

Think about the era of your great-grandparents. Wait a minute, go further back and think about every generation of humanity up until the last hundred years or so. Compare the choices our ancestors could make in life with the choices you can make in the present day. For example, Americans can go into their local superstore and find over 100,000 distinct inventory items to choose from. And shoppers can go online and find many millions of individual items, each with individual, distinctive features catering to the individual whims of every browsing consumer.

This is the age of what marketers call “differentiation.” That’s where people have astounding options to purchase from among a veritable blizzard of goods and services at a range of prices from inexpensive to middling to high.

You see, our opportunity as consumers in a free-market economy is almost magical. Sophisticated supply chains like those of Walmart or Amazon quickly and routinely deliver a mix of products to our neighborhoods, even our doorsteps, something that the kings and queens of yesteryear would find mind-boggling. That’s the simple yet profound truth of it.

So, what an amazing time we live in! Americans have astonishing choice among very high quality yet affordable goods and services. That’s because competition in a free market creates differentiation, as suppliers relentlessly work to provide an ever-newly-differentiated version to defeat competitors.

This activity is a huge benefit to the ordinary person. And that dynamic is exactly why the standard of living has increased for so many people worldwide over the past hundred years...and that has created what the astute economist Diedre McCloskey has labeled “betterment.”

What a great word for this phenomenon: the word “betterment.” Many—in fact, huge numbers of people—are elevated when producers and suppliers work to stay very differentiated. Hundreds and hundreds of millions of people have experienced this betterment...much to the chagrin of the socialist economists who choose to turn a blind eye to the vast betterment of the past several decades or so in the free world, even while the socialist governments in Cuba, North Korea, and Venezuela stand on the necks of their citizens.

And, this is an age when people can choose from many different specializations for their life’s work. Far from just inheriting the farming work or the bakery store that our parents did, the range of career options is simply amazing! ...But differentiation is not in any way limited to marketplace economics.

To be sure, the most important differentiation is embedded in the reality of the Cross. Jesus was and remains uniquely different than any other world figure in history. He was sinless and He was sacrificial, dying for the whole world, serving all of humanity who cannot improve themselves out of sin.

In contrast, the world’s religions have forwarded the idea of ultimate human self-improvement...all the way to supposedly being reincarnated based upon the results achieved in this life. But only One, Jesus, is truly differentiated in this landscape: He was sinless, sacrificing unto death for the whole world, and then being resurrected for hundreds of witnesses to affirm an astounding fact—that He is risen. One and only one person who has ever lived meets this level of differentiation—Jesus the Resurrected One!

But it’s even deeper than that, really...the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is the only true God. Humanity has tried for millennia to create gods to compete with the one true God, but the Judgment of God will reveal that His truth as laid down in His Word will be only version of God left standing for eternity.

So, we have before us one of the most amazing conundrums ever. First, we have amazing betterment *economically* because humanity has an amazing capacity to invent, innovate, and serve others better and better, every decade, every century. So, the standard of living has improved for billions of people,

especially the last few decades, as man's ingenuity for betterment has worked so well in free markets. So, we can and should be expectant and look ahead with optimism when free markets are sustained.

But the fascinating irony is what I call the "betterment paradox." That is, simultaneous to this significant economic betterment, humanity has not gotten better at overcoming sin. You see, humanity always has and continues to experience the recurring parade of child molesters, cheaters, liars, deceivers, adulterers, idol-worshippers, and abusers—in short, all varieties of sinners. So, every person, all throughout history, then *and* now, has the need for Jesus—again, because not one person can overcome sin apart from Jesus.

So, here's what's so unique: when you and I want legitimate betterment in our lives, we have to look both *backward* and *forward*. We must look backward to the only perfectly differentiated solution for sin—the one and only Jesus who went to the Cross! And if we want economic betterment in our lives, we seek out ever-fruitful free markets where so many are working diligently to be differentiated from others, all for our benefit as consumers and clients!

The Bible tells us that Christ's work on the Cross was a one-time sacrifice, paying for the full extent of humanity's sin, once and for all! *Only Jesus* can offer such a differentiated service. His *perfect differentiation* brought us incomparable eternal wealth with one single transaction! Free markets can't come close to this perfect differentiation, so instead of looking *backward* to one perfect economic solution, we look *forward*, to continued economic improvement through continuous, marginal, but imperfect steps of free-market-fostered betterment.

By the way, the God-denying socialism that is currently in vogue in politically fashionable sections of America neither looks backward to the totally-differentiated, sin-covering Jesus nor looks forward to the ingenuity of creative free markets. Instead, God-denying socialism looks to a structurally stagnant, government lordship that betters neither spiritual lives nor economic lives—all-too-predictably remaining mired in a dreary present and even more pessimistic future. There is no fruitful differentiation desired for the common people in socialism—it's been tried and found severely deficient whenever attempted.

A major seduction for many has always been and always will be that humanity either is itself God or will become like God—in other words, that progress in the soul of man will keep up with technology and economic advancement. Sadly, the past century alone clearly informs us that hundreds of millions were dramatically impacted by deviant, power-hungry "leaders"—widespread engineered famines, so-called "reeducation camps," wars that were supposedly the "last great war" that counted innumerable dead and maimed, and extreme social self-righteousness masquerading as moral reform and betterment.

But we Christians absolutely do have a whole different understanding. And where does that understanding leave us? Well, in a truly amazing position. We confidently secure our foundation in Christ and Him crucified—clearly differentiated from every religion in the faith of assured destiny provided by Jesus' supreme sacrifice. And then we work to differentiate ourselves by first discerning, and then developing, our unique gifting—that's your and my unique differentiation—in order to uniquely serve others in our families, our churches, our neighborhood, our communities, and our workplaces.

And, in so doing all that in our daily lives, what is the very essence of what we do? We point confidently backward to the finished work of the Cross and its enduring, eternal message. And we point optimistically forward, believing that when human differentiation is honored—and not denigrated by racism and favoritism and other "isms," where people can substantially advance as individuals worthy of personal achievement—well, then, we enjoy the fruits of God-intended differentiations in our lives.

That's differentiation—backward *and* forward! Christ's astounding differentiation for our personal benefit then frees us up to differentiate ourselves for His glory. The perfect balance, the perfect opportunity!

A&A: Application & Action

1. In your various organizational stewardships (e.g., workplace, home), how are you helping others in those spheres of influence to differentiate themselves? Provide details.
2. How does your church work to help believers differentiate themselves? Give examples.
3. Ponder Jesus Christ's amazing differentiation. List some aspects of His life and death that were differentiated above any other religious substitute. Have you marveled with others recently about this?