

American Institutions, Moral Courage & Biblical Truth

Featuring Dr. John West

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TRANSCRIPT

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Welcome everyone to Cornerstone University's Wisdom and Influence podcast. It is my joy and pleasure to have Dr. John West with us. He serves as our distinguished scholar of American government and Christian civic engagement, also one of our president's fellows, and he serves as well as the vice president of Discovery Institute.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: This is not his first time on the podcast, or, or at Cornerstone. He's been here a number of times, and now is part of our team. So John, welcome, welcome again, and thank you for being with us. Dr. Moreno-Riaño, I am delighted to be here and delighted to be, actually connected to Cornerstone now. Well, it's been, it's been wonderful, so thank you for all your many contributions and all the many future ones you will, you will, contribute.

John West: So thank you so much, John. I'm, I'm gratified, I'm humbled, and like I said, I'm delighted to be a part of the great work of Cornerstone that you're leading, forward. Thank you. The... John, there's so much to talk about, I will tell you, a- as we think about, our, our s- as, as Eric Metaxas calls it, the super centennial, right?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Our- Mm-hmm. Yeah ... our birthday here, our 250th. And, and I have to share with you an incident that just happened yesterday here in Grand Rapids, and I thought, "Well, am I glad I'm speaking with John West today." We were, we were celebrating here in downtown Grand Rapids, the 50th anniversary of the Grand Rapids Economic Club.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm. at an economic club was started back, 50 years ago, by an attorney here in Grand Rapids, and the goal was to bring, e- business leaders, civic leaders together to try to have civil conversations about not just the future of the city here of Grand Rapids and West Michigan, but the importance of enterprise, right, and business, and collaboration to, to develop a, a flourishing community.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And as a part of the celebration, the Econ Club invited, President Bill Clinton and George W. Bush to speak and to have a conversation. Hmm. and so it was a packed out event, I will tell you, and lots of security, as you can imagine. And while we're outside in the event, lo and behold, a, a su- a number of, of protesters were out, right as...

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: literally right next, next to us, with loud horns and speakers and banners and, Pa- Palestinian flags and whistles and cursing, and you name it, it was being said and it was being done,

right? We were all called all kinds of things, including oligarchy, be- you're part of the oligarchy, and they just went on and on and on and on, and, and it was a little hostile a few times in the very beginning.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm. So we made it in, and, and I've been reflecting on that moment — Mm-hmm. I bet ... s- since yesterday, especially in a lot of the conversation of both President Clinton and President Bush about civility and, and, and how do we move forward as a country given where we are now. And so I, I want to use that as a little bit of a context and backdrop to, to the conver- to our conversation, because President Bush made a comment that, is still ringing in my ears.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: He said, when I was a young man, 21, 22, in college," he said, "I thought our country was not gonna make it back then." He said. there were race riots, parts of cities being burnt down, political assassinations," right? he na- he... It was terrible. "I never actually... I didn't think we were gonna make it, and here we are."

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And he talked about sort of a pendulum effect, that these things seem to happen and come, but our institutions are strong enough, he says, that they're, they're able to weather these difficult moments, in, in our history, right? And I've been pondering a lot on that. You've done a lot of work. Your, your wonderful book just recently, "Endowed by Our Creator," beautiful, wonderful book, and, and all the work that you've done.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: I wanna ask, just start by asking you to comment on, share with our listeners your thoughts on that, about the, the strength and resilience of our institutions in light of what's happening now and some of the difficult things in the past, but certainly sort of the, the, the, the, the churn that we're going through now politically, socially, and culturally.

John West: You're one for small questions. That, that's a lot of chitchat. okay. Well, I, I think first of all, and you've sort of implied this, but I think people need to recognize that America has been in very stormy situations throughout much of its history. Hmm. And although, politicians perennially call for civility, if you actually look through American history, including the time of the Revolution, including once, the Revolution took place and you had the Jeffersonians and the Federalists go after each other, let alone the Civil War.

John West: or some of the things I remember growing up, I was in college during, Ronald Reagan's presidency and in Seattle he came a couple of times and I, remember being stuck by thousands of protesters that were burning American flags, asking God to damn America. Excuse my language. So this isn't the first time that we've had this.

