

the CALL to COMMERCE

ways to love your
neighbor through
business



“And who is my neighbor?”

This question is just as pressing to us in 21st century America as it was 2,000 years ago. A legal expert, “who wanted to justify himself,” posed this question to Jesus. In response, Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Like that expert, we look around the world today and see pressing needs at every turn: self-centered leadership, ignorance, poverty, political instability, disease, and spiritual darkness. Overwhelmed at the needs pouring into our digital devices, we ask “What can *I* really do?” Our temptation, like that of the Levite and the priest in the parable, is to walk past the needs of others and go about our day.

Yet two surprising twists in Jesus’ parable can give us hope. First, the hero of the story is a Samaritan, a member of a mixed ethnic group despised by the Jews. Though the religious insiders—a Levite and a priest—pass by, it’s the heretic, the outsider, who stops to help. The Samaritan didn’t find a solution to a global crisis. Instead, his single act of mercy for a stranger is the model here. This we can do.

Second, which is perhaps the biggest shock for us today, the hero of this story isn’t a pastor, religious leader, or a nonprofit volunteer. *He’s a business person.*

There’s a bit of guesswork here, but the Samaritan had the time and excess wealth to serve a need. And in so doing, he fulfilled Jesus’ command to “love your neighbor.” As Margaret Thatcher once said, “No-one would remember the Good Samaritan if he’d only had good intentions; he had money as well.” **Might engaging in business be a primary way God intends for us to love our neighbors?**

“Business is God’s intended partner in his great work as Provider for all of humankind,” says Tim Weinhold, an entrepreneur I quoted in a recent article for *Christianity Today*¹. His point is that business is a way God has chosen to *both* provide the goods and services we all depend on each day *and* create the wealth we need to be able to afford those goods and services.

As a CFO friend of mine says², “Business is the only institution that creates wealth. Every other institution distributes it.”³ The purpose of business, like the purpose of the church in the world, is to serve (Mark 10:45, John 20:21). Business people are called to use their talents to bless others.

But what about corporate greed? What about scandals like the price fixing scandal at Archer Daniels Midland⁴, famously portrayed by Matt Damon in the movie *The Informant*⁵? Or the levels of corruption and collusion in the housing market collapse of the mid 2000s (again, portrayed dramatically by Hollywood in “*The Big Short*?”⁶) This looks more like plundering your neighbor rather than loving your neighbor.

Business can either plunder our neighbors through low wages, oppressive practices (like the payday loan industry), environmental degradation, and hoarding wealth—or it can be the single greatest instrument for the alleviation of poverty the world has ever seen. (Films such as *Poverty, Inc.*⁷ and the article “Towards the End of Poverty”⁸ in *The Economist* make compelling cases for the latter.) Our work can either destroy or design, plunder or provide, sack or serve.

Yet what would it actually look like to love your neighbor through your own business or work life?

I agree with Robin John, CEO of Eventide Funds⁹, who recently suggested we need to start with the question of the legal expert: who is my neighbor? *Business, he believes, has six neighbors:* customers, employees, supply chains, communities, the environment, and society. The best performing businesses over the long haul, he believes, create products and services that serve society and authentic human flourishing, focus on stakeholder value creation, build human-centered operations strategies and create a rich organizational culture. That is, they look carefully at all the “neighbors” a business has and ask how to serve those neighbors well.



Using that framework, here are

**ways to love your
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**Love Your
Customers**

Love Your Customers

Dan Dye is the CEO of Ardent Mills, America's largest flour producer.¹⁰ Each day, 100 million people eat an Ardent Mills product. It's likely that the bread products you ate for breakfast this morning came from the flour produced at one of their 42 mills. Dan describes his work as "nourishing the world," which his company does on a global scale. They continuously innovate the best processes of turning wheat into flour, which is eventually sold to companies like Bimbo bread that are found in America's grocery stores. And at the end of their global operations and billion dollar balance sheets is a simple commitment to serve the needs of their customers.

When companies prioritize the needs of the customer and create genuine value for them, businesses flourish. For example, Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon, leaves a chair empty at corporate meetings to remind them they're there serve their customers. Creating value for others, in Charles Koch's language¹¹, or endeavoring to love your customers as yourselves, is the first pillar of loving your neighbor through business.

