Part 2 of 2: 12 Principles of Economic Wisdom
with
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Dr. Darrell Bock: Well, that takes us kind of through three of the concerns. Let me quickly – I'm going to wrap these together because I want to be sure we get to the 12 elements of economic wisdom, and our time is rapidly running away from us.

There are four themes that the Economic Wisdom Project pursues, and those are: stewardship in flourishing – we are given stewardship over the world so our work can make it flourish for God's glory; what's called "value creation" – through economic exchange, we work together and create value for one another; productivity and opportunity – economic systems should be grounded in human dignity and moral character; and responsible action – economic systems should practice and encourage a hopeful realism.

And behind all this, I think, these four themes, what kind of pulls them together is this kind of commitment to serving your neighbor and loving your neighbor that draws all these together. So I take it these are themes, or maybe even values in some ways, that drive the movement.

Dr. Greg Forster: Yes. I do think that love of neighbor is central to all of these themes and does provide a tie that holds them all together. To a large extent, it grows out of a couple of talks that Dallas Willard gave to us two years ago, shortly before he went to be with the Lord. It grows out of the vision of our benefactors at the Kern Family Foundation. It grows out of a number of other sources.

But I do think that, essentially, the – I don't want to overstate this, but I think the American evangelical church has focused a lot on faith but has not put hope and love as much at the center of Christian life in the last century. And that's a result of a lot of historical factors, or the confrontation with the mainline where the definition of faith is called into question, central historic doctrines of the Christian faith are being attacked, and so forth and so on. The increasing secularization of public spaces makes it important for us to keep our identity grounded in our faith.
I think all that is legitimate, but I think, to some extent, the Christian virtues of hope and love are not as widely intentionally put at the center of Christian life as they could be. And it may well be the job of the 21st century to grow – not to leave faith behind by any means, but to grow hope and love out of that faith in a new way. And I hope that this contributes to that to some extent.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** Yeah. Look, I'm going to translate what you just said because I think that, when people think about faith, really what you're talking about, in some degree, is the theological reflection and the theological way of engagement of the faith and how we think about that, and the challenges that modern life has put on faith has ended up creating a focus on those kinds of questions.

But you're saying in order to have a holistic and well-rounded approach to the Christian walk and the Christian faith, the role of love and the role of hope and the role of service and the role of knowing where you're trying to take people in kind of turning around life in a fallen world is a very, very important part of the package.

**Dr. Greg Forster** Absolutely. I think another thing that you see in those four themes is the work that we're doing trying to reintegrate theological concerns with economic concerns.

So you look at – the starting point is stewardship and flourishing. We need to understand that what we are to value, what we are to pursue is to be good stewards for God and to help our neighbors and our world flourish. That's the starting point.

And the ending point is: "Okay, let's roll up our sleeves and get busy because we're responsible," but let's not just do things for the sake of doing them. Let's not sort of let – do good works so that we can look in the mirror and say we did something, but let's actually be responsible for outcomes and how well we are effective in helping our neighbors.
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And then the middle part – sort of value creation, productivity, and opportunity – reflects a sense of what does it mean when we say, "All right. Let's help the world flourish"? We want to create value. We want economic exchange to be value creating, and we want people to be productive to the extent that they can, and we want to give them opportunity to do that because that is necessary to respect their human dignity.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Yeah. I think that when we think about this, if we just contemplate it a little bit, what we're talking about is life represents a management of the creation. If you ask why God brought people into being, and we go back to Genesis 1 and 2, we've got a management of the creation that we've been given responsibility for from the very start, and we've got a management of the relationships of other people made in the image of God that we're supposed to respect.

And so that's what you're seeing here. And I think once you develop that kind of theological foundation for how Genesis 1 and 2 feeds into the definition of life and why God has created us, then a theology of faith and work makes immediate sense.

Dr. Greg Forster

I think that's right. And you mentioned the image of God recovering a more fully rounded understanding of what the image of God means and the significance of it is another theme that ties this together. And it's related to love because, of course, that's central to how we image the triune God where three persons are loving each other in perfect unity.

The love that human beings are called to have for one another is essential to the image of God. And recovering a sense that the image of God consists not only in reflecting God's attributes – although it does involve that – but, also, in what you just called "managing the creation order," a sense of dynamism in the creation order, that God gave creation to human beings as a project to be developed and cultivated, rather than simply as a static reality, which is a Greco-Roman philosophical view of creation that is, I think, not reflected in the biblical view.