John West: Now, having said that, I do think our institutions are, are resilient, but I'm a little bit less sanguine than former President Bush because ultimately, although the institutions are solid and our founding principles are solid, long term, it's really hard for any nation to survive if large numbers of people have written off its fundamental principles and, and no longer believe it.

John West: In other words- Hmm ... for, for all the checks and balances and, and the Bill of Rights and, and separation of powers and the things that the founders installed, even they acknowledged that those were auxiliary precautions and you actually f- first had to have enough virtue among the citizenry, and they actually had to believe it.

John West: And whereas when I was growing up, or even in the 1960s, there was a component of America that was really overthrowing things, many people, of both political parties still had an admiration for America and still had at least some sort of understanding of its basic principles, even if they disagreed on specifics.

John West: And, and the people who didn't were really on the fringes. The problem I see now is that increasingly what used to be on the fringes of sort of deep-seated- Ambivalence or even hatred toward America's founding principles, that has moved from the edges more and more towards the center. And so I think we are in for some challenging times in the next couple of decades if we don't get our own house in order, and I don't think the institutions themselves alone are gonna help us survive anymore with- if the people don't actually support them.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: thank you, John. And, and so let me follow up by asking you this, because, principles on their own, they're embodied in some way, right? They're embodied in institutions, and principles are embodied in people- Yeah ... and they're embodied in leaders. And I couldn't help but think last night as they were speaking about the problem of leadership in our country, right?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: or the problem of statesmanship in our country. I think about our current president, Donald Trump, the former president, Joe Biden, the former president, Barack Obama, I think about the opportunities these men had, have to be statesmen, right? To in some ways embody these principles. And I'm w- and I'm wondering if, if not...

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And I'm not speaking not just about the presidency. I think about members- Sure ... of the s- of c- of the House and members of the Senate, right? I'm, I'm thinking of our governors, right? th- these leaders in, whether it's state office, federal office, and local level, to embody these principles. And I'm wondering if the people en masse are looking at these leaders and saying, "These principles must be false because you're false."

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: These principles must be bankrupt because you're bankrupt, and therefore I'm not gonna pay attention." I'm wondering if the fault is, is not with the people, but with the fact that our leaders have not embodied them and lived them out. What do you think? I think there's truth to that, and I'd even expand it.

John West: the, the reason why people have lost trust in the principles is many of them have gone through an educational system where they- Mm-hmm ... don't learn, like what Cornerstone is doing. They basically have learned to hate America in, through their educational system or l- or at very best, they just don't learn anything.

John West: So, so either they don't learn anything really about America's principles or, or, or why they're right, or they're actually taught to affirmatively hate them. So I think, that's an important thing. But I do think you're right that, leadership is important in any sort of society, and I think especially in a republic where you look to the elected leaders to exercise statesmanship and wisdom.

John West: I will say, though, that I, I, I do think there's a lot of fault on the leaders. So, some people, and we could debate the rhetoric, say, of, like, President Trump- Some of the people who o- o- on both sides who, who talk about the importance of civility, which I actually as a Christian think is important.

John West: I don't think civility negates the idea that you can speak truth plainly, but I, I do think there is a virtue in it. But if you're using the term, civility or, or whatever to really cover up your own malfeasance or to cover up the fact that you're not doing anything, I, I, I think actually- ... the, one of the reasons why people are so cynical for the, the people who are, say, they pretend to be more statesmanlike is they're not really being...

John West: They're, they're mouthing words often that are written by political consultants and there's no follow-through, and people can see that. I think ju- just of one example actually, I don't, I don't want to, th- there are different sides about, President Trump. let me just give you an example of...

John West: I, I think one reason why people are attracted to President Trump, others are repelled by him, but is that, for good or ill, they think they're getting what he actually thinks. Yeah. That's right. Now, that means that some of it is a cesspool of stuff. But they actually feel that there's a bit of honesty there even if you disagree with it.

John West: But, that there's... He's giving you what he thinks, out of his heart, which could be bad or good, but you're getting a, a, a sort of honesty. And they're so tired of scripted talking points from other people who don't really believe what they're saying. And, all other things being equal, would it be better to have a more statesmanlike character who's actually giving out of their heart better things?

