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'Stop Turning My Father's House into a Market': Secular Models and Sacred Spaces

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In the gospel of John's version of Jesus' cleansing the temple, Jesus yells, "Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" (2:16). The temple was sacred; the market was secular. Modern-day economists threaten to change the sacred into the secular when they analyze the church, marriage, and other holy things using purely secular models such as utility maximization. Economic models are useful and powerful when they are used to analyze secular things; however, when they are used to analyze sacred things, they tend to make those things less than what God intended them to be. Furthermore, because Christians are the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16 and 6:19), each Christian needs to be personally vigilant to keep the secular from invading and destroying the sacred.

Stop Turning My Father's House into a Market

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?"

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

> They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. (John 2:13–21)

Jesus' saying, "Stop turning my Father's house into a market," is disturbing to economists because most economists believe that every human action can be analyzed using economic models, especially models of markets. Gary Becker, expressing this view, says,

> I have come to the position that the economic approach is a comprehensive one that is applicable to all human behavior, be it behavior involving money prices or imputed shadow prices, repeated or infrequent decisions, large or minor decisions, emotional or mechanical ends, rich or poor persons, men or women, adults or children, brilliant or stupid persons, patients or therapists, businessmen or politicians, teachers or students.[1]

Gary Becker is particularly famous for explaining marriage in terms of a market transaction based on utility maximization.[2] Laurence Iannaccone analyzes attendance, giving, and even self-sacrifice at church based on utility maximization by way of club goods.[3] Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner, the authors of *Freakonomics*, apply economic market models to many interesting social interactions.[4] Economists who deal with religion tend to use economic models to explain religious activities. I have taken the opposite approach—I use the Bible to analyze economic models and current events.[5] This article will examine what John 2:14–21 conveys to economists. However this article is not just for economists—it contains an important message to all people. That message is that we need to protect those parts of our lives that are sacred from the invasion of the secular.

A vast and valuable literature in anthropology and sociology discusses what is secular and what is sacred.[6] Using the Bible, this article defines the sacred as people, times, or things that are separated from the secular by God for a divinely defined purpose. The distinction between secular and sacred is first introduced in the Bible in Genesis 2:3: "Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done." Genesis 2:3 is the basis for one of the Ten Commandments:

> Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and

> all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Ex. 20:8–11)

The economist in me screams in defiance, "Why? Why should I be forced to rest? Cannot I, based on my own utility analysis, decide when it is best to rest and when not? Furthermore, if I own a cow, why cannot I work it as much as I want? Don't I own it?" In answer to my defiance, the Bible implies that God places restrictions on my utility maximization analysis and on the rights that come with ownership.[7] Many times in the Gospels, Jesus contends with the religious leaders of his day over the Sabbath. In these confrontations, Jesus makes it very clear that, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). If "the Sabbath was made for man," then would it not be even better to let each individual man or woman decide when to rest based on his or her own individual utility function? It is not so, for several reasons.

First, individuals make their utility maximizing decisions based on a social context. A social context without a Sabbath would lead to lower utility than a social context with a Sabbath. For example, during the Industrial Revolution, people maximized their individual utility function by working seven days a week because they would be fired, and thus starve, if they did not. Under the theory of pure competition, if my competition works seven days a week and I only six then I am likely to be driven from the market. In these cases, God's establishing a Sabbath provides a healthier social context in which people make their individual utility decisions.

Second, markets affect the social context and, according to Michael Sandel, that effect can often be corrosive.[8] Democracy is based on the ideal that "all men are created equal," yet when the rich can pay to cut in line in front of poor people who do not have that option, the ideals of democracy are unrealized. Paying children to earn good grades undercuts efforts to teach children to take personal responsibility for their knowledge and their future; it sends the message that education, in and of itself, is not worthy of the effort to get a good grade. Friends or honors purchased through the marketplace are usually less valuable than friends and honors earned through hard work, intelligence, and sacrifice. To put a market value on a life and then to place bets on how long someone will live is to treat a human solely as a way to make money. Likewise, paying people to place advertisements on their bodies, cars, and houses degrades them. Furthermore, plastering advertising throughout our national, state, or city parks reduces the value of those parks. With thinly veiled regret, Sandel explains how marketing, corporate sponsorship, and skyboxes have changed baseball from an equalizing community activity to a segregated marketing opportunity.

Sandel carefully documents real world examples of all of the above situations and many more.[9] He makes a compelling case for markets affecting the social context: by affecting the social context, markets affect the utility maximizing decisions people make.