And this goes all the way back to the debates in the early church where Irenaeus was championing this dynamic view of creation. But, unfortunately, that view didn't win out for a while, and it was not until the Reformation that this dynamic view of creation comes back to the fore.
I think we're still figuring out the deep implications of creation being a dynamic project that was given to us for cultivation and development rather than a static reality that was meant to simply remain motionless and unchanging.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**

We could park here, but I'm going to move on. We've got a challenge because I'm going to try and take us through the 12 elements of economic wisdom in the remaining half – a little less than half hour that we have, so that means we've got about two and one-half or three minutes for each one of these. So with that, I'm throwing the challenge out ahead of time so you kind of know what we're up against. Let's go through these one at a time.

One: "We have a stewardship responsibility to flourish in our own lives, to help our neighbors flourish as fellow stewards, and to pass on a flourishing economy to future generations." I guess if you boil down No. 1 to one word, it's the word "flourish."

**Dr. Greg Forster**

I think it is. It's restoring a teleological, a purpose-oriented approach to human activity, that human activity is not just arbitrarily there. It's made with direction; it's made for purpose.

Another aspect of what's going on in that first element is we are naming the different levels of experience. There's an individual level that every individual needs to do, whatever, to seek flourishing as a steward in his or her own life.

There's a relational level where we are to help our neighbors flourish as fellow stewards, and that "as fellow stewards" is important to the way we relate to people as we help them to flourish. We don't reduce other people to objects of our pity and help, but we maintain the humanity of our fellow human beings as we help them flourish.

And then there's the social level. We want to help our whole world flourish and our societies flourish.

And, finally, the intergenerational level: that we need to restore a sense that it matters how our grandchildren are going to live.
Dr. Darrell Bock: So we're talking about a combination here of service. And if I can put in another word here, we're asking, "How can I benefit my neighbor?" I mean when we're talking about flourishing, we're actually looking at something that edifies, that builds up, that benefits one's neighbor.

Dr. Greg Forster: Absolutely.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Okay, No. 2 – we did all right on that one: "Economics flourish when people have integrity and trust each other."

Dr. Greg Forster: That is absolutely essential. I can't overstate the importance of trust. What makes economies run is when strangers trust each other, the expectation that a person you just met will not attempt to deceive, swindle, or defraud you in an exchange.

If you go to parts of the world that are economically underdeveloped, and just go into the market as a stranger who looks different and speaks a different language, you will, I think – I've heard this experience reported so many times by so many people. There is a distrust, an expectation that strangers are not to be trusted in economic exchange.

And the critical turning point in economic history is when a sufficient level of trust is established, and respect for the dignity of individuals outside the social elite is established, that people can engage in large-scale economic exchange with one another without having to constantly look over their shoulder every moment, because when people don't trust their neighbors, they withdraw into socially homogeneous groups and do all their exchanging in those socially homogeneous groups.

Breaking down those barriers between classes, between races, between religions has been the major factor in the success of modern economies.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Okay, three: "In general, people flourish when they take responsibility for their own economic success by doing work that serves others and makes the world better." I think the key here is, if I can give another term to kind of throw into this, is to kind of work against creating a dependency that in the end is destructive.
Dr. Greg Forster: Yes. That's absolutely right. Here is where we're beginning to define what we mean by flourishing. So what does it mean? Well, central to flourishing is creative work and producing more than you consume. And I think that there's an anti-materialism that's going to come out in the next element. I'm giving you a perfect segue to move to the next element. There's an anti-materialism here that people need right relationships with their neighbors more than they need material resources.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Okay, four: "Real economic success is about how much value you create, not how much money you make."

Dr. Greg Forster: This is why that dependency is so dangerous. To live into the image of God and to love our neighbors, we need to be creating value for other people rather than extracting value from others as our primary goal, that people are not actually made better off primarily by money.

Now I'm not saying money's not important. It's very important. We don't want to be Gnostics and become contemptuous of material realities. That's not the idea. But we need to prioritize relationships over material goods and services and conditions and resources. And, in fact, once you prioritize relationships, that will have important consequences for the way you use money and resources, and –

Dr. Darrell Bock: And so – go ahead. I'm sorry.