John West: Yeah. A- as a, a, as a Christian and even just as a American citizen, yes. But if your only alternative is, say, someone who's straight talking but kind of vulgar and can't control his tantrums sometimes or someone who speaks platitudes but they really don't mean them, that's not a great choice. And I, I think- Hmm

John West: the, the, the third choice there is to go back to straight talking but principled people who aren't afraid to tell you the truth even if you don't like it, but, also aren't, they're not trying to pander to you. And I think just one concrete example actually with Trump, in his first, campaign, he promised that, "Well, we're going to move our embassy to Jerusalem."

John West: Now, you may think that's a good idea or a bad idea, I don't care. The thing that though that earns my respect as a political scientist and, and actually even as an American citizen is that whereas every president, Democrat or Republican, for the last 40 or 50 years has pledged we're gonna move our embassy to Jerusalem, you know, in Israel None of them meant it.

John West: Reagan didn't mean it. George W. Bush didn't mean it. B- Obama didn't mean it. Clinton didn't mean it. None of them did it. Trump, he actually promised it, and then he actually did it. That actually is an amazing sort of ... when, when people are actually talking about political ethics, one of the primary political ethical considerations is if you make a promise, do you keep it?

John West: Mm. Or is a promise j- And so it's not ... Some of the people are so obsessed by rhetoric, which again, I think as a Christian, I don't think Trump is a Christian, so I, I, I don't ... You know, he may not be held to that standard. But I, I- John, John, H- John, how can you say that, John? Yeah, well, I, I, I, God knows the heart, but there also is fruit- I, yes, yes

John West: but, but, but re- regardless of that, but he more than actually most politicians in my lifetime, he has seemed serious of keeping his promises that he made. Yeah. And that, when it comes to judging an elected official, ought to be more important than it is. I think we've gotten so used to feeling that people just, the, again, they're just talking points.

John West: We shouldn't believe them. Having politicians of either party being sincere that they think what they're doing is right, whether you think it's right or not, and then they actually try to honor their promises, even to their own hurt, that is something that I wish we would concentrate more on. And I have to say, th- this is why I'm a little bit jaded, because some of the, some of the vaunted, proponents of civility in our culture right now, and, and this is why so many people are turned off by it, it's a cover for them- Not being honest about what they're actually advocating- Yeah

John West: or what they're willing to follow through on. And so that- that's not a knock on civility. Again, I, I think, especially Christians, we should guard what our mouth says, and we should find a way that is truthful but also, doesn't unnecessarily judge people in a way that they shouldn't be judged and is, is very careful.

John West: But I can understand why so many people, and I don't really blame the vast American public for this, they've perceived something. They've perceived that we ha- Houston, we have a problem, so to speak- Mm ... with leadership. Well, there's something else that was said last night that though was fascinating, and I've been thinking about it as, as a, as a fellow political scientist, John, dwelling on it, thinking about it, and, I wanted to ask you and so we can discuss it together.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: one of the things that was mentioned last night was the importance of humility. So both presidents spoke at length about the importance of humility in today's world, humility and leadership. And the argument was simply this: no one can be right all the time. So therefore it says you can't be right all the time.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: This was President Clinton speaking. You have to learn... You have to be humble because you can't be right all the time, right? And, and so therefore you need this sort of hu- this kind of humility in a democracy, in a democratic republic, for it to flourish, for it to be stable, for it to move forward. I've reflected a lot on that, and it seems to me that, that o- one of the things that was not discussed last night is the importance of moral goodness and moral truth to c- to, to really be at the core of a flourishing democracy.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And, and it's almost as they, they, they don't want that, right? This... That's not what we wanna talk about today, right? Moral goodness and moral truth, but we do wanna talk about the fact that we all could be wrong sometimes, we all need to be humble, and we all need to listen and be quiet, right, to some degree.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: But democracies can't thrive just on that. They have to... they have to have truth, right? This is... Whether you look at, at- Mm ... Christian phil- political philosophers or a, a Plato or an Aristotle or, or medieval critics of our democracy, everyone seem- and the founders, you have to have truth. You have to have moral virtue for a democracy, otherwise it will tend to self-destruct.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: But that's not the conversation. Civility or humility Yeah, I, I, I, again, as a Christian, we should definitely be humble, especially towards God- Of course ... because- Of course. Of course ... but, but this is one of those things where, we both know that when it comes to politics, politicians aren't particularly known for being humble.

