

Lesson Six

Breaking Ground: What You Can Do To Seek Social Justice

II Before You Press Play

The previous five lessons have presented different pieces of a framework for thinking about social breakdown in America and the different players who can respond most effectively.

How do these different pieces fit together, and how can you live out this approach in your community?

As we seek social justice, it's not effective to rush to solve an abstract problem called "injustice" in the name of a generic category of people called "the poor." Casting blame solely on distant, impersonal social structures doesn't solve our neighbors' needs. Justice is not ultimately found in political campaigns and government handouts.

The stories highlighted in this series portray a different approach, one that seeks social justice by pursuing human flourishing in its fullest sense. This strategy helps us to recognize not only material needs but also familial, spiritual, moral, emotional, and social ones. People need food, shelter, and clothing, but they also need relationships that offer love and accountability and that address the transcendent aspects of human existence. This perspective emphasizes the importance of work, good habits, and a sense of hope.

This approach recognizes the responsibility and capacity of multiple institutions in society to help transform lives in need. Families and churches have a critical role in cultivating personal relationships from the ground up, while government protects the arena in which they operate.

As you watch the final video, ask yourself:

- What are some common pitfalls we need to avoid in seeking social justice?
- How might you work to strengthen those social institutions that best care for people's needs?



Watch

Justice as a Way of Life

featuring Jedd Medefind, Executive Director, Christian Alliance for Orphans (see DVD or watch online at SeekSocialJustice.com)



Read and Discuss

As you discuss how to seek social justice in your own neighborhood, keep in mind which institutions best cultivate healthy relationships, and why. Our actions will have the most impact when they strengthen and support those institutions.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

In the video, Jedd Medefind identifies several common pitfalls in seeking social justice. First, the sheer size and scope of some social problems can leave us with a sense of hopelessness. As Jedd mentions, this can lead to weariness, frustration, anger, and burnout. But as we've seen in the stories highlighted in this series, taking action with faith, hope, and love can bring about real transformation in people's lives.



What kind of vision motivates Jedd to continue serving those in need?

Another temptation is to keep our distance from the problem. As Jedd acknowledges, getting personally involved with another individual or family's need is a lot tougher than writing a check or signing a petition. Though those actions can be necessary and important, personal outreach and investment make a difference on a deeper level. Serving others isn't always safe, comfortable, or immediately effective. When a stranger is hurting, it's often much simpler to pass by on the other side of the road and pass the buck to somebody else. As Rudy Carrasco says, we'd like to think "they" will handle it—that is, somebody besides us. In contrast, in this series we've seen individuals, congregations, and ministries take personal responsibility for the wounded neighbor in their midst. Their responses show patience, personal sacrifice, and a willingness to relate to just one person in need.

"There's a circle of people closest to you, and in the middle is the circle of people who understand the person best and who understand the need best.... And the farther away you get from the people who know the problem, the less effective you're going to be."

—Rudy Carrasco,
Former Executive Director
Harambee Christian
Family Center

- 2 Think about the kinds of ministries highlighted in previous lessons and the various ways volunteers contribute to them. What kind of investment—in time and effort—do those volunteers make toward social justice?

- 3 Think back to Ron and Cheryl Murff, whose friendship played a key role in helping transform a young family in need. What sort of commitment did they make to Roderick and Lisa Yarbrough?

- 4 Discuss what your weekly routine might look like if you made the same level of investment to help others.

It's also tempting to think that only mega-institutions and massive campaigns or programs can make a difference. It can seem more worthwhile to join the ranks of those promoting a monumental solution than to cultivate the mustard seed—to follow the flock rather than to go after a single hurting sheep. We're drawn by celebrity-sponsored campaigns to problems half-way around the world while we may overlook the work of the "street saints" serving just around the corner. "Street saints" do not usually make sweeping claims about wiping out global poverty—but they do care passionately about stamping it out in individual lives, one person at a time. Their work happens outside the spotlight, as they humbly pursue incremental change through personal relationships.

- 5 According to Andy Crouch in his book *Culture Making*, "No matter how complex and extensive the cultural system you may consider, the only way it will be changed is by an absolutely small group of people who innovate and create a new cultural good." Why do you think this is the case? Can you think of an example of an organization or movement that brought

about significant social change by starting small?

Finally, perhaps the most common pitfall is to focus our hopes and expectations on government. The problems are big, and so is government—after all, the U.S. government has a bigger budget than any other institution. Increased government spending on welfare might seem like an obvious solution to combat poverty throughout the nation.

But as we've seen, human need and social breakdown are not simply monetary problems. Poverty isn't only a lack of money. At their roots, the problems of poverty are relational and complex, and effective responses focus on restoring relationships. That means family, church, and ministries are best equipped to be first responders to those in need because they deal with the whole person, face-to-face. As Jedd learned from his own experience, government is not able to love people. It simply doesn't have the capacity to cultivate relationships from the ground up.

"It is these small acts of love that can transform the world one life at a time. And together they form the vital core of a whole-person approach to justice."

—Jedd Medefind,
Executive Director
Christian Alliance for Orphans

6 What does Jedd mean when advocating a “whole-person” approach to justice? What are the different aspects of a person’s well-being that social justice approaches should address?

7 In the video you just watched, think about Rudy Carrasco’s explanation of concentric circles of relationships. Why is government less able to cultivate justice from the ground up than family, neighborhood, and church?

