

There is no more stubborn gap in street-level opinions than when people start talking about the differences between businesses and nonprofit organizations. You see, many people have long-standing biases about these two types of organizations...and those biases can range from accurately astute to truly ludicrous.

Perhaps the most persistent viewpoint, at least one that's often expressed with very self-righteous moral certitude, is that businesses are generally about being greedy, while nonprofit organizations are about being noble. Please forgive me for saying it so bluntly, but that's a ridiculous generalization!

You see, we all know that some people indeed are quite greedy. But those greedy people can be and often are very active in *either* a business *or* a nonprofit. Also, other people are indeed quite noble. But those noble people can be and often are very active in *either* a business *or* a nonprofit.

But, you might say, isn't a very large business, a for-profit corporation that has a very large stock market value just plainly clear evidence of greed? Well, that might be true or that might not be true. But one thing is for sure: a very large stock market value for a business is clear evidence of someone's great stewardship!

Stewardship, you argue, just what's a business got to do with authentic stewardship? Well, just about everything that matters! The primary, overwhelming reason that a Chief Executive Officer—that's a CEO—of any particular business is hired is to be a good steward of the capital raised for the business's focus of serving customers well.

But there's an obvious irony that seems to consistently escape the observation of all the anti-free-market attackers of business. That irony is this—the only way to create significant value to the owners of a business is to create significant value for customers...and do so over a long period of time. Serving customers well is in and of itself a wonderful opportunity for stewardship! But something just deeply grates on the business-attackers that somehow, somewhere businesspeople are being rewarded well financially for serving others in the marketplace.

So, the next question is, what do the business owners do with their wealth...their capital...when it's been created? Well, the greedy ones never stop being greedy, because that's the nature of greed—it doesn't depart very easily from its host. But the other types of owners—the stewardship-minded owners—find ways to make their earned capital go to work in other meaningful ways—that is, still serving others! That can include investing in other businesses or giving to charity or just simply helping people directly.

There we have it! We must not ignore observable human actions: there are greedy business owners and executives but there are also generous, stewardship-driven business owners and executives!

So, what about nonprofit organizations? Well, of course, the issues are exactly the same. The primary, overwhelming reason that a Chief Executive Officer of any particular nonprofit is hired is to be a good steward of the capital raised for the organization's focus of serving others well. Of course, that's just like the CEO of a business.

And some of those nonprofit CEOs are paid extremely well to be a great steward—go look on the web and find some of the data on the largest American nonprofits...if you haven't seen it before now, it's likely you will be flabbergasted to discover the compensation of some top nonprofit executives. But, then, why not? Running a nonprofit very well can be just as enormously difficult as running a business very well...it's a rare skill that's truly hard to find.

Are some of those nonprofit CEOs greedy? Of course! But others are just working to be a great steward for their nonprofit, for their family, for their church, for God! Just like some business CEOs.

But, you might argue, isn't a nonprofit working for nobler purposes than those dirty, money-grubbing businesses? You mean money-grubbers like Sam Walton, founder of Walmart, whose business served and continues to serve many, many millions of people each year, helping those Walmart shoppers steward their own families' limited resources in the most economical way possible? Yep, that's Sam and the current Walmart team, giving an economic boost to maybe 150 million Americans each year, give or take a few million...and those Americans often with the least family resources.

All of that is a reminder about the prevalent "wealth-shaming" that is often part of the negative barrage of public dialogue today. Oh, so you haven't heard the term "wealth-shaming" before? Well, of course you haven't! That's because that phrase isn't on the unofficial, approved list of types of banned social "shaming" put forth by people who diligently keep score on that kind of thing.

But it still happens—wealth-shaming goes on all the time. Supposedly, the wealth of a Jeff Bezos or a Bill Gates is automatically categorized as shameful or ill-gotten, allegedly done as part of an inherently immoral scheme. But countless millions happily vote in the interest of these owners with their pocketbook every day! When you or I purchase something on Amazon or buy a Microsoft Office subscription, we as customers are agreeing that Bezos and Gates have indeed created helpful value for us as consumers! Yep, these companies are perceived by their actual customers as being good stewards of *their customers* by offering excellent value via their products. Well, obviously, there's no *legitimate* shame in that!

Now, back to nonprofits. Have you looked closely at the mission-effectiveness of many nonprofits? Some nonprofits are very effective at their mission of serving people well! But other nonprofits have lost sight of their original mission and are often wasting their resources. They essentially exist only to serve the people working there, although they would never think this of themselves. Are those people just greedy, then? Well, some might be. But others are just simply poor stewards, often in love with the *idea* or the *appearance* of serving targeted needs rather than *actually in reality* serving targeted needs very effectively.

Again, there we have it! We must not ignore observable human actions: there are greedy nonprofit leaders and effective, stewardship-driven nonprofit leaders. That's the very same as with businesspeople.

Here's one very key thing for us to consider: what businesses and nonprofits have in common is that both are to be good stewards of the capital entrusted to them for their missions and their operations. And here's another really key thing for us to consider: you and I are not appointed by God to "fix" others from being greedy instead of being wholly stewardship-focused. Only Jesus can truly do that kind of fixin'.

Wealth-shaming is a dead-end for both the criticizer and the "criticizee," and that's true whether you want to disparage a business or a nonprofit. When we call others out for a real or perceived fault, that's what the Bible calls a ministry of condemnation—which the Apostle Paul says leads to death. But we can be like the good stewards in Jesus' parable of the talents, take what we've been given to oversee and invest it properly—no matter what those around us are doing. Here, in this case, that means being intentionally great stewards with regard to the capital we are personally entrusted with, whether that is the capital of investors in our businesses or the capital of givers to our nonprofits.

We live in a truly amazing time and place, with remarkable access to so many tools to serve well. So, our job is to keep our own house in order: how is that stewardship in your business enterprise working out for those you are steward for? And how's that stewardship in your nonprofit enterprise working out for those you are steward for?

It's just this type of stewardship that is the name of the game for the serious Christian! That's our opportunity for lifelong impact. Wow, we should work to begin a renewed freshness...today!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Check your heart. Is your foundational personal framework about greed or stewardship?
2. In your workplace enterprise, does the dominant, foundational dialogue during the typical day revolve around stewardship for owners and customers? Give examples.
3. In nonprofits you have been involved with, is reality-based stewardship metrics the rule or do appearances seem to matter more than reality? Does your church have a keen sense of stewardship for the lost?