John West: Yeah. And I have to wonder whether it, it's... Well, let me put it this way. In a, in a Christian sense, we're humble ultimately before God and his truth. And what I fear is that it is being used as a pretext to say, "Well, redefining marriage, well, we may be wrong about traditional marriage, so we're humble by allowing things to be re- marriage to be redefined," or, "We're humble by allowing little babies to be torn apart in the womb," or, "We're humble," you go on, and not, by, by not protecting religious liberty of Christians, because, people have different ideas.

John West: Well, people do have different ideas, but you, you're not being humble towards God or his word or his standards on issues where, where the right and wrong is clear to say, "Well, I'm being humble." And I will tell you that when it comes to their party interest, they aren't humble. They'll fight tooth and nail.

John West: And so the... In fact, this is an interesting thing in politics, and this is w- again, why I think, sort of popular America is actually... they don't really have a solution, but they, they are, they're seeing some of these things. So some of the same people who value civility actually are very uncivil in certain things, and, and it's sort of being used to cover up that they're not sort of standing for truth.

John West: Same way with, humility. Christians should be humble, but we should be humble toward the truth, toward God, and that's not an excuse not to stand for the truth or to be really wishy-washy on

fundamental things. And so... And, and m- maybe that's not what they were talking about, but I, I, I do think- You wonder, right?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: you- Where's cour- where's truth? Where's courage? Where's- Yeah ... honesty, as in by really, treating people as, as adults and, and, and telling them, the truth? And I... Those are things, I think, that are in short supply and are really needed. Well, I'll, I'll tell you, John.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: So two c- two comments on this. I've been, I've been pondering this for weeks now, what I'm about to share with you. So you're, you're getting the first raw, unfiltered perspective on this, all right? For several weeks now, I've been thinking about this. When I came here to Cornerstone, I faced, my, my first year here, significant, significant opposition from many woke, many, many woke faculty, woke staff, and even woke members in the community who just, there were just so many things that we uncovered.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: We're so grateful we're not there anymore because of a, of a great, group of folks that remain on the faculty and staff, a, a board now that's fully unanimous. We're heading in the right direction. We, we've course-corrected, and we're so grateful for that. But one of the things that, that I did appreciate about all those folks back then who were so virulent was they were at least courageous about what they believed in.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah. Right? They were courageous, and they took action, right? And I respected that, and I've respected it every single year that, they don't agr- like me, they don't agree. They don't believe we're in... we should be committed to an orthodox view of Christianity and ortho- all, all those things.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: They wanna be more per- Okay, fine. I understand that, but I respected their courage. I respected their action. They weren't al- they didn't always act in the most appropriate way, but I respected the fact that they were at least courageous enough to take action. I can't tell you how many other folks who disagreed with all this, who were just silent.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Who would say nothing. Oh. Right? And, and, and for years said nothing a- as, as things were happening here at Cornerstone. Said nothing, right? And the argument was, "Well, we need to be irenic." That's the word. We need to be irenic, right? and, and so they would absolutely do abs- n- nothing at all. And as they did nothing, the institution drifted even more and more and more away from Jesus, away from orthodoxy, away from its confession, away from the, the bedrock principles of the gospel.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: It just drifted and drifted and drifted, right? And so when I had thought about President Clinton last night speaking and a lot of all this stuff I've been thinking about, one of the things that, that dawned on me was that oftentimes people on the wrong are more courageous than people that have the truth, right?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And oftentimes evil is more courageous by its adherents than those who have what is good and true. Why is that happening, John? Well, I think we're sinful and fallen. but I think you're exactly right. I have the same sort of i- impression. I've known ma- many people who I disagree with, but I respect them because they actually are trying to fight for what they believe in.

John West: In other words, they have the courage of their convictions. Whereas I've known many people who at least pay lip service, and I think probably in their hearts, do know the right thing, who aren't willing to do that, and I think that's very sad. And I think that is a big reason why America, and also parts of the American church, are where they're at today is because so many people who in some sense knew the right thing weren't willing to stand up for it.