Third, utility theory assumes that I always choose what is best for me or my goals. However, the future sometimes reveals that my choices were, in fact, not in my long-term best interest. When Judas sold Jesus to the religious leaders, he was not doing what was in his long-term interest as is clearly shown by his hanging himself out of regret a few days later (Matt. 27:1–5). Jesus said the following about Judas: "Woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born" (Matt. 26:24). Judas is not the only person who makes utility maximizing mistakes. Romans 1:25 (NASB) says that some people exchange "the truth of God for a lie," which is not in their long-term (eternal) interest. In Jeremiah 2:13, God says, "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." Perhaps God established a Sabbath in order to minimize the mistakes we make when we maximize our utility. Indeed, immediately prior to Jesus's cleansing the temple in the gospel of Luke, Jesus wept over Jerusalem, saying,

> If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you. (Luke 19:42–44)

In a similar way, many of us really do not know what will maximize our long-term utility function, or what things make for our own peace and happiness.

A common reason for individuals making mistakes when maximizing utility is that they are deceived. Adam and Eve were deceived into thinking that eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was good (Gen. 3). The serpent did not tell Adam and Eve that eating from that tree would result in painful child birth, the subjugation of women to men, and the earning of food by hard work and sweat. The Pharisees mistakenly thought that they were righteous and had no need for a savior (see John 9, especially vv. 40–41; and Matt. 15:14). In John 8:43–45 (NASB), Jesus tells the Pharisees,

> Why do you not understand what I am saying? *It is* because you cannot hear My word. You are of *your* father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the

> truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own *nature*, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me.

Jesus warns that in the end times, "false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect" (Matt. 24:24 NASB; see also Rev. 13). We often make utility maximizing mistakes because we are deceived. The economic assumption of perfect information often does not hold in reality.

Third, economics do not judge what people put into their utility functions, but God does.

> This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. (John 3:19–21 NASB).

Jesus clearly saw that the chief priest's, elders', and Pharisees' clinging to power and superficial righteousness were wrong (Matt. 23). Almost immediately after the Matthew version of Jesus cleansing the temple, Jesus tells the parable of the two sons:

> "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'
>
> "'I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.
>
> "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.
>
> "Which of the two did what his father wanted?"
>
> "The first," they [the chief priests and elders of the people] answered.
>
> Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him." (Matt. 21:28–32)

The Pharisees, like many others, put the wrong things into their utility functions—things that hurt them in the long run such as acts of self-righteousness, acts of superficial religious piety, and acts that make them look better than other people. The drug addict going through withdrawal wants drugs now even though that is not in his long-term interests; the Pharisee wants more crowd recognition

even though it is not in his long-term interests; and many of us want to work on the Sabbath even though it is not in our long-term interests.

The God of the Bible allows each individual to decide how much sleep (rest) they will get every night based on their personal utility maximizing analysis; however, that same God made the Sabbath sacred and commanded us to rest during it, even if we do not believe that resting on the Sabbath will increase our utility (Isa. 58:13–14).

It is possible to argue from the Bible that the requirement to keep the Sabbath was eliminated with the death and resurrection of Jesus (Gal. 3:23–25; 4:8–11; Col. 2:16; Rom. 14:5). However, the issue of whether or not we are still required to keep the Sabbath does not affect how I am using the Sabbath in this article. In this article, I am using the Sabbath as an example of something that (at least before Christ) was sacred. Furthermore, I have argued that the sacred does not (and should not) always fit under normal utility maximizing analysis. Moreover, I have argued that something can be made sacred for the benefit of mankind, while (simultaneously) being contrary to individual utility maximization. People make mistakes, are deceived, and/or have the wrong things in their utility functions, and the sacred can affect the external context in which utility maximizing decisions are made.

Another biblical example of the sacred is the Jewish people: "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession" (Deut. 7:6). The divine purpose of God's making the Jewish nation sacred is so that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3). In Mark's version of Jesus's cleansing the temple, Jesus refers to this divine purpose when he says, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Mark 11:17). A third example of something sacred in the Bible is the tribe of Levi, which was set aside to be the priests of God's temple.

