

How Business Glorifies God

by Wayne Grudem

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Article Summary: In this article, a world-renown theologian turns his attention to business, identifying several business activities that glorify God. In particular, he makes the case that God-honoring business activities include producing goods, employing people, buying and selling, earning a profit, and borrowing and lending.

When Christians hear the expression “glorifying God,” we probably first think of *worship* – singing praise to God and giving thanks to him. Second, we think of *evangelism* – glorifying God by telling others about him, so that more people are brought into the kingdom of God. Third, we think of *giving* – glorifying God by contributing money to evangelism, to building up the church, and to the needs of the poor. Fourth, we might think of *faith* – glorifying God by depending on him in prayer and in our daily attitudes of heart.

These four – worship, evangelism, giving, and faith – are excellent ways to glorify God and working in a business provides many opportunities for glorifying God in these ways. But they are not my focus here because I think most Christians in business already understand how business can contribute to these ways of glorifying God. What many do not understand, I think, is that there is a fifth way to glorify God, one that we often overlook, but one that has profound implications for any believer in business. This fifth way to glorify God is *imitation* – imitation of the attributes of God – and it is critical to understand how business *in itself* glorifies God.

Imitating God Glorifies God

God created us so that we would imitate him and so that he could look at us and see something of his wonderful attributes reflected in us. The first chapter of the Bible tells us, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). To be in God’s image means to be *like* God and to *represent* God on the earth. This means that God created us to be more like him than anything else he made. He delights to look at us and see in us a reflection of his excellence. After God had created Adam and Eve, “God *saw* everything he had made, and behold, it was *very good*” (Gen. 1:31). He looked at his creation and took delight in it – yes, in all of it, but especially in human beings made in his image.

This is why Paul commands us, in Ephesians 5, “*Be imitators of God*, as beloved children” (Eph.

5:1). If you are a parent, you know that there is a special joy that comes when you see your children imitating some of your good qualities and following some of the moral standards that you have tried to model. When we feel that joy as parents, it is just a faint echo of what God feels when he sees us, as his children, imitating *his* excellent qualities. “Be imitators of God, as beloved children.”

This idea of imitating God explains many of the commands in the Bible. For instance, “We love *because he first loved us*” (1 John 4:19). We imitate God’s love when we act in love. Or, “You shall be holy, *for I am holy*” (1 Peter 1:16, quoting Lev. 11:44). Similarly, Jesus taught, “Be merciful, *even as your Father is merciful*” (Luke 6:36). And he also said, “You therefore must be perfect, *as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Matt. 5:48). God wants us to be like himself.

But sin does not glorify God. It is absolutely important to realize that we should never attempt to glorify God by acting in ways that disobey his Word. For example, if I were to speak the truth about my neighbor out of a malicious desire to harm him, I would not be glorifying God by imitating his truthfulness, because God’s truthfulness is always consistent with all his other attributes, including his attribute of love. And when we read about a thief who robbed a bank through an intricate and skillful plan, we should not praise God for this thief’s imitation of divine wisdom and skill, for God’s wisdom is always manifested in ways that are consistent with his moral character, which cannot do evil, and consistent with his attributes of love and truthfulness. And thus we must be careful never to try to imitate God’s character in ways that contradict his moral law in the Bible.

Business Activities That Imitate God

With this background we can now turn to consider specific aspects of business activity, and ask how they provide unique opportunities for glorifying God through imitation. We will find that in every aspect of business there are multiple layers of opportunities to give glory to God, as well as multiple temptations to sin.

Producing Goods

We know that producing goods from the earth is fundamentally good in itself because it is part of the purpose for which God put us on the earth. Before there was sin in the world, God put Adam in the garden of Eden “to work it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15), and God told both Adam and Eve, before there was sin, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and *subdue it* and *have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28). The word translated “subdue” (Hebrew: *kabash*) implies that Adam and Eve should make the resources of the earth useful for their own benefit, and this implies that God intended them to develop the earth so they could come to own agricultural products and animals, then housing and works of craftsmanship and beauty, and eventually buildings, means of transportation, cities, and inventions of all sorts.

