairly to make a profit for themselves. That's why it's important to have political and economic systems that guard against such actions. It's important to note that a free market is not the same as a free-for-all. It requires government to enforce contracts and to guard against criminal activity such as fraud.

Wealth earned by hard work and ingenuity can be used for great good. Many universities and hospitals have been created by the wealth earned in the free market, as have countless charitable organizations and community enrichment programs. A political and economic environment that encourages innovation and growth and allows workers to enjoy the fruits of their labors is more likely to stimulate investment in worthy causes.

- 11 Do you think there is a difference between greed and a desire to see profit in a business? If so, how would you describe that difference?

- 12 Read 1 Timothy 6:9-10. These verses cite the love of money as the root of all evil. What is the difference between the love of money and simply having wealth? How can wealth be used to advance social justice in the ways these lessons have discussed?

“Instead of looking at how I can get people to give me stuff, now I look at life from a standpoint of how I can give to other people.”

-Billy Joe King, Jr.,
Men of Valor Graduate

The Difference Between Work and Welfare

The Limits of Welfare

What happens when people are unable to work or when work is simply not available?

In these situations, people need help. As we’ve seen, family, friends, churches, and charitable organizations that have a relationship with those in need are best equipped to offer effective support.

If these resources aren’t enough, government welfare programs can provide short-term assistance. The downside is that these programs have a track record of creating long-term dependence on government, which can be dehumanizing to the individual and damaging to the relational support network around them. That’s because impersonal welfare programs tend to treat human beings as passive *recipients* rather than active *participants* who have something important to contribute to their personal well-being and to the common good. These programs also lack the accountability that’s inherent in personal relationships, and over time they can generate an entitlement mindset—a sense of being owed something without doing anything in return.

- 13 According to Men of Valor staff, what kind of attitude and behavior does welfare and government intervention foster in men? How can this play into the cycle of repeated criminal behavior?

- 14 Read 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12. Why does Paul urge readers to avoid idleness and to work instead?

In the 1990s, a majority of Americans generally reached agreement that welfare policies were discouraging work and marriage and were hurting many of the very people they were intended to help. In 1996, reforms to the central federal assistance program for needy families added work requirements and policies to encourage marriage and strengthen families. As a result of these new incentives, welfare caseloads fell by more than 50 percent. Work participation increased as well, particularly among the most disadvantaged. Ten years after the reform, 1.6 million fewer children were living in poverty, and by 2001 black child poverty dropped to its lowest rate in national history.

- 15 According to Star Parker, what kind of mindset did the government encourage in her when she was on welfare?



Rethink

Effective social justice strategies recognize that work promotes human dignity and fosters healthy relationships that lead to human flourishing. Work provides an individual with a sense of purpose, responsibility, and a way to contribute to the common good. Businesses have the capacity to promote a just society by creating opportunities to work. The free market presents opportunities and incentives for people to use their gifts to provide for themselves and those around them. In seeking social justice, we should pursue conditions and policies that create opportunity and incentive to work.

- 16 How might it change your perspective and involvement to view work as an essential element of a just society?



Read On

Interested in learning more about the role of business and work in pursuing social justice? Visit SeekSocialJustice.com for hyperlinks to these and other resources.

Proverbs 10:4-5

The Call of the Entrepreneur (DVD), Acton Media

Economics in One Lesson: The Shortest and Surest Way to Understand Basic Economics, Henry Hazlitt

Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship, Lawrence M. Mead

Working: Its Meaning and Its Limits, Gilbert Meilaender, editor

Business as a Calling: Work and the Examined Life, Michael Novak

The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism, Michael Novak

Money, Greed, and God: Why Capitalism is the Solution and Not the Problem, Jay W. Richards

"The Role of Parental Work in Child Poverty," Robert Rector, The Heritage Foundation

Behind the Scenes

What is Carl Carlson's background?

Carl began serving time in a state reformatory after running away from home at the age of 10. As an adult he received a 15-year prison sentence for robbery. During that time Carl first came to understand that he was loved by God. After his release, he began looking for ways to help other men struggling with the despair of prison life and the difficulties of reentry.