If the sacred is people, things, or times set aside for a divinely appointed purpose, then the secular is everything that is not sacred. In John's version of Jesus cleansing the temple, Jesus drives the secular out of the temple so that the temple can fulfill its sacred purpose. In John's version, Jesus says, "Stop turning My Father's house into a market." Jesus is not antimarket. Nowhere in the Bible do we learn that Jesus attacked any other market. The only market that Jesus had a problem with was the one in the temple, and (in the version of John) his only problem with that market was that it, a secular institution, was in a sacred place. John's version differs from the version in the synoptic gospels. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus accuses the religious leaders of having changed the temple into a "den of robbers." Perhaps the temple had become "a den of robbers" by becom-

ing a monopoly gateway to fulfilling religious duties through the approval and selling of animals suitable for sacrifice and through the exchanging of coins for the temple tax. (In contrast to this narrow interpretation, Jeremiah 7:4–11 implies an even broader meaning for "den of robbers.") However, this accusation of the temple's becoming a "den of robbers" is not in the version of John. In that version, Jesus' only problem with the temple market was that it was a secular institution that had invaded a sacred space.

The version of John also differs from the Synoptic Gospels in that, only in John does Jesus make a connection between the temple of Jerusalem and his own body as a temple. When asked for a sign to justify his disruption of the temple market, Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The Jewish leaders respond, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" The writer of the gospel of John explains that Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body, not the Jerusalem temple (John 2:18–21).

Through this similarity between the Jerusalem temple and a person's body being the temple of God, Jesus's cleansing of the temple is connected to several other passages of the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 3:16–17 (NASB) it says, "Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are." In 1 Corinthians 6:15–20 (NIV), Paul says that we should not visit prostitutes because,

> Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.
>
> Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

Second Corinthians 6:14–16 (NASB) argues that Christians should not marry unbelievers:

> Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God.

Christians Are Temples of God

Imagine Jesus's coming to his temple—you—weaving a whip, overturning the money tables, and driving out those who are buying and selling and yelling, "Stop turning my Father's house into a market!"

Jesus knows that in order to live we must spend a significant amount of time selling our labor in the market and buying and selling food and other things in a market. I am an economist, and I know the power of economic models—models that can explain our world and can help build a better world for the future. Models are very appropriate when analyzing approximately 86 percent of our lives (six secular days out of seven days per week = 86 percent). However, we need to be very careful that the 86 percent that is secular market does not invade the 14 percent that should remain sacred. We must set aside part of ourselves and our time to be holy, to be sacred, and to be the temple of God.

Consider Gary Becker's analysis of marriage as a market transaction driven by utility maximization.[10] As an economist, I find Becker's analysis fun, interesting, and insightful. However, as a Christian, I believe that it threatens to reduce "holy" matrimony to something that is purely secular and thus less than what God intended marriage to be. Let me be clear: I see Becker as a normal economist doing what all economists do—analyzing everything in terms of economic models with no evil intent involved. Furthermore, Becker's analysis does shed interesting light on issues such as how children affect marriage and divorce decisions. However, as Brad Gregory documents how the Reformation had undesirable consequences that would have horrified the leaders of the Reformation,[11] likewise, seeing marriage as solely economic can have some undesirable and unintended effects.

Consider a contrast between Gary Becker's view of divorce and Jesus's view. Becker, Landes, and Michael say,

> [An earlier article of Becker's] assumes that persons marry when the utility expected from marriage exceeds the utility expected from remaining single. It is natural to assume further that couples separate when the utility expected from remaining married falls below the utility expected from divorcing and possibly remarrying. One way to reconcile the relatively high utility expected from marriage at the time of marriage and the relatively low utility expected at the time of dissolution is to introduce uncertainty and deviations between expected and realized utilities. That is, people separating presumably had less favorable outcomes from their marriage than they expected when marrying.[12]

In contrast, Matthew 19:3–10 says,

> Some Pharisees came to him [Jesus] to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason [in other words, when the expected utility from a divorce exceeds the expected utility from staying married]?"
>
> "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."
>
> "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"
>
> Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."
>
> The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

"'I hate divorce,' says the LORD, the God of Israel" (Mal. 2:16 NASB). Becker's view makes getting a divorce the rational thing to do if the expected utility from staying married is less than the expected utility from divorce. In contrast, the Bible makes marriage sacred and divorce much more serious. When we reduce the sacred to the level of the secular, we lose something holy.

Iannaccone's reduction of church attendance to utility maximization when there are "club" goods is another example of treating the sacred as if it is secular.[13] Club goods provide extra utility by being consumed in a group setting where everyone feels like they belong. The problem with this applied to church is that the value of church is reduced to the utility gain from the group and from activities of the group—the existence of a loving God is unnecessary. A person can gain similar utility from joining a bridge club. Just as Becker's analysis provided useful insight into marriage, Iannaccone's analysis provides useful insight into some religious groups and into some of their practices that appear strange to outsiders. Becker's and Iannaccone's analyses become harmful when they are viewed as capturing the essence of marriage or the church. Let me emphasize that I do not see Iannaccone or Becker as evil; I believe, however, that undesirable consequences emerge from adopting their views without qualification.[14] Indeed, I will readily admit that the entire reason that some churchgoers attend church is captured by Iannaccone's analysis; however, such churchgoers are more like the Pharisees than like true Christians. Hopefully we do not go to church solely

because it maximizes our utility functions, but we go to church to worship a God who loved us enough to die for us. If someone reduces the church to what he personally gets from it through his personal utility function, then he has, in essence, left God out of the church and reduced it to a purely secular institution.