Dr. Greg Forster: I was just gonna say we have to define flourishing as being in right relationship with other people, which in the case of work means providing value for others, rather than defining flourishing as accumulating resources.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Yeah, or even just making sure that everyone kind of lives at a subsistence level.

Dr. Greg Forster: Yeah. I think that's important that people – if there are people who lack daily food and shelter, we need to be doing something about that, and yet to define that as the end goal of how we help others, I think, then puts material stuff rather than relationships in the center of the picture.
And so the transition is to move people to a place where they hopefully can begin to contribute to the ongoing exchange as opposed to being people who are left so marginalized that they are constantly only drawing from that system.

Yes. Like Bob Lupton says, "Everyone has something to contribute," and whatever they have to contribute, we want them to be contributing it because we value them as human beings.

Okay, fifth: "A productive economy comes from the value-creating work of a free and virtuous people."

Right. Here's where we're kind of stepping from the personal level to the social level, that this lesson that we want people to be value creators applies not only at the individual level, but we want to create a social expectation of it. And when we ask how can our society have economic success, we want to not look to kind of gimmicks and short-term thinking and say, "Well, if we just pull this lever and push this button, everybody's going to be better off."

T.S. Eliot has that wonderful line about how we're dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good. There is no hope for economic success until we rediscover virtue, until we rediscover moral goodness. That is the only root and foundation of a lasting prosperity.

And then it mentions free and virtuous people, because human beings are made to be stewards. Human beings are made to have moral responsibility for their own lives, which means they need a degree of control over their own lives in order to exercise the virtue and cultivate the virtue that we want them to have.

When you pull morality out of this conversation, then I think what you risk launching yourself into is a kind of world in which – and I think we sometimes see this – where tribalism reigns, where it's basically the use, and often the abuse, of power that reigns because everyone starts to apply their energies for their own self-interests.
Dr. Greg Forster: Right. When there is no publicly recognized, transcendent standard of good, then political and economic activity simply becomes "How can I get as much as possible for me or for my group?" – depending. And the only way to have political and economic activity that is not simply a competition for power is to have a publicly recognized standard of good that transcends our material interests. And that's what we're talking about when we talk about value creation.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Yeah, transcends our material interests and also transcends our tendency to be personally selfish and self-directed.

Dr. Greg Forster: Yes.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Well, sixth – I feel like I'm running through a list, which is actually what I'm doing. Sixth: "Economies generally flourish when policies and practices reward value creation." You're talking about the formation of a moral environment here.

Dr. Greg Forster: Yes. We're taking a step now from – from having taken it to the social level, we're now saying this needs to guide practice. This can't simply be something that we affirm in public speeches and holidays and that kind of thing, but this actually needs to be put into practice.

Now we don’t get very specific about that here, and we don't get very specific about that in the Oikonomia Network because it's not the role of pastors to kind of examine many of these policies in detail. And yet it's important to make the statement that this is not just gaseous rhetoric and that you can't accomplish the kind of vision we're laying down simply by talking about it, that policies and practices have got to align rewards to behavior, that there's nothing wrong, there's nothing cynical with saying that, if you practice the right behavior we want that to be successful, and if you don't – if you practice the wrong behavior, we don't want that to be successful.

It's an acknowledgment of the fact that human beings are not disembodied spirits. We're not the sort of platonic minds in jars. Human beings are creatures. Human beings have a biological and a physical and a relational reality where, if vice is rewarded, you will get more vice. And that's something we've got to take seriously.

Dr. Darrell Bock: I think we see that in some of what goes on today.
Seventh: "Household, businesses, communities, and nations should support themselves by producing more than they consume."

Dr. Greg Forster: Yes. And you notice the list of levels of experience again. We want this from the household level to the corporate level to the local level and national level. At all levels of social experience, what we want is, as much as possible, people and organizations contributing more than they consume, producing more value than they consume so that they are net benefactors to those around them rather than net consumers to those around them.

Now households is important because not all individuals are able to produce more than they consume, and the first line of defense there is the household. And, boy, do you see this in the Old Testament law. The household is so economically important. The whole economy in the Old Testament is designed to operate around the household. The household is where the primary place for care of those who can't care for themselves takes place.

