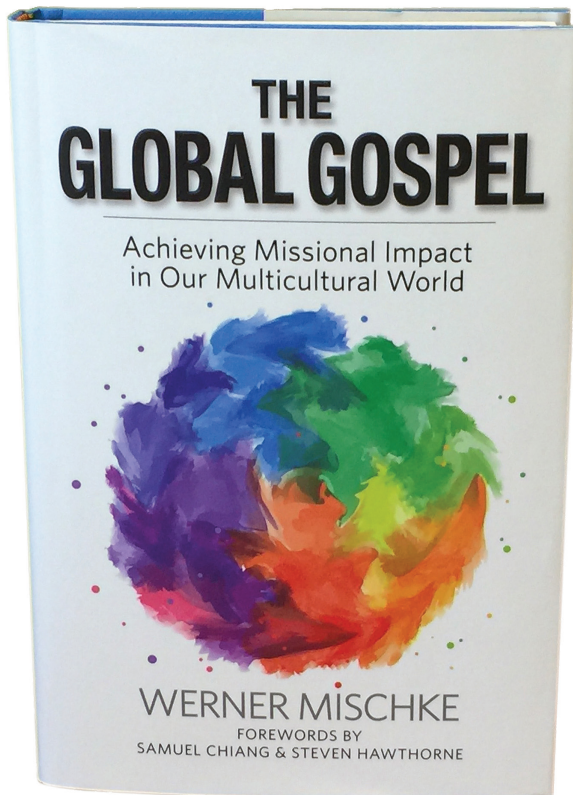


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Chapter 2.3:  
“Honor/Shame Dynamic #3: The Image of Limited Good”



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## Honor/Shame Dynamic #3: Image of Limited Good

### Why is this important?

- Emphasizes a strongly held value of honor/shame societies that is contrary to Western ideals.
- Contributes to an understanding of why honor competition is a continuous dynamic in the drama of Scripture.
- Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders were in constant honor competition; this helps explain—from a social science perspective—why this led to violence and why the Jews conspired to have Jesus crucified.
- Contributes to a rationale for the seemingly unending cycle of conflict and violence in some honor/shame societies, i.e., the Middle East.

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### Definition

The image of limited good is “the belief that everything in the social, economic, natural universe ... everything desired in life: land, wealth, respect and status, power and influence ... exist in finite quantity and are in short supply.”<sup>1</sup> If you gain, I lose ... it’s a “zero-sum game.”

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1. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 18. Scholars call this the “image of limited good,” because, in fact, “good” is not necessarily limited. This author considered calling this honor/shame principle “limited good” for the sake of simplicity, but rejected the idea. While *land* may be correctly considered finite and limited—wealth and power, honor and glory—may or may not be limited. The limitations are real only in the mind of the person or society, thus the description is apt: “the *image* of limited good.” The Bible teaches that in Christ there is no “limited good.”

All people do not view the world similarly. The industrialized West considers the world to be a limitless source of resources for an ever expanding economy that benefits all. A rising tide lifts all boats. But anthropologists who study other cultures, modern and ancient, inform us that other people see the world as a fixed and limited source of just so much grain, water, fertility, and honor. For them, this supply will never expand, and the benefits must be divided out between all people. Thus, one person or group's share increases only because it is being taken away from others. When people operating under the presumption that everyone is born into a family with only so much wealth, grain, siblings, and respect perceive others apparently getting more of the limited goods, the scene is set for conflict.<sup>2</sup>

## Saul and David

Consider this account from the life of David—following his victory over the Philistine Goliath. The honor/shame dynamic of King Saul in relation to David is revealing:

As they were coming home, when David returned from striking down the Philistine, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to one another as they celebrated, "Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands." And Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him. He said, "They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands, and what more can he have but the kingdom?" And Saul eyed David from that day on (1 Sam 18:6–9).