Revelation 13:16–17 predicts that there will come a time when the market will be used as a weapon against Christians: "[The evil beast] forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name." It would be horrible to have to choose between all the advantages of the market and my Christian faith. Fortunately for us, Revelation's prediction has not yet been fulfilled. In the meantime, Christian economists must choose between making 100 percent of their world a market transaction or leaving approximately 14 percent of their world as sacred. Jesus participated in and used markets. He only objected when the secular market invaded the sacred temple. As economists, we should be thrilled that our models are powerful, appropriate, and useful 86 percent of the time. However, we push our models too far when we insist that everything, including the sacred, can be reduced to economic models. We push our models too far when we think that holy matrimony and church attendance can be reduced to utility maximization.

Consider Sandel's point that markets can corrode values as applied to Jesus' life.[15] Jesus had a problem with crowds of needy people (see Mark 1:32–2:4; 3:7–10; and 5:21–34). Mark 3:20–21 says, "Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'" The obvious economic solution to this "crowd" problem would be for Jesus to charge for his services. He could just keep increasing the price until the crowds were manageable. Imagine how much money Jesus could make if he charged for each healing, for each sermon he taught, or for each fish sandwich he gave to the nine thousand men fed between Matthew 14:10–21 and Matthew 15:29–38 (not to mention the women and children). The charging of fees for these services could be viewed as the most efficient way to allocate Jesus' scarce resources. However, this "economic" solution would have excluded many including the woman who had already spent her entire livelihood on doctors while trying to fix a hemorrhage (Mark 5:21–34). If Jesus had charged enough for his services that the crowds became manageable, then he would have only helped the rich. Such an economic solution would have fundamentally changed who Jesus was and the content of his message. As Christians, we are called to be like Jesus (Phil. 2:3–8; Matt. 25:31–46)—do not let the market destroy the

image of God in which you were made. The market has its rightful place in the world; it should not, however, become the sole defining model for everything in our world. The market should not define who we are, should not define holy things such as marriage, and should not invade the temple of God.

To all readers, economists and noneconomists alike, I say that it is very important to protect the sacred from the secular. A part of your life needs to be holy, set aside for God. Live 86 percent of your life as secular and protect the 14 percent that is sacred. Furthermore, there are things that are never appropriate to do because you are the temple of God. I do not care how much utility you gain from activities such as visiting prostitutes, viewing pornography, cheating on your spouse, cheating on your taxes, lying, stealing, or murdering. These activities are not appropriate in a temple of God. You are the temple of God. "Stop turning my Father's house into a market!"

Notes

1. Gary S. Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 3–4.
2. See Gary S. Becker, "A Theory of Marriage: Part I," *Journal of Political Economy* 81, no. 4 (July/August 1973): 813–46.
3. See Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Sacrifice and Stigma: Reducint Free-Riding in Cults, Communes, and Other Collectives," *Journal of Political Economy* 100, no. 2 (March/April 1992): 271–91.
4. See Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, rev. and expanded ed. (New York City: William Morrow, 2006).
5. See Jonathan E. Leightner, "Utility versus Self-Sacrificing Love," *Christian Scholar's Review* 32, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 317–28; Jonathan E. Leightner, "Response; 'Not My Will …' Further Thoughts on 'Utility versus Self-Sacrificing Love,'" *Christian Scholar's Review* 34, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 17–20; Jonathan E. Leightner, "Property, Ethics, and God," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2009), 337–58; Pamela Z. Jackson and Jonathan E. Leightner, "Unrighteous Stewards in Biblical and Modern Times," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 339–55.
6. See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York City: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957).
7. Cf. "Property, Ethics, and God," 337–58.
8. See Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York City: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012).

9. See Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*.
10. See Becker, "A Theory of Marriage: Part I," 813–46.
11. See Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformaiton: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2012).
12. Gary S. Becker, Elisabeth M. Landes, and Robert T. Michael, "An Economic Analysis of Marital Instability," *Journal of Political Economy* 85, no. 6 (November/December 1977): 1141–87.
13. See Iannaccone, "Sacrifice and Stigma," 271–91.
14. See Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*; and Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*.
15. See Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*.