John West: And, and certainly many Christian colleges, you can see that. A- as Yeah ... I wrote another book, Stockholm Syndrome Christianity, which is actually how we met. Right. Yes. And, and, and so a- a- and I had an experience at an institution that where the, the people who knew what was right, and so weren't really willing to stand up for it, and where the people on the other side, they had, backbone like steel and, and persistence like steel.

John West: And so that is, But, but see, that's what's encouraging actually to me, I don't want to sound like I'm just tooting your horn, but what's so encouraging to me after I wrote that book of... is encountering Cornerstone. And I'm not gonna say everything at Cornerstone is perfect. I'm sure there are things that aren't, although I, I...

John West: it's a human institution. But the ability of you and the board members who, who, stood by you to actually turn something around- I admit, that amazed me because I have not seen that very much. I, I've seen it in a few cases, but the... I, I actually think Cornerstone, you've provided a microcosm for, for people who feel that, well, there's nothing that can be done to save their institution or nothing that can be done in their community.

John West: No, it just takes a handful of people who have the same courage of their convictions. Yeah. and, and, y- look, we're in a fallen world, so God doesn't guarantee success. But if you don't have the courage of your convictions, you pretty much know what's going to happen. Yeah, that's right.

John West: But if you have the courage of your convictions, God often honors that way more than we deserve. And so I'm kind of humbled by seeing what God did through Cornerstone in just a, a few years and, and how God honored the, the, the, the desire to actually- Mm ... be Orthodox and, and to have a, developed Christian worldview and really get back to the foundations of the institution.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Well, the, one of the things that I, I used to think about, not just Cornerstone, but I think about the beautiful opportunity we have here to educate future leaders and influencers in the world for Jesus Christ, but I'm also thinking about our churches, I'm thinking about our homes, I'm thinking about our listeners.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And then I'm thinking about the comments that both President Clinton and, and Bush made last night about humility and civility, but no conversation about truth, no conversation about moral goodness and, and the, and the courage we need to have to f- to advance, advocate, defend, fight for what is good and what is right, and what is true, what is beautiful, what is good.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Be humble and be civil. We c- we can't always be right. Well, that's not a recipe for a flourishing society. That's not a vision, right? No. that is not a vision that young people today can get behind. I think that's one of the thing that's driving, sort of the surge in socialism and the surge in communism and the surge of this kinds of movements, where you have almost a third of Americans if they'd surveyed saying, "We, we're kind of thinking about it or we're liking it."

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: They at least have a vision. Wrong, yes, but they have a vision for society and humanity, and I think people are looking for that, through... That we, as human beings, we respond to that. And, So the vision for just be civil, the vision to be civil, the vision to you can't be right all the time so be humble, that's not a vision for a democracy.

John West: No, it's not a vision really for, for anything. And, you wouldn't have had the Reformation, you wouldn't have had the- Yeah ... any of the great revivals, you wouldn't have had, America if you had that. You wouldn't have had the civil rights movement. really, the... we live in a fallen world, and that means we have to show courage in, in being faithful to God.

John West: And if we don't, the, the path of least resistance is also the path to ruin. And I think, unfortunately, y- you mentioned on the socialist side and the left-wing side, we're seeing a mirror image of that on parts of the, of the secular right and even parts of the Christian right. So among the Catholic integralists or, or some of the Protestant Christian nationalists, which again, depending on what you mean by Christian nationalism, it could be okay or not.

John West: But people who actually... They've seen the malaise and they see that it's not palatable and that what you're talking about isn't sufficient, and I agree with them. But rather than go back to the bedrock of, we have 2,000 years of great Christian teaching, going back to the early church fathers, going back to the Bible, and, and also the mistakes that Christians have made we can learn from.

John West: So we have all this great-- And I see so many-- I, I see a growing minority, especially of some younger people, young males, who are wanting to just sort of overthrow that even on the Christian side for, oh, they want a, a Christian dictator. They, they want actually a state church where the government sort of imposes Christianity.

John West: Well, hint, hint, if anything about history, the type of Christianity that the, government would impose would not be what an orthodox confessional Christian wants. And I'll just tell you, I just ... even in America, I the, this type of social Christianity would not be, orthodox Christianity.