Dealing with cranky, irrational, or flippant customers is no fun. But C.S. Lewis reminds us that loving your neighbor has little to do with your feelings.

"The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him...There is, indeed, one exception. If you do him a good turn, not to please God and obey the law of charity, but to show him what a fine forgiving chap you are, and to put him in your debt, and then sit down to wait for his 'gratitude', you will probably be disappointed."¹²

Even if customers don't show appreciation, business is still filled with opportunities to "love one another as I [Jesus] have loved you."¹³ The way we love our neighbors, says Lewis, is by working for their good. Like providing sewage systems, software, lighting, legislation, lesson plans, and, of course, loaves of bread.

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This is not just good advice...it's good business strategy.

Verse to post on your desk: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." – 1 John 4:16-18



**Love Your
Employees**

Love Your Employees

Men and women are created to work and are meant to express the dignity of being God's image bearers through their creative activity.

This fact is not lost on Wes Gardner, CEO of Prime Trailer Leasing.¹⁴ Years ago, Wes had an “aha moment,” where he saw that his business was not just a way to fund ministry, but to *do* ministry, specifically by caring for his employees. He began hiring women from Hope House, a nonprofit that works with teenage mothers, and providing them a good salary and opportunities for growth—opportunities that would likely not come their way unless Wes was committed to loving his neighbors through his business.

He's part of a larger movement in Denver to provide good jobs to people with barriers to employment.¹⁵ New efforts are afoot to create good jobs for at-risk communities. (A “good job” is loosely defined as a job that provides increasing wages, some flexibility of schedule, benefits, a healthy workplace culture, opportunities for advancement and education, and a sense of pride in the work.)

Yet people from every socioeconomic class long to know their work has deeper value than a paycheck. Dave Kiersznowski, founder of DEMDACO, a business that makes gifts that “lift the spirit,” wants his employees—of all faith backgrounds, races, and ethnicities—to broaden their vision of how their work is contributing to the common good.¹⁶ For example, in their headquarters he named meeting spaces after “heroes of the common good,” such as Martin Luther King Jr., William Wilberforce, and Mother Theresa. This reminds employees that their labor matters not just to the company, but to human history. Good thinkers, like Barry Schwartz, professor at Swarthmore College, see that emphasizing the ways our work makes other people's lives better is key to loving your employees.¹⁷

Caring for your employees begins the virtuous cycle of profitable long term business. “We take great care of our people, they take great care of our customers, and our customers take great care of our shareholders,” says Cofounder and former CEO of Southwest Airlines, Herb Kelleher. By providing good jobs, laced with dignity, fair wages, and intrinsic meaning, some are even calling the “good jobs strategy” a game-changer among business leadership in the US.¹⁸

A question to ask to your employees or coworkers: do you have a job or a craft? A job, says Hugh Heelo, is merely a “miscellaneous piece of work undertaken on order at a stated rate.”¹⁹ However, mechanic and author Michael Crawford defines craftsmanship as “the desire to do something well, for its own sake.”²⁰ How can business leaders provide not just

jobs, but a craft, to their employees? Are there ways all jobs can provide the opportunity for men and women to experience mastery, autonomy and purpose, as Daniel Pink suggests?²⁰

“Work,” says playwright and theologian Dorothy Sayers, “should be the full expression of the worker’s faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental, and bodily satisfaction, and the medium in which he offers himself to God.”²¹ What will it look like to create more jobs like this?

Verse to post on your desk: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them...The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” – Genesis 1:27, 2:15



**Love Your
Supply Chains**

Love Your Supply Chains

Months ago, I had a moving conversation with Tim Dearborn, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and former vice president at World Vision International.²² He shared the story of visiting a church built on slave forts in Ghana. As he sat in the cathedral, he could almost hear the cries of 19th century slaves echoing below.

I asked him, “What do you think are the modern ‘churches built on slave forts’ today?” That is, what are the systemic injustices that Christians have knowingly—or unknowingly—supported in the modern world?

He replied with two simple words: “Supply chains.”

Rarely do we think about the labor conditions of those who sew our shirts or make components for our iPhones. But even more rarely do we think about the long-term profitability of underpaying laborers or oppressing those in faraway lands. Good business means thinking through where we source our materials, and the conditions for laborers of those we do business with.