It is easy for us to recognize Saul's jealousy. But when you add to this the understanding that in an honor/shame culture, honor is a "limited good" (a zero-sum game), the power of this value to influence behavior—particularly to *generate conflict*—is raised to another order of magnitude.

From an honor/shame perspective, King Saul saw that his honor as king was threatened by the *achieved* honor of David. Saul's very personhood, his total identity, was threatened by David. As David's honor rose in the hearts of the people of Israel, Saul's own honor fell—even though he was still king. Saul's honor was at stake, and David's dramatic increase in honor was to Saul the equivalent of a mortal threat. Therefore, Saul became obsessed with finding a way to kill David.

Contrary to the idea that Saul was perhaps mentally disturbed, his reaction was only logical. Since Saul believed in the concept of "limited good," it was inconceivable for him to celebrate David's victory with the people.

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2. Neyrey and Stewart, 235. Of course, not everyone in the "industrialized West" has the view that "an ever expanding economy ... benefits all." Neyrey is broadly generalizing. In fact, the reader will note that a few pages further into this chapter, a chart by Darrow Miller characterizes the secular worldview of the West to reflect a "limited good" worldview.

## Paul in prison

In the New Testament, consider this passage from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Observe the honor/shame dynamics, and in particular, how Paul completely overturns "the image of limited good."

What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all *ashamed*, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be *honored* in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account (Phil 1:18–24). (Emphasis mine.)

Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ and a Roman citizen—both great honors. However, Paul was in prison as he wrote this letter, which would normally be considered a low and shameful condition. But Paul wrote with great faith, "It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed" (1:20).

How does Paul's relationship with Jesus Christ give him the means to overturn "the image of limited good" ... turning "win-lose" into "win-win?"

At the crux of this dynamic shift is Paul's life in Christ. His expectation is that, rather than being ashamed of imprisonment or death, he will trust in Christ. Rather than being ashamed by disloyalty or dishonor toward God, Paul will "with full courage" allow "Christ [to] be honored" in his body, "whether by life or by death." How can Paul do this?

*Here's how:* "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

The win-lose drama of Paul's imprisonment and possible execution is turned into a sublime declaration of irrepressible victory in Jesus Christ. It overturns the dynamics of *win-lose* and the "image of limited good"—through the *win-win* of a life totally immersed in the resurrection life and supreme honor of Jesus Christ. Paul did not locate his honor in his achievements, his family, title, or circumstances. Paul located his honor in *the most honorable One*, Jesus Christ.

Paul goes on in other parts of his joy-filled letter to demonstrate how this works—not just for him during his imprisonment—but for all believers, regardless of their circumstances. In the latter part of his letter he writes, "And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:19). Paul was directly challenging this widespread belief of the "image of limited good." He revealed that for all Christians, there is no "limited good" in Christ. There is, in fact, an unlimited storehouse of provision for physical needs, for blessing, and for honor through Christ. Paul calls it God's "riches in glory in Christ Jesus"—potentially available by faith to all persons who follow Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

## Reinforcing the cycle of poverty

In *Discipling Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures*, Miller and Guthrie describe how societies can perpetuate a culture of poverty primarily because of their basic worldview. The *image of limited good* is completely at odds with what Miller calls the “development ethic” that is contained in the “transforming story” of the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the book, Miller and Guthrie compare three basic worldviews: *animism*, *theism*, and *secularism*. These basic three worldviews have drastically different perspectives about nature. One of the society-transforming ideas that comes from the Bible is a view of nature called the “open system.”<sup>4</sup> Below is a chart, “The Nature of Nature,”<sup>5</sup> which shows the contrasts:

	<b>Animism</b>	<b>Theism</b>	<b>Secularism</b>
<b>Ruler</b>	Nature	GOD	Man
<b>Perspective</b>	Biocentric	Theocentric	Anthropocentric
<b>Nature</b>	Capricious	Open System (Created)	Closed System
<b>Man</b>	A Spirit	A Mind, The Image of God (A living soul)	A Mouth, The Highest Animal
<b>Resources</b>	Limited Good	Positive Sum	Zero Sum
<b>Man's Role</b>	Worshiper / Victim	Steward / Regent	Consumer / Miner

Figure 2.08: Miller's "The Nature of Nature"

In a closed system, everyone competes for the same resources. As stated above, “Everything desired in life: land, wealth, respect and status, power and influence ... exist in finite quantity and are in short supply.”