A Better Response

How should we respond to the needs around us in a way that avoids these pitfalls?

What does a better response look like? How can we navigate the various options and possibilities before us?

This series has suggested an approach to social justice that centers on two questions:

- What’s the nature of the need?
- Who is best able to meet that need?

Seeking social justice is about matching the abilities of different institutions with the nature of the need. Demanding that an institution fulfill tasks for which it’s not equipped can actually work against the cause of justice. A church can’t lock up a criminal engaged in human trafficking; government programs can’t provide the unconditional love a child needs from a family.

8 Read Romans 12:4-8. Like the various parts of a body, or the various gifts within the church, different institutions serve the common good of society in different ways. Thinking back on the previous lessons, how would you describe the different roles and responsibilities of each of the following in seeking social justice?

- Friends/Neighbors _____
- Families _____
- Churches and Ministries _____
- Businesses _____
- Government _____

As in Shyima’s case, sometimes we need to call on government to administer justice for those in need of protection or rescue. Government is well-equipped to maintain the social conditions of freedom, order, safety, and peace in which healthy relationships can grow.

9 In what ways can you call on government to exercise its proper responsibility in fulfilling social justice?

“The bottom line is that when government complements and enables these different spheres to thrive—the businesses, non-profits, and families—then it is championing true justice. But, when government grows so big, it crowds them out...then it ultimately does more harm than good.”

–Jedd Medefind,
Executive Director
Christian Alliance for Orphans

- 10 At the same time, in what ways can you encourage government officials to recognize and protect the authority of the family, the role of churches and ministries, and the value of work and the free market?

Like those volunteering at Men of Valor or the ministries of First Baptist Church Leesburg, sometimes we need to start or join a ministry or support a church initiative to serve those struggling with problems such as hunger, sickness, homelessness, addiction, unemployment, abandonment, and alienation. Our care should promote the human dignity of those who are served by recognizing their spiritual and relational—not only financial and material—needs.

- 11 Make a list of some of the ministries and other charitable organizations in your community. What needs do they address well? Which needs do you think require more attention? Do you, your group, or your congregation have the capacity to fill those gaps?

- 12 Strengthening families is one of the most important steps we can take to cultivate strong, healthy relationships in society. What ministries do churches or para-church organizations in your community sponsor to encourage strong marriages and healthy family life—e.g., marriage enrichment programs or counseling for dating couples, newlyweds, or first-time parents? What are some concrete steps your congregation or small group can take to strengthen marriages and families in your area?

The opportunity to pursue justice can present itself in humble, interpersonal ways. As in the case of Ron and Cheryl Murff, this can take the form of befriending a stranger, caring for a sick neighbor, sharing knowledge or material goods, tutoring or mentoring a child, or offering accountability.

“The way of Christ is different. He loved the one person in front of him in each moment in the way that they most needed to be loved.”

—Jedd Medefind,
Executive Director
Christian Alliance for Orphans

13 In what ways do your gifts and passions match the needs and opportunities to serve in your current circumstances?

14 Discuss the concrete steps you can take to befriend someone in need and help that person cultivate healthy relationships.



Rethink

Seeking social justice is about cultivating healthy relationships from the ground up—relationships among individuals as well as among institutions. Family, church, business, and government all have different and important roles. A just society is one in which individuals and institutions exercise their proper roles and responsibilities, each freely doing what they do best and working together to meet people’s needs and to advance the common good.

We can all make a difference by engaging personally to help transform lives in need, starting with the opportunities in our own neighborhoods.

15 How has your understanding of social justice either changed or been confirmed since the beginning of this study?

16 What concrete steps do you plan to take to seek social justice?

Closing Thought

Unlike people in many parts of the world, Americans generally enjoy long life expectancy, good nutrition, clean water, and a general absence of treatable life-threatening diseases such as malaria or tuberculosis. Social justice has a better chance to thrive when these positive physical conditions are present. But these conditions didn't arise by accident. They emerged from a combination of values, relationships, and ways of ordering society over the course of many years. General prosperity and well-being go hand-in-hand with the freedoms Americans enjoy: the freedom to worship openly according to the dictates of our conscience, to work where we can best make use of our gifts, to educate our children in accord with our values, and to express our opinions without fear of government censorship or oppression.

In other words, the ingredients of social justice are moral, social, and relational as well as economic and political. They stem from a way of life that respects human dignity, equality, mutual responsibility, neighborly service, and hard work, and from a strong, but limited constitutional government that protects a vibrant civil society of individuals, families, businesses, and churches.

Things are far from perfect, and we have lots of work to do. But as we seek social justice, we are blessed with a strong constitutional order and civil society on which to build.



Read On

Keep breaking ground with the following resources. Visit SeekSocialJustice.com for hyperlinks to these articles and other resources.

Matthew 25:31-46

James 2:14-18

Who Really Cares: America's Charity Divide—Who Gives, Who Doesn't, and Why It Matters, Arthur C. Brooks

Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling, Andy Crouch

Street Saints: Renewing America's Cities, Barbara J. Elliott

Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery, Eric Metaxas

Restorers of Hope: Reaching the Poor in Your Community with Church-Based Ministries that Work, Amy Sherman

The Triumphs of Joseph: How Today's Community Healers are Reviving our Streets and Neighborhoods, Robert L. Woodson, Sr.