William Haughey, 35, is leading the way in “loving your supply chain.” After having been an investment banker at Goldman Sachs for four years, he started Tegu, a toy company that makes simple, magnetic wooden blocks.²³ The name is derived from a part of their supply chain, located in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

Their mission is to responsibly harvest wood from Honduran cooperatives and to “pay our employees a living wage and prioritize long-term career growth and development rather than simple task-based jobs.” Their goal is to bring world-class employment standards to Central America.

Thinking this through as a consumer can be a stressful affair. Staring at clothes on a department store rack and wondering if sweatshop labor produced my new dress shirt can be paralyzing. Nonetheless, if we have the choice between two suppliers—and one has demonstrably better ratings on [glassdoor.com](https://www.glassdoor.com), or, on the other side, has an obviously bad reputation in the industry—let’s choose the former. Even supply chains are made up of people that God so loves (John 3:16).

Though we won’t solve all global issues, we can, and should, follow the advice of American priest Ken Untener when considering who we do business with:

“We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of
liberation in realizing this.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,
a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord’s
grace to enter and do the rest.
We may never see the end results, but that is the
difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not
messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.”²⁴

Verse to post on your desk: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Listen! The Lord is calling to the city—and to fear your name is wisdom...‘Am I still to forget your ill gotten treasures, you wicked house, and the short ephah, which is accursed? Shall I acquit someone with dishonest scales, with a bag of false weights?’” – Micah 6:8-11



**Love Your
Communities**

Love Your Communities

Karla Nugent has found that caring for the community gives her company an advantage.²⁵ As the Chief Business Development Officer of Weifield Group Electrical Contracting, Nugent has built an industry-leading electrical contracting firm in Denver. Her company has built edifices like the Net Zero, a LEED-Platinum research facility at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Golden, Colorado, and has been recognized by the *Denver Business Journal* for its community impact.²⁶

Weifield Group has four main philanthropic areas: Head of Household, Women & Children, Health/The Less Fortunate, and the U.S. Military.²⁷ Not only do they give out of corporate profits to local nonprofits serving people in these categories, but the 350 plus employees also volunteer at these organizations on the clock.

Seems expensive—and unprofitable—right? That’s what I thought, too. But dig down, and the culture at Weifield of contributing to the good of communities has significantly impacted their employee retention numbers. Keeping their best employees—who want to be at a company that cares about more than profit—has made Weifield one of Denver’s Top Places to Work.²⁸ Which means in hot economy starving for middle and high skilled labor, Weifield is coming out on top on the war for talent—and has been profitable every single year since their founding 15 years ago.

In fact, Harvard Business School research found that companies with more corporate social responsibility practices and programs significantly outperform their competitors, both in terms of their balance sheet and stock price.²⁹

As it turns out, loving your community is also loving yourself.

Verse to post on your desk: “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” – Galatians 6:9-10



**Love Your
Environment**

Love Your Environment

After an illustrious career in executive leadership at public companies like Nextel and Vonage, Barry Rowan took a “purposeful pause”—a four-year Sabbath to grow closer to Christ. At the end of his time, he decided that instead of working in a nonprofit or retiring, he could do the most amount of good by going back into business. And so he joined a clean energy start-up called Cool Planet Energy Systems.³⁰

Cool Planet has innovated a carbon-negative process for turning wood chips into renewable fuels while simultaneously producing a byproduct that improves soil health for agriculture and livestock. In summary: their company produces gasoline and natural fertilizer that make the air cleaner and the soil healthier.

“In the last 50 years we have really degraded the soil,” Rowan says. “To feed the world’s population we’ll have to increase food production by 50% over the next couple of decades because of growing population and raising economic status.” Today, there’s a lot of emphasis on precision farming to raise agricultural yields. But the next wave of innovation, Rowan believes, is soil health.

Rowan also believes it’s his responsibility as a Christian to care for the earth. *“I think we have a God-given responsibility to be stewards of this great gift of a planet. To be able to help the planet in this way by feeding the population with less water and less fertilizer is a great privilege.”*

There’s been a lot of emphasis lately on companies that are environmentally friendly. Yet too often, conversations around the environment assume that business is inherently going to make the earth worse off. That’s not true for many companies. Take, for example Domtar, “the sustainable pulp, paper, and personal care company.” Their mills are certified by three separate sustainable forestry organizations. Domtar doesn’t have a perfect record, yet they’re striving to show that profitability and environmentally sustainable practices can live together in harmony. Moreover, [these 10 environmentally-friendly companies](#) show that profitable business can coexist with a thriving ecosystem.