Now that's not the only place. If the household fails, then there are other structures that do need to come in. But if the household is displaced from its central role in productivity, sort of in creating those units that produce more than they consume, it becomes unsustainable over the long term.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Eighth: "A productive economy lifts people out of poverty and generally helps people flourish."

Dr. Greg Forster: Here is where I think we're coming into contact with some approaches that have really begun to take a negative view towards economic growth. I think that needs to be rethought.

The idea has been that, because economic growth does create some unique challenges culturally and for the church, that economic growth is therefore the problem and we want to go back to a sort of old-fashioned, agricultural economy that doesn't grow. I think it's really impossible to take that view and still have a sustainable idea of human flourishing.

Again, we're back to the dynamic creation, that creation is a dynamic order that's intended to grow, and that means economies are intended to grow. That's God's intention for them.
It doesn't mean growth should be made into an idol, and it doesn't mean that growth doesn't present some very serious challenges that are not present in a preindustrial order. And, yet, if we're really going to say love your neighbor but hope that your neighbor loses his job, I think we've taken a wrong turn.

And the other thing that a static economy of course does is that it ignores the fact that the world itself is growing, that the population of the world grows. So if you have a static economy with a growing population, you have shrinking resources, fewer resources for people to have access to.

Right. And I think part of the perspective that we're offering here is that human beings are an asset. We don't want to reduce them to that. But we need to overcome the idea that human beings are a liability. Human beings are productive. They have something to contribute. That's part of being made in the image of God; that's part of their dignity. Human beings are a net positive. We're for that. We like human beings. We want more of them.

I'm just very concerned about sort of negative attitudes about growth, and particularly how it helps the poor, that, in general, the economic well-being of the impoverished within a society gets better when that society is economically growing and gets worse when the society as a whole gets worse. It's rare to see economy as a whole growing but the poor getting worse off. It's just not where we see the data going.

Ninth: "The most effective way to turn around poverty, economic distress, and injustice is in expanding opportunity for people to develop and deploy their God-given productive potential in communities of exchange, especially through entrepreneurship." So this is actually an extension of what we were just talking about.

It very much is. But say that ten times, fast.

Exactly right. I did that about as quickly as I could.

I'll admit that that one includes a lot of verbiage that's intended to reassure people that we don't mean anything kind of radical and revolutionary here that's going to sort of just tear the order to shreds and throw people into snow banks and whatever.
What we're saying here is, ultimately, a sustainable and effective approach to poverty is formation of entrepreneurial enterprises. If you put it that way, it doesn't generate a lot of resistance. People generally see that.

I'm very excited about initiatives where local churches are helping to organize for-profit businesses in impoverished communities.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** Yeah. That's crucial.

**Dr. Greg Forster** That is the long-term solution to poverty.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** Okay. Ten: "Programs aimed at economic problems need a fully rounded understanding of how people flourish."

**Dr. Greg Forster** Once again, this is sort of putting the cherries on top of the sundaes at this point. As we've been talking for some time, you can define flourishing as having money, or you can define flourishing as being in right relationship with other people.

Programs and practices are very often – and I'm talking about programs in the church, programs in nonprofits and parachurches, and programs in the public square – are often designed on the assumption that people flourish by having money, that giving people money will make them flourish.

Now money's important, and I'm not saying those programs are always wrong to exist, but flourishing is about being in right relationship with God and neighbor. If we think about these programs only as a way of moving money around, they're not going to be successful.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** And what you do with money is actually pretty important. The parable of the rich fool sits out there and says this guy basically kept it all to himself and for himself, wasn't benefitting anyone other than himself, and the commentary on that, when it was all done, is, "Yeah, he may be rich, but he's a fool."

**Dr. Greg Forster** No, that's right. Or, as Dallas Willard put it in those talks I referenced earlier, he said:
Fifty dollars in the pocket of a person with broken family relationships, and broken work relationships, and other broken relationships, is not going to do the same thing as $50.00 in the pocket of a person who has right household relationships, and right working relationships, and other right relationships with God and neighbor. That $50.00 is just going to behave differently, depending on which of those two pockets it's in.

I think that's very profound.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** Eleven: "Economic thinking must account for long-term effects and unintended consequences." Hard to do, but you have to think about this.

**Dr. Greg Forster** Absolutely. There's a classic book, by Henry Hazlitt, called Economics in One Lesson, and the one lesson is essentially that. Economic policies and programs need to think about long-term effects and unintended consequences.

