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STUDY GUIDE

REFLECTIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR INVESTING
IN YOUR COMMUNITY'S COMPASSION AND CAPACITY

The Economics of Neighborly Love

BY TOM NELSON

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Study Guide for The Economics of Neighborly Love

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Human Fruitfulness and Material Wealth

“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 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.

The glaring irony is that Holy Scripture speaks a good deal about economic flourishing. Yet in our personal lives, in our congregations, and in our work, we all too often woefully neglect to connect the gospel of the kingdom with economics. This harms our witness, our cities, and our future. The church needs to address and begin the hard work of overcoming the perilous Sunday-to-Monday gap.”



1. Why did people at Tom Nelson's childhood church seem to notice his family's economic state but not care?

2. In what ways can you relate to what Nelson describes?

3. Nelson lists several questions that will frame the rest of the book. At this point in your reading, how do you answer them?

→ *What does the Bible say about economics?*

→ *What role do Christian leaders have in nurturing the economic well-being of their congregations and organizations?*

→ *What does a life of fruitfulness look like?*

→ *What about the economic well-being of the cities where they minister?*

Neighborly Love

“The Great Commandment challenges us to better connect Sunday to Monday, not only by nurturing compassionate hearts but also by growing in our economic capacity. And economic capacity does not appear out of thin air. It comes from our faithful vocational stewardship. The financial margin we need for generosity flows from a lifestyle of wise financial management. Neighborly love requires both compassion and capacity. It requires transformed hearts and transformed habits, deep compassion and faithful stewardship. If we are going to narrow the Sunday-to-Monday gap between our faith, our work, and the economic flourishing of our neighbors, we must take tangible steps to love with both greater compassion and increased capacity.”



1. What are the applications of Jesus' Great Commandment (Matthew 22: 36-40) you typically encounter? Similarly, how do Christians often apply the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12)?

2. Read Luke 10: 25-37. Which character in the story best represents your natural response to a situation like that?

3. Nelson points out that neighborly love requires a better definition of "neighbor." Why does Jesus affirm the Samaritan as the neighbor in the story? What allowed him to be a loving neighbor?

4. How does this compare with how you typically think of neighbors?

5. Nelson concludes this chapter by looking at Jesus' ultimate meaning of the parable. How does this affect how you understand the idea of being a neighbor?

Made to Flourish

“The measure of our neighborly love is not only seen in our ever-increasing Christlike character, but also in our outpouring of Christlike compassion and productive capacity for the good of our neighbors. When we wholeheartedly embrace the Great Commandment, we are compelled to live with greater compassion and fruitful productivity, which fuels our economic capacity. As our economic capacity grows, whether it is measured in influence, access, or ownership of wealth, our ability to lead a life of love-fueled fruitfulness increases. When we look back at God’s original design for human flourishing, we discover we were created for a vibrant life of responsible creativity, innovation, and productivity.”

“... Because fruitfulness is about cultivating blessing from the created order. Fruitfulness means adding value and bestowing honor to others in and through our work. Fruitfulness is building up and utilizing our capacity for influence, access, and wealth so we might tangibly express our neighborly love.”



QUESTIONS

CHAPTER 2

1. Read Genesis 1. What two “essential and unique qualities” does it teach about humans?

2. What is the connection between the two?

3. In what ways does the cultural mandate extend beyond childbearing?

4. And in what ways does the cultural mandate extend beyond paychecks?

5. When Nelson discusses economics, what is he talking about? How does that reframe what typically comes to mind when you think of economics?

Human Fruitfulness and Material Wealth

“Whatever work God has called us to, we must ask: Are we becoming more fruitful workers? Are we increasingly doing our job better and gaining greater skills?”



1. “Whatever work God has called us to, we must ask: Are we becoming more fruitful workers? Are we increasingly doing our job better and gaining greater skills?”

2. What are the two problematic views of wealth Nelson names? Which are you most tempted to believe?

a. _____ b. _____

3. What is the fixed pie fallacy and where do you see it applied in society?

4. Nelson gives a lot of attention in this chapter to the Great Enrichment and the “hockey stick” economic upturn of the 19th and 20th centuries. What are the causes of the Enrichment and why are they important in the context of neighborly love?

5. Read Proverbs 30. What does this passage say about the opposite ends of the wealth spectrum?

6. In what ways do you need to redefine or reimagine fruitful work?

The Fruitfulness of Faithfulness

“So often, we are encouraged in our personal journeys of discipleship to lead more faithful lives marked by obedience and trust. And certainly faithfulness is an essential component of true discipleship. Without faith, we cannot know God or please God. Our enduring, trusting, persevering faithfulness matters. Yet, in our pursuit of faithfulness, I wonder if we might not have unintentionally overlooked the high importance of fruitfulness, missing the comprehensive fullness of what God desires for us. In fact, I’d go so far to ask, Is it possible to lead a faithful life without leading a fruitful life? Can we be faithful without being fruitful?”