But those who believe in an “open system” are not bound by the *image of limited good*. Miller writes, “Development is thus more about discovering and exploring God’s world than merely trying to help people survive. It is about creating new resources, not redistributing scarce ones.”

Secularists, and those influenced by their teaching, have a hard time with this. They are locked into a worldview that takes as an article of faith the idea that “spaceship earth” is headed for a crash. Like all pessimists, the ecological glass for them is always half empty. They believe we live in a closed system. Their brothers in the mindset of poverty, the animists, do not believe in natural laws, which cuts at the knees any kind of scientific progress. Those who look at the world as God’s creation, however, have a radically different outlook. They see a world of potentialities limited only by their own creativity and moral stewardship.<sup>6</sup>

3. Miller and Guthrie, 243–79.

4. *Ibid.*, 147.

5. *Ibid.*, 149. Figure 7.2.

6. *Ibid.*, 148.

Miller is drawing broad generalizations, to be sure, but in the context of his book's multifaceted overall theme, it is valid. There are many reasons for chronic poverty, some of which are oppressive *external* social or political forces. But among the *internal* dynamics that contribute to chronic poverty is a worldview that clings to the *image of limited good*.<sup>7</sup>

In the economic development or relative prosperity of nations, *ideas matter*, including whether a nation clings to the “idea” of *limited good*. Former Harvard economics and history professor David S. Landes wrote a landmark book, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor*. In his summary he stated, “If we learned anything from the history of economic development, it is that culture makes all the difference.”<sup>8</sup>

### A kingdom summary—dark side and bright side


Image of limited good—kingdom of this world vs. kingdom-reign of God		
	Kingdom of this world	Kingdom-reign of God
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contributes to the onset of violence toward self and others</li> <li>• Reinforces culture of poverty and a mindset of despair</li> </ul>

Figure 2.09: Image of limited good—kingdom of this world vs. kingdom-reign of God

We will further explore the dynamics of violence in relation to honor/shame later in this book.

### Action points

- *Fast-forward:* To explore how the *image of limited good* can shape a contextualized presentation of the gospel of Christ, turn to Section 3, Chapter 3.
- *Reflect:* In what ways has God's “riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19) helped you overcome a sense of inadequacy or satisfied your longing for honor?
- *Bible study:* Read through the Gospel of Mark in one sitting, keeping in mind how the honor/shame variables worked together in a dark symmetry of religious and political powers to generate violence and crucify the Son of God.

7. See Wayne Grudem and Barry Asmus, *The Poverty of Nations: A Sustainable Solution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013). The book offers a multitude of historical evidences and Scripture-based principles that support my contention that some honor/shame dynamics such as the *image of limited good* inhibit economic development, and thus perpetuate poverty. See especially pages 275–307; as I read these pages, I discovered that many of the principles of economic growth are antithetical to some of the values of honor/shame cultures.

8. David S. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 516, as quoted in Grudem and Asmus, 317.

- *Teaching*: In the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand (Luke 9:10–17), explore how the image of limited good is overturned by the miracle of Jesus.
- *Mission*: In ministering to the poor and oppressed, to what degree does your ministry sometimes have the attitude of the “image of limited good”? This would be reflected in thinking, “They cannot help themselves, we must do it for them.” How can you explore together with your ministry partners their *assets and blessings*, rather than their deficits and limitations, pursuing together the *unlimited good* and abundance of the reign of God?