



The Economics of Neighborly Love: Investing in Your Community's Compassion and Capacity

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Marrying biblical study, economic theory, and practical advice, Tom Nelson presents a vision for church ministry that works toward the flourishing of the local community, beginning with its poorest and most marginalized members. Nelson resists oversimplification and pushes us toward more complex and nuanced understandings of wealth and poverty.

What does the Christian faith say about economics?

As a single parent, my mom worked extraordinarily hard at a relatively low-paying job. The economic challenges we faced were not hard for others to see. Indeed, material poverty not only weighs on the human heart but also on the sleeves. I'm sure our economic situation was apparent to those around us. Nevertheless, the Christian faith of our local church felt deeply disconnected from the economic challenges we experienced. Each day, I woke up in an economic world, yet the Christian faith I was taught seemed to have little to say about it. I wondered why this was: Did Christian faith have anything to do with the economic world I lived, worked, and played in?

As a young adult this important question was put on the back burner for a time, even as I pursued a college degree in business. I took classes in macroeconomics, microeconomics, and economic statistics. I learned about classical and modern economics. I was exposed to Adam Smith, as well as the Austrian, Keynesian, and Chicago Schools of economic thought. Even so, my painful childhood experiences and the deep disconnect I experienced between my Christian faith and my economic life laid fallow in the recesses of my mind and my heart.

A few years later, I sensed God's call to serve the local church in a pastoral role. That meant seminary education and theological study. Yet again, the question of how Christian faith might speak into economic life was sidestepped, as the worlds of theology and everyday work were presented to me as entirely separate spheres, which were kept planets apart in my seminary classrooms.

In my professional education for pastoral ministry, I do not recall any serious discussion about economics or its connection to faith or to the local church. As an impressionable seminarian this neglect further reinforced a dualistic understanding of the world, deepening the faulty notion that pastoral work and economic life had little in common. Economics was for economists; theology was for pastors. There were no points of intersection – or so I believed.

It wasn't until I'd served for a few years in pastoral ministry that the burning questions of my childhood revisited me. How did Christian faith speak meaningfully to everyday life? What did it have to say about work and economics? I needed answers. After an extensive reexamination of the biblical text and a careful revisiting of the writings of the Protestant Reformers, I came to a sobering conclusion. Due to an impoverished understanding of Scripture, I had been perpetuating an improperly dualistic Sunday-to-Monday gap through my teaching and ministry. Wrongly, I had separated the life of Christian faith from ordinary,

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Tom Nelson (DMin, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is president of Made to Flourish (MTF), a network that seeks to empower pastors to lead churches that produce human flourishing for the common good. He also served as senior pastor of Christ Community Church in Leawood, Kansas, for almost thirty years. Tom is a council member for The Gospel Coalition and the author of *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work*, *Five Smooth Stones: Discovering the Path to Wholeness of Soul*, and *Ekklesia: Rediscovering God's Design for the Church*.

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everyday living in the world. Though I had experienced economic hardship, and though I had studied economic theory and Christian theology, I had failed to connect faith and economics in a meaningful way.

This was an inconvenient truth as a young pastor. I had made a grave mistake. Operating out of an impoverished biblical theology and pastoral paradigm, I had been spending the majority of my time equipping the congregation I served for the minority of their lives. I had to call it what it was: malpractice. This pastoral malpractice was impoverishing our congregation in its spiritual formation and gospel mission. To be faithful in my vocational calling, I knew deep in my bones that this massive gap needed to dramatically narrow.

By God's grace over the past twenty years, the Sunday-to- Monday gap is beginning to shrink in the parish I serve, though we still have miles to go. In my conversations with other pastors and Christian leaders, I've come to see that my story of pastoral malpractice is not unique. It is tragically common. I now realize the gap is far bigger and more perilous than I first imagined. The rightful worship of God, the spiritual formation of God's people, the plausibility and proclamation of the gospel, and the common good of our neighbors – both local and global – are crippled because we have long neglected to rightly understand how the gospel speaks to every nook and cranny of life, including our work and economic systems. Pastors and Christian leaders in all vocations are called to care for the vulnerable and to seek the flourishing of every image bearer of God. I hope this work will contribute to that high and holy task.

– Taken from the introduction