QUESTIONS

CHAPTER 4

1. Read John 15. What does Nelson say is the connection between *abide* and *fruitfulness*?

2. Nelson lists three manifestations of fruitfulness. What are they and how do they relate?

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

3. What is the connection between cultivating character and culture?

4. Read Matthew 25:14-30. Then read Colossians 3:23, 1 Thessalonians 4: 9-11, and 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12. Together, what do these passages say about work and diligence?

5. Nelson lists three distortions of fruitfulness that he says are common to churches in the United States. What are they, and which do you see as most prevalent?

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

Loving the Neighborhood

“How differently would we think about the important and complex reality of modern economics if we first saw it as the stewardship we all have been given by God for caring for our common home and cultivating the art of living together? Would we not look at economics differently and value economics more if we saw economic interaction as the place where value is created and where collaborative neighborly love is exchanged? How important might greater economic reflection be in the late modern world, where humans who see the world so differently need to learn to live together in our interconnected global village, in light of those differences?”



1. Why does God say in Genesis 2:18 that it's not good for Adam to be alone?

2. If you adopted the definition of economics on page 70 — “stewardship we all have been given by God for caring for our common home and cultivating the art of living together” — what could that change for you, your family, and your community?

3. What is the relationship between good neighbors and good neighborhoods?

4. Nelson argues that a free-market economy is the best imperfect system for the common good. What are the four reasons he offers?

- a.

- b.

- c.

- d.

5. What is the economics of mutuality?

Economic Wisdom

“It is important to grasp the symbiosis and synergy operative within this economic wisdom trinity. A virtuous person who brings value to the economic system of exchange through their diligent labor will have capacity for economic generosity. In Old Testament wisdom literature, virtue, diligence, and generosity come together as a primary means and motivation for true neighborly love. Wisdom calls for a neighborly love of compassion and capacity. Wisdom compels us forward with both compassion for the economic needs of our neighbor and the economic capacity to meet those needs through wise generosity.”



QUESTIONS

CHAPTER 6

1. Read 2 Chronicles 1:11-12. What are the connections between wisdom and honor, possessions and honor?

2. Nelson highlights three themes from Proverbs — the wisdom trinity. What are they?

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

3. Economic *integrity*. What do Proverbs 22 and 28 have to say about America's Great Recession?

4. Economic *diligence*. Nelson points to two "close relationships" in Proverbs. What are they? How have you seen those play out?

5. Economic *generosity*. Read Proverbs 14. How does generosity connect to diligence and integrity?

Wisdom and the Modern Economy

“When we learn and apply economic wisdom, we can be hopeful that economic injustice can be confronted, economic opportunity can be offered, and economic flourishing can be a reality, even for the most vulnerable and marginalized of society. While some economic theories and frameworks are better than others in producing human flourishing, they all can be distorted and corrupted. Economic progress can be achieved, yet economic perfection will only come when Jesus returns and establishes his perfect reign in the new heavens and new earth. In this already–not yet moment of redemptive history, economic wisdom that comes from Scripture as well as sound economic understanding articulated by thoughtful economists will move us in the direction of a God-honoring, humble confidence, hopeful realism, and greater human flourishing.”



1. In this chapter, Nelson addresses seven “foundational economic building blocks.” What are they and how do they fit together?

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____
- d. _____
- e. _____
- f. _____
- g. _____

2. What is the difference between self-interest and sinful selfishness?

3. How can profits encourage people to look out for the good of others? Does this contradict the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 6?

4. What are the institutions Nelson names as “indispensable” to a flourishing economy?

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

5. Read Proverbs 31. How do integrity, diligence, and generosity come together in the virtuous woman?

Wise Generosity

“If we begin to more firmly grasp God’s design on how we should direct our generosity, the revolution of generosity we are graciously experiencing in our time will have profound and lasting impact for the gospel and the common good. But if we are unwise with how our generosity is directed, we will miss the wide-open door of opportunity before us in this strategic moment in redemptive history.”



