

‘Anyone, Anyone . . .’ Want to Learn Economics: Three Reasons Why Christians Should Study God’s House

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²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’

— Luke 14:27–30 —

What comes to mind when you think of economics?

If it is only a stuffy college classroom, a contentious topic that resurfaces at election time, or anything like Ben Stein in *Ferris Beuller’s Day Off* (see above), then you are not getting your economics from the Bible. In Scripture, economics is a subject that informs the story of salvation from Genesis to Revelation. From the command to subdue and rule the world to the promise of Christ’s payment of our sin-debt, we find economic realities. And just as prominently, from the inability to build a tower in the land of Shinar (Genesis 11) to Jesus’s warning of the same (Luke 14), we find dangers associated with bad economics.

Put the other way, when economics is studied, it touches on issues that penetrate deep into the life of everyone made in God’s image. Personal finance, raising children, going to work, making decisions about the future, and paying (and evaluating) taxes are all economic in nature. To put it more broadly, economics is not only about supply and demand, monetary theories, or policies related to taxation. Rather, economics is a fundamental aspect of human activity and moral imagination. When Jesus said to “count the cost” of following him, he employed an economic way of thinking.

Thus, like every other area of life and knowledge, economics is something intrinsic to human nature. And in Scripture, God’s prophets and apostles speak about the world God has made and the resources that exist therein. Even more, Scripture tells us how God intends for us to use creation for his glory. And all of this is economics.

To borrow the language of Thomas Sowell, “Economics is the study of the use of scarce resources which have alternative uses” (*Basic Economics*, passim). Now Sowell does not approach economics through the lens of Scripture, but his definition recalls the vast-but-limited nature of our world. God has created a finite world, where productivity is possible, but also fragile. Thus, the world God has made teaches us our need to learn economic principles for good stewardship.

How we steward our limited resources (e.g., our time, our energy, our money, our vocations, etc.) is a moral endeavor. And economics, when rightly conceived, is a way of looking at God's world that calls us to use those resources well. Indeed, the father of economics, Adam Smith, was not an economist, but a moral philosopher. And when we rightly consider the subject, economics is a way of thinking about God's world and our place in it that calls us to invest our lives in things eternal.

I doubt many textbooks on economics speak like that, but they should. And starting this Sunday, we will consider what Scripture says about economics in a new Sunday School series. In this post, I want to offer three reasons for studying economics. These reasons are explicitly biblical, but for that reason, Christians should not perceive economics as the "dismal science" (a pejorative label often assigned to economics). Instead, Christians who want to renew their minds with God's Word should consider how God teaches us to think economically about the world, God's salvation, and good works.

Three Reasons for Studying Economics

Without being exhaustive, here are three reasons why economics matter.

The World is an Oikos

Economics is a word that comes from the greek word *Oikonomia*, which is composed of two words—*oikos* which means house(hold) and *nomos* which means law. In the New Testament *oikonomia* is used in various ways. For starters, the closely associated word *oikonomos* speaks of a household manager in Jesus's parable in Luke 16. Spurring his disciples to invest their lives in things eternal, Jesus describes a dishonest manager (*oikonomos*) who uses his access to wealth as a means of making friends. Without getting into the details of Jesus's parable, it's enough to say that the word *oikonomos/oikonomia* carries with it a sense of stewardship. And Jesus expects his followers to learn how to be good stewards of their wealth.

Similarly, the word *oikonomia* is used of Paul's ministry (1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 3:2; Col. 1:25) and "the stewardship (*oikonomia*) from God that is by faith" (1 Tim. 1:4). God entrusts his work to his apostles and all those who trust in their gospel message. This is God's household—the children of God who are redeemed from slavery to sin and Satan, and who now live in his house and makeup his household.

Both in respect to the cosmos that God has made and the people he has made in his image, we cannot escape the language of house and household. In Scripture, we learn that God's world (the cosmos) is organized into a three-story house. God created heaven (the top story), the heavens (the middle story), and the earth (the lower story). These three stories are mapped out on the Mountain of God in Eden, Mount Sinai, the tabernacle, and the temple. Indeed, the houses made by Moses and Solomon are microcosms of the universe, while the cosmos is itself described as a temple for God (see Psalm 104). Long story short, the world is an *oikos*, a house in which God's people must live according to God's law.

That's the other thing built into the word *oikonomia*—the *nomos* (law). In God's world there are laws that correspond to his holiness and his wisdom. These laws include "thou shall not kill," but they also include "thou shall not steal" and "thou shall not covet." Without pulling these apart, the instructions regarding theft and covetousness relate directly to God's economic plans for his people. Again, God has laws for his household.