Manufactured products give us opportunity to praise God for anything we look at in the world around us. Imagine what would happen if we were able somehow to transport Adam and Eve, before they had sinned, into a 21st century American home. After we gave them appropriate clothing, we would turn on the faucet to offer them a glass of water, and they would ask,

“What’s that?” When we explained that the pipes enabled us to have water whenever we wanted it, they would exclaim, “Do you mean to say that God has put in the earth materials that would enable you to make that water system?”

“Yes,” we would reply.

“Then *praise God* for giving us such a great earth! And praise him for giving us the knowledge and skill to be able to make that water system!” They would have hearts sensitive to God’s desire that he be honored in all things.

The refrigerator would elicit even more praise to God from their lips. And so would the electric lights and the newspaper and the oven and the telephone, and so forth. Their hearts would brim over with thankfulness to the Creator who had hidden such wonderful materials in the earth and had also given to human beings such skill in working with them. And as Adam and Eve’s hearts were filled with overflowing thanksgiving to God, God would see it and be pleased. He would look with delight as the man and woman made in his image gave glory to their Creator and fulfilled the purpose for which they were made.

Therefore, in contrast to some economic theories, *productive work* is not evil or undesirable in itself, or something to be avoided, nor does the Bible ever view positively the idea of retiring early and not working at anything again. Rather, work in itself is also something that is *fundamentally good* and God-given, for it was something that God commanded Adam and Eve to do before there was sin in the world. Although work since the fall has aspects of pain and futility (Gen. 3:17-19), it is still not morally neutral but fundamentally good and pleasing to God.

But significant temptations accompany all productions of goods and services. There is the temptation for our hearts to be turned from God so that we focus on material things for their own sake. There are also temptations to pride, and to turning our hearts away from love for our neighbor and turning toward selfishness, greed and hard-heartedness. There are temptations to produce goods that bring monetary reward but that are harmful and destructive and evil (such as pornography and illicit drugs).

But the distortions of something good must not cause us to think that the thing itself is evil. Increasing the production of goods and services is not morally neutral but is *fundamentally good* and pleasing to God.

Employing People

In contrast to Marxist theory, the Bible does not view it as evil for one person to hire another person and to gain profit from that person’s work. It is not necessarily “exploiting” the employee. Rather, Jesus said, “the laborer deserves his wages” (Luke 10:7), implicitly approving the idea of paying wages to employees. In fact, Jesus’ parables often speak of servants and masters, and of people paying others for their work, with no hint that hiring people to work for wages is evil or wrong.

This is a wonderful ability that God has given us. Paying another person for his or her labor is an activity that is uniquely human. It is shared by no other creature. The ability to work for other

people for pay, or to pay other people for their work, is another way that God has created us so that we would be able to glorify him more fully in such relationships.

When the employment arrangement is working properly, both parties benefit. This allows love for the other person to manifest itself, because if I am sewing shirts in someone else's shop, I can honestly seek the good of my employer and seek to sew as many shirts as possible for him (compare 1 Tim. 6:2), and he can seek my good, because he will pay me at the end of the day for a job well done. As in every good business transaction, both parties end up better off than they were before. In this case, I have more money at the end of the day than I did before and my employer has more shirts ready to take to market than he did before. And so we have worked together to produce something that did not exist in the world before that day—the world is fifty shirts wealthier than it was when the day began. I have created some wealth in the world and so there is also a slight imitation of God's attribute of creativity. So if you hire me to work in your business, you are doing good for me and you are providing many opportunities to glorify God.

However, employer/employee relationships carry many temptations to sin. An employer can exercise his authority with harshness and oppression and unfairness. He might withhold pay arbitrarily and unreasonably (contrary to Lev. 19:13 and Jas. 5:4) or might underpay his workers, keeping wages so low that workers have no opportunity to improve their standard of living (contrary to Deut. 24:1). Employees also have temptations to sin through carelessness in work (see Prov. 18:9), laziness, jealousy, bitterness, rebelliousness, dishonesty, or theft (see Titus 2:9-10).