QUESTIONS

CHAPTER 8

1. What is design-based giving and what are the three things it promotes? (113)

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

2. Design-based giving also depends on three “bedrock ideas.” What are they?

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

3. What is “grace-giving”? Is grace-giving what the apostle Paul promotes?

4. How does your understanding of the local church influence your contributions to its work?
How has it in the past?

5. How can design-based giving reorder your loves?

The Poor Among Us

“In his death and resurrection, Jesus the Messiah provides the final solution for humanity’s greatest poverty. However, we must also remember that Jesus himself demonstrated compassion and care for the materially poor throughout his earthly ministry. When Jesus spoke about his messianic mission, he often spoke of the poor. In his hometown of Nazareth, as he read the Isaiah scroll, Jesus identified himself as one bringing good news to the materially impoverished.”



1. What is poverty, according to Nelson?

2. What does evangelism have to do with poverty?

3. How does the story of Ruth reveal God’s heart for the poor? Is this consistent with the New Testament vision?

4. Nelson names five barriers to poverty alleviation. What are they? And which do you encounter most often?

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

5. What are some practical ways you can step outside your “bubble of cultural insularity” and engage the poor in your community?

Economic Injustice

“A prophetic voice must not only point out the errors of injustice but also offer better ways forward for the flourishing of all. In speaking to those in the for-profit world, my prophetic message is not that economic profits do not matter, they clearly do. Rather, it is to warn that economic profits can come to matter too much and can blind us to our stewardship of the common good. When the idolatry of power and economic greed captures the human heart, it is only a matter of time until the indiscriminate shrapnel of injustice does great damage. At the heart of the matter, injustice is a matter of the heart.”



1. Are gospel proclamation and calls for economic justice mutually exclusive? Why or why not?

2. Nelson calls out four current realities he says require prophetic indictment. What are they?

- a.

- b.

- c.

- d.

3. Can you think of some ways of preying on the poor in your community?

4. How can your church be an agent of racial reconciliation in your community?

5. Human trafficking is an obvious human right problem. How is it an economic issue?

Rebuilding the Ruins

“In the book of Nehemiah, we find a wise and principled way forward for pastors and Christian leaders who, out of the overflow of their love of God and neighbor, seek to enhance human flourishing and rebuild the ruins of sin-stained, broken cities and disintegrated social order. Nehemiah’s writing and example offers encouragement and instruction to Christian leaders and faith communities who take seriously the call to neighborly love through the conduit of faith, work, and economic integration. Specifically, Nehemiah suggests that the huge task of rebuilding broken communities begins when we first see the need, and advances as we keep a Godward focus.”



QUESTIONS

CHAPTER 11

1. Why does Nelson tell the story of Nehemiah?

2. Nelson says key to Nehemiah’s work was a “Godward” focus. How did this focus animate the prophet in the story?

3. Read Matthew 20:1-16. How does the parable of the landowner establish an “economy of grace”?

4. What “else” is required for free-market economies to survive?

5. Nelson describes an ideal gospel ecosystem. How is your community aligning with that vision? How could you get closer to it?

Getting to Work

“Rebuilding the ruins around us requires that we first embrace new patterns of seeing and thinking. But it also requires us to get to work.”



1. Why is fostering entrepreneurship important to flourishing communities, even for churches to be involved in?

2. Nelson argues that job creation is essential to sustainable poverty alleviation. How?

3. *How* you work matters, too. In what ways could you work to be more productive and help others do the same?

4. Nelson’s church employs five “antipoverty building blocks.” What are they?

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____
- d. _____
- e. _____

5. What is vocational stewardship? And what are Amy Sherman’s four pathways for local churches to go about it?

The Hope of the World

“The life Pastor Reid lives, the message he communicates, and the local church he serves all speak to the vital importance of connecting Sunday worship with Monday work and the economy. In a time when the local church is often marginalized, opportunities for neighborly love, gospel impact, and positive cultural influence are brimming with possibilities—if we are willing to engage the world of work. Yet it will take Spirit-empowered pastors and church leaders who out of theological conviction embrace a more robust missional paradigm that takes seriously the stewardship of equipping congregations for a majority of their lives. At the heart of local church mission is the intentional multiplication of Jesus’ apprentices who embody neighborly love in the workplace, adding value in the broader economy.”



1. The story of pastor Reid’s talking to the airline mask company concludes with employees reacting emotionally to his story. Why would they be emotional about his story?

2. How does capacity relate to a church’s mission or neighborly love?

3. What could “more intentional faith, work, and economic focus” look like in your local church? How could it help close the Sunday-Monday gap?

“Many pastors and Christian leaders are awakening to a moment of great gospel opportunity. What changes in our local church do we need to embrace? What unique opportunities in our communities are we waiting to be engaged with renewed passion and commitment? For the glory of God and the flourishing of our neighbors, let’s seize the moment.”