Christians are often in this space with a different motivation than many in the environmental movement, which sometimes see people as the problem and not the solution. Nonetheless, we can and should work with like-minded partners in this space, motivated by the call to be stewards of God’s world. Loving the environment is a priority for business because all of creation is the possession of God, the Creator and Sustainer of the world.

Verse to post on your desk: “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it; the world, and all who live in it.” – Psalm 24:1



**Love Your
Society**

Love Your Society

It may be tough to say that a single business has changed all of society. But history shows that business done with a vibrant moral core—especially from a Christian worldview—can be a transformative blessing to society as a whole. Let me give an example from history.

In Niall Ferguson’s book *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, he asks what caused the West’s ascendancy in the last 500 years.³¹ In the year 1500, Western Europe was a largely impoverished shrinking band of feudal states, whereas the Chinese empire under the Ming dynasty was a wealthy and flourishing society. Why, then, do Western institutions—from capitalism to democracy—dominate the world today?

Ferguson argues that West had six “killer apps,” six institutions that caused its rise over the past 500 years: competition, science, property rights and the rule of law, medicine, the consumerist society, and work ethic. German professor Max Weber, who wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, believed it was Protestants who worked hard in order to prove their election that spurred on capitalism.³² Though Ferguson (and others like Rodney Stark) believe his thesis unfairly overlooks foundations of capitalism in 12th century catholic Italy, there is a strong connection between Protestants and the growth of global wealth.³³

Protestants, especially of the Puritan variety, created communities of honesty, openness to strangers, and trust—all economically beneficial traits. (University of San Francisco economist Bruce Wydick has shown that social trust is indeed *the* factor that leads to broad economic prosperity.)³⁴ High levels of trust were also a major factor in the development of global credit markets, which would provide unprecedented levels of capital for business ventures through banks and the stock market.

Ferguson also remarks that it was the Protestant *word* ethic as much as their work ethic that lead to vast global economist growth. Protestants in the West and America had a high value on saving, thrift, and *reading*, being focused on the proliferation of the *word* of God. Even in places like Africa, there’s a stark difference between where Protestant missionaries set up camp. Robert Woodberry, during his PhD studies at the University of North Carolina, found:

“Areas where Protestant missionaries had a significant presence in the past are on average more economically developed today, with comparatively better health, lower infant mortality, lower corruption, greater literacy, higher

educational attainment (especially for women), and more robust membership in nongovernmental associations.”³⁵

The point: historically, Christian influence on business and thus the development of our economy and political institutions, has been a permanent blessing to global society. And of all people, we largely have the Puritans to thank!³⁶

Business done well can have a transformative impact on society. In the words of University of Virginia professor James Davison Hunter, “In short, fidelity to the highest practices of vocation before God is consecrated and in itself transformational in its effects.”³⁷

Obey God in your work life, and you bless not just your neighbor, but all of society.

Verse to post on your desk: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” – Deuteronomy 6:4-7

Stewards of Civilization, Servants of our Neighbors

Max Stackhouse, former professor of reformed theology at Princeton Seminary, said in his book *On Moral Business*, “Business leaders are increasingly the stewards of civilization.”

If that’s true, the first step toward such a vast responsibility is to obey Jesus’ simple command to love our neighbors in our work lives. It begins by looking at Christ, the Servant King, who said, “Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom to many” (Mark 10:45). And it leads to a humility that sees Christ in each employee, investor, or customer, because Christ is present in the everyday needs of others (Matthew 25: 31-46).

Discussion Questions:

1. What day-to-day challenges do you see in your own work to “loving” your customers, employees, supply chains, communities, environment or society? Give a specific example.
2. What might you do to solve the challenge in question #1? Write out one potential solution and how you could implement that idea in your workplace.
3. What spiritual disciplines or practices might allow you to better serve others connected to your business or workplace?

“Which of these three men,” Jesus asks, pointing to the Levite, the priest, and the Samaritan, “was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers (those who plunder, steal, and engage in otherwise seedy business practices)?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

And Jesus told him, and all of us, “Go and do likewise.”

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Endnotes

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