But the distortions of something good must not cause us to think that the thing itself is evil. Employer/employee relationships, in themselves, are not morally neutral, but are fundamentally good and pleasing to God because they provide many opportunities to imitate God's character and so glorify him.

Buying and Selling

Several passages of Scripture assume that buying and selling are morally right. Regarding the sale of land in ancient Israel, God's law said, "If you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another" (Lev. 25:14). This implies that it is *possible* and in fact is *expected* that people should buy and sell *without* wronging one another—that is, that both buyer and seller can *do right* in the transaction (see also Gen. 1:57; Lev. 19:35-36; Deut. 25:13-16; Prov. 11:26; 31:16; Jer. 32:25, 42-44).

In fact, buying and selling are necessary for anything beyond subsistence level living and these activities are another part of what distinguishes us from the animal kingdom. No individual or family providing for all its own needs could produce more than a very low standard of living (that is, if it could buy and sell *absolutely nothing* and had to live off only what it could produce itself, which would be a fairly simple range of foods and clothing). But when we can sell what we make and buy from others who specialize in producing milk or bread, orange juice or blueberries, bicycles or televisions, cars or computers, then, through the mechanism of buying and selling, we can all obtain a much higher standard of living, and thereby we fulfill God's purpose that we enjoy the resources of the earth with thanksgiving (1 Tim. 4:3-5; 6:17) while we "eat" and "drink" and "do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

Therefore we should not look at commercial transactions as a necessary evil or something just morally neutral. Rather, commercial transactions are in themselves good because through them we do good to other people. We can honestly see buying and selling as a means of loving our neighbor as our self.

Moreover, because of the interpersonal nature of commercial transactions, business activity has significant stabilizing influence on a society. An individual farmer may not really like the auto mechanic in town very much, and the auto mechanic may not like the farmer very much, but the farmer *does* want his car fixed right the next time it breaks down, and the auto mechanic *does* love the sweet corn and tomatoes that the farmer sells, so it is to their mutual advantage to get along with each other and their animosity is restrained. In fact, they may even seek the good of the other person for this reason! So it is with commercial transactions throughout the world and even between nations. This is an evidence of God's common grace, and so in this way God has provided among the human race a wonderful encouragement to love our neighbor because we seek not only our own welfare but the welfare of others. In buying and selling we also manifest interdependence and thus reflect the interdependence and interpersonal love among the members of the Trinity. Therefore, for those who have eyes to see it, commercial transactions provide another means of manifesting the glory of God in our lives.

However, commercial transactions provide many temptations to sin. Rather than seeking the good of our neighbors as well as our selves, our hearts can be filled with greed, so we seek only our own good and give no thought for the good of others. Our hearts can be overcome with selfishness, an inordinate desire for wealth, and setting our hearts only on material gain.

Because of sin, we can also engage in dishonesty and in selling shoddy materials whose defects are covered with glossy paint. Where there is excessive concentration of power or a huge imbalance in knowledge, there will often be oppression of those who lack power or knowledge (as in government sponsored monopolies where consumers are only allowed access to poor quality, high-priced goods from one manufacturer for each product).

But the distortions of something good must not cause us to think that the thing itself is evil. Commercial transactions in themselves are fundamentally right and pleasing to God. They are a wonderful gift from him through which he has enabled us to have many opportunities to glorify him.

Earning a Profit

What is earning a profit? Fundamentally, it is using our resources to produce more resources. In the parable of the minas (or pounds), Jesus tells of a nobleman calling ten of his servants and giving them one mina each (about three months' wages), and telling them, "Engage in business until I come" (Luke 19:13). The servant who earned 1000% profit was rewarded greatly, for when he says, "Lord, your mina has made ten minas more," the nobleman responds, "Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities" (Luke 19:16-17). The servant who made five more minas receives authority over five cities, and the one who made no profit is rebuked for not at least putting the mina in the bank to earn interest (vs. 23).