And then all the rest of the book is applying that to policy after policy, showing how we have gone wrong again and again by thinking about the short term but not the long term, and thinking about the intended consequences but not asking what might be the unintended consequences.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** So you can meet a need, but if you meet a need poorly, you still have a need on the other end of meeting the initial need, and you create more need.

**Dr. Greg Forster** Yep. If you want to read another book about that, When Helping Hurts is the book to read about that.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** And then the last one on the list, No. 12: "In general, economies flourish when goodwill is universal and global, but control is local, and personal knowledge guides decisions."

**Dr. Greg Forster** Right. And this is very difficult. As Christians, we know it's important that our neighbor does not just include the people we happen to know, that our neighbors can include strangers and people who are culturally other. At the same time, modern technology and globalization has given us the capacity to reach around the world and have a tremendous impact on people who we are not in relationship with.
It's just not always helpful for us to fly around the world and dump crates full of money on people from helicopters and then wave and sort of say, "Now we've helped you," and leave. To be in relationship with people is important to sustainability of all efforts. Modern technology does allow us to reach people who are our fellow human beings, but they're not our neighbors until we're in relationship with them in some respect.

In the last generation particularly, we've been very eager to mobilize the ability of technology to get us around the world and to move money and resources around the world, but, actually, it is the development of local relationships and capacities that is going to produce long-term flourishing.

So we do want global goodwill. We just don't want to remove the locality of relationship from that equation.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**

Well, we've come to the end of the list, and I want to close by reading kind of the last paragraph of this document, which I think does a nice job of summarizing kinda the direction that you seek to achieve with all of it. It says:

The economic sphere of human life derives its nature from the Trinity, from the eternal love that God is. The free and voluntary coordination of diverse activities for mutual benefit that God intends for human economies is an image of the loving way in which the Father, Son, and Spirit freely and voluntarily work the divine will in unison. When Christianity helped our civilization see this aspect of God's image more clearly, it laid the groundwork for the modern economy.

If Christians recover a theology of work and economics, they can once again offer this clarity to our civilization through fruitful work and economic wisdom. Only this can restore both whole life discipleship in the church –that's an interesting phrase – and the deepest foundation of flourishing in civilization. What a thrilling time in history God has called us to live in.

Nicely said.
**Dr. Greg Forster**  
Well, thank you. I don't disagree with anything you just read. I do think that a return to the Trinity is an essential part of this – coming back to what we were talking about before: love for neighbor – and to understand the anthropology of the human being, that we are individual creatures and social creatures. We see, I think, a conflict going on between those who are so eager to affirm the dignity of the individual that they neglect the social nature of humanity; and those who are so eager to affirm the social nature of humanity, that importance of every individual and freedom and virtue of every individual is often obscured.

I think there is potential common ground if we can affirm both the individual and the social nature of human beings, individuals in community and communities constituted by individuals. And I think this is what Christianity has often done in human history: show cultures how they can affirm seemingly contradictory things at the same time. That's often the secret of the church's success.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  
You know, another thing that strikes me here is that we're really dealing here with helping people locate their identity, where they fit in the world, where they fit in the creation, where they fit in God's design. And when you use God's character and the Trinity as the backdrop for thinking about how we relate to one another, how we contribute to one another, how we edify one another, serve one another, help one another flourish, we're again back to Genesis 1 and 2, that God has given us a creation to manage that is a reflection of His own management of the world. And in that we locate ourselves, and we gain insight into the vocation that God has given each one of us.

**Dr. Greg Forster**  
Yes, and not only Genesis 1 and 2, but Revelation 21 and 22 as well, where the nations of the world bring their glory into the new Jerusalem and come in and out of it at all times. The gates are never shut. It's both backward looking and forward looking.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  
That's great. Well, Greg, I appreciate you taking the time to walk us through this document. We've had several sessions now. This completes the project, in some ways, of having this kind of digitized commentary on a theology that works.
We hope that this has been beneficial to our listeners. We hope it's been beneficial to have this. For the Kern Foundation, we thank you for taking the time to spend time with us to walk us through this document.

Dr. Greg Forster  
Thank you. I've appreciated it.

Dr. Darrell Bock  
And we thank you for being a part of The Table, and we look forward to seeing you again.