Mankind is not given the power to create a world however we choose. Inhabiting God's world, we must learn his household rules. And this study of God's household rules is what calls us to study economics. We will not live wisely or well, if we do not give ourselves to learning what Scripture says about various principles in economics. Just the same, any economic principles that are formed within the light of God's Word will be misleading or misled. For that purpose, we should study economics.

Salvation is an Oikonomia

Closely related to God's household rules is the fact that God himself has an economy. In theology, the Trinity, God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is often described in terms of ontology and economy. Put briefly, these two descriptions speak about the same God, but with respect to two realities. The *ontological* Trinity is God in himself, considered independently from his creation and his work in the world. The *economic* Trinity is God at work in creation and redemption. Because we are God's creation, we know God through his economic activity. That is, as God works in his world, we come to know him in his work and his words. Infinite in himself, God is more than his works, but we know him truly through his works. Thus, economics is related to how God himself works in the world.

Returning to the Scriptures, the idea of God's economy is also found in the book of Ephesians. Twice, Paul uses the word *oikonomia* to speak of God's eternal plan for the world. In context, let's read Ephesians 1:7–10 and 3:7–10.

Ephesians 1:7–10

⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a **plan** [*oikonomia*] for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Ephesians 3:7–10 (ESV)

⁷ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the **plan** [*oikonomia*] of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, ¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

In these two verses (1:10; 3:9), God's *oikonomia* relates to God's final purposes for restoring creation by means of Christ's work of redemption. As we observed above, this plan for the world is the formation of a cosmic household, a Spirit-filled temple composed of Jew and Gentile. This is God's economic work in the world. And any attempt to understand economics, therefore, must relate to this world and the household God is building.

Even more, as C. R. Wiley notes in his book, [*The Household and the War of the Cosmos*](#), there is a deep connection between God's household and ours. It should not come as a surprise that in a letter focused on a God's new household (see Ephesians 2–4), that Paul spends so much time talking about household codes (Eph. 5:22–6:9). Indeed, these household codes are reflections of God's cosmic household codes, and again they are foundational for any study in economics.

As many economists note, strong households make strong economies. Conversely, when marriages breakdown, divorces go up, and children are raised by the state, the long term effect is economically disastrous. In our country, the negative effects of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the formation of the welfare state are still being felt. And of course this is the case, because all economic plans that ignore God's economic standards, i.e., his house rules regarding work, family, and freedom, will hurt people and their attempts to do good works. Yet, such wisdom only comes when we study God's Word as it relates to economics.

Good Works Require Good Economics

The third reason for studying economics relates to good works. As Ronald Nash, Kevin DeYoung, and others have noted, good intentions are never enough for achieving good works. Good works, which is what we were created for in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:10), require good economics. And instead of proving that myself, let me offer three insights from Nash, DeYoung, and Benjamin Rogge.

First, Ronald Nash begins his book, [*Social Justice and the Christian Church*](#), with this conviction "that if a Christian wishes to make pronouncements on complex social, economic and political issues, he also has a duty to become informed about those issues. And that requires a careful study of economics and other social sciences" (1). This is why we are studying economics, because we do not want to sow good seeds foolishly. We want to make sure that good seed finds good soil and grows good fruit.

Similarly, Kevin DeYoung, along with Greg Gilbert, describe how good intentions are never enough. "Sometimes well-meaning Christians accomplish little or even have a negative effect on the people they are trying to help because they do not understand basic economic realities" ([*What is the Mission of the Church?*](#) by Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, 186). Rightly, DeYoung and Gilbert acknowledge that faithful Christians do not need to become economic experts. But we do need to learn as much as Scripture teaches. And it teaches quite a bit, actually.

Finally, Benjamin Rogge makes the same point, when he writes, "The typical American who calls himself a Christian and who makes pronouncements ... on economic policies or institutions, does so out of an almost complete ignorance of the simplest and most widely accepted tools of economic analysis. If something arouses his Christian concern, he asks not whether it is water or gasoline he is tossing on the economic fire-he asks only whether it is a well-intended act. As I understand it, the Christian is required to use his God-given reason as well" (Benjamin Rogge, quoted in Ronald Nash, [*Social Justice and the Christian Church*](#), 2).

It is possible that Rogge's assessment does not fit every Christian, but judging by the way Christians align themselves with movements and memes on social media, there are many well-meaning Christians who support ideas, people, and institutions that stand against the good they desire. To that end, we need to study economics. And starting this Sunday, we will do that during our Sunday School hour. In order to better understand God's world, God's salvation, and our good works, we will take up the subject and study God's household rules.

Want to join us? Anyone, anyone . . .

Soli Deo Gloria, ds