The nobleman of course represents Jesus himself who went to a far country to receive a kingdom and then returned to reward his servants. The parable has obvious applications to stewardship of spiritual gifts and ministries that Jesus entrusts to us, but in order for the parable to make sense, it has to assume that good stewardship, in God's eyes, includes expanding and multiplying whatever resources or stewardship God has entrusted to you. Surely we cannot exclude money and material possessions from the application of the parable, for they are part of what God entrusts to each of us and our money and possessions can and should be used to glorify God. Seeking profit, therefore, or seeking to multiply our resources, is seen as fundamentally good. Not to do so is condemned by the master when he returns.

The parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30) has a similar point, but the amounts are larger, for a talent was worth about twenty years' wages for a laborer, and different amounts are given at the outset.

Some people will object that earning a profit is "exploiting" other people. It might be, if there is a great disparity in power or knowledge between you and me and I cheat you or charge an exorbitant price when you have nowhere else to go and you need a pair of shoes. That is where earning a profit provides temptations to sin.

But the distortions of something good must not cause us to think that the thing itself is evil. If profit is made in a system of voluntary exchange not distorted by monopoly power, then when I earn a profit I also help you. You are better off because you have a pair of shoes that you wanted, and I am better off because I earned \$4 profit, and that keeps me in business and makes me want to make more shoes to sell. Everybody wins and nobody is exploited. Through this process, I glorify God by enlarging the possessions over which I am "sovereign" and over which I can exercise wise stewardship.

The ability to earn a profit is thus the ability to multiply our resources while helping other people. It is a wonderful ability that God gave us and it is not evil or morally neutral but fundamentally good. Through it we can reflect God's attributes of love for others, wisdom, sovereignty, planning for the future, and so forth.

Borrowing and Lending

It seems to me that borrowing and lending in themselves are not prohibited by God; rather many places in the Bible assume that these things will happen. Jesus even seems to approve lending money at interest, not to the poor who need it to live, but to the bankers who borrow the money from us so they can use it to make more money: "Why then did you not put my money in the bank, and at my coming I might have collected it with interest?" (Luke 19:23; also Matt. 25:27).

In fact, the process of borrowing and lending is another wonderful gift that God has given to us as human beings. These activities multiply the usefulness of all the wealth of a society. My local library may have only one copy of a reference book, but 300 people might use it in a year, thus giving my community as much value as 300 copies of that book if each person had to buy one. I only own one car, but because of the process of borrowing and lending, I can fly into any city in the United States and have the use of a rental car for a day, without having to own a car in that

city. Without the existence of borrowing and lending, I would have own thousands of cars in order to have the same ability.

And of course, when I borrow money to buy a house or start a business, I enjoy the usefulness of that money (just as I enjoy the usefulness of a rental car) for a period of time without actually having to own the money myself. I pay a fee for the use of that money (what is called interest), but that is far easier than obtaining all the money myself before I can gain the use of it. And so borrowing and lending multiplies the usefulness of money in a society as well.

In this way, borrowing and lending multiply phenomenally our God-given enjoyment of the material creation, and our potential for being thankful to God for all these things and glorifying him through our use of them.

However, there are temptations to sin that accompany borrowing. As many Americans are now discovering, there is a great temptation to borrow more than is wise, or to borrow for things they can't afford and don't need, and thus they become foolishly entangled in interest payments that reflect poor stewardship and wastefulness, and that entrap people in a downward spiral of more and more debt. In addition, lenders can be greedy or selfish, and can lend to people who have no reasonable expectation of repaying, and then take advantage of people in their poverty and distress.

But the distortions of something good must not cause us to think that the thing itself is evil. Borrowing and lending are wonderful, uniquely human abilities that are good in themselves and pleasing to God and bring many opportunities for glorifying him. In fact, I expect that even in heaven there will be borrowing and lending, not to overcome poverty but to multiply our abilities to glorify God. But I don't know what the interest rate will be.

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