John West: And so I, I do think this is why it's so critical For Christians who do understand the importance of, say, the, the principles of America, the biblical principles, and why they're good, to actually provide a positive alternative to this vapidness that, that you experienced, last night where the o- of everything is humility and, and, wi- winsomeness.

John West: Well, that's good in its place, but that isn't a substitute for courage and truth. And so you ... So because people on both the extremes, if they don't see something better ... And I'm talking about the people who are, are falling to those extremes because they're craving something more. They actually know that something's wrong, but they're being manipulated in many sense by, by people who are bad actors.

John West: But the antidote to that is not just criticizing it, it's actually providing a positive alternative, which I think is biblical Christianity. B- but also in America, I think it's the principles of the American founding which grew out of a Christian worldview. So here's another, here's another easy question.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: All right? Uh, let's, let's ... given what these protesters were saying last night, and what I've heard similar protests say over the last many months, I wanna talk with you about the problem of human evil and, and capitalism and free enterprise. Oh. Because as that, that's what I think one of the sort of the Achilles heels of free enterprise and capitalism, right?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm-hmm. That we don't really take a full accounting of the problem of evil and human sin. And, and, and the dangers therefore of, of free enterprise and capitalism that does not have a real biblical moral vision, for it. And so, when I hear these protesters speaking about the oligarchy and, the crisis they have in housing and healthcare, and you people are so wealthy and you have all this, and we need to tax you and take everything you have from you, and, all these kinds of things.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: excessive, wrong, fine, but there's something at heart that they're- Mm-hmm ... that they're concerned about. There's a fundamental almost injustice that they think is at, is at work that needs to be rectified, right? And I'd al- I don't always get the sense that free market advocates and free market thinkers have really addressed the problem of sin and injustice inherent in the human condition that touches everything we do.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm-hmm And having said that then, h- help, let's talk about that for our listeners to, to help them think through the, the beauty of free enterprise, the beauty- Mm ... of liberty that God's given to us, the beauty of creativity, right? First Things right now is having a, an intellectual retreat in New York City, and they're focusing on the question, why, why did God create?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm-hmm. And the importance of creativity and purpose and design. So all these wonderful, beautiful things that the scriptures reveals to us about God and the imago dei, but then there's sin that touches on liberty and touches on free enterprise and touches on creativity. How do we wrestle with those realities and yet still advance a biblical vision of free enterprise and the free market?

John West: Yeah. Well, I have great sympathy for, for people who are concerned about the injustices of economics and, and also the, the, the seeming, depending on how it's described, cruelties and hardness of, of free enterprise. I remember when I was an undergraduate, I actually took an economics course, from someone who I later found out w- was actually quite a free market economics person, but it was made so unpalatable.

John West: It basically was... I'm caricaturing a little bit, but not much. Greed is good. And that, economics is all-encompassing. There aren't really any other values that come alongside it, and it's just like- I had grown up in a home that, respected freedom and free enterprise. But I had to s- have to say that when I took that course, I began to wonder a little bit, is this- Yeah

John West: what it's about? What helped me actually is someone I got to know then years later, actually in my work at Discovery Institute, George Gilder, who wrote a book called, *Wealth and Poverty*. And George, really, got back to the roots... If you actually go back to the roots of capitalism with people like, Adam Smith and the others, if you read their works, capitalism wasn't simply about money, and it wasn't disconnected from a Judeo-Christian moral framework.

John West: And the, and if you understand the way capitalism, why it works, it's actually not because it's evil. There are evil capitalists. There are injustices. But capitalism, the dynamic isn't selfishness, which is often by secular defenders of free enterprise. That's what they say. "It may be selfish, but, through selfishness, we benefit everyone."

John West: Okay. But no. Actually, a- as my friend now, George Gilder, points out, that if you actually look at the, the entrepreneurial spirit that drives capitalism and wealth, these are people who have to delay their own gratification to bring, against great odds, new products, creative things that they are just excited about, that they may actually lose a lot of money, lose, It, it really is, properly speaking, a good capitalist, as opposed to a bad capitalist who tries to get things just by greed or cheating people. A good capitalist is actually sacrificing their own immediate good to benefit the community by bringing these products and services and, and they actually take hits for it, and often lose money, often go bankrupt because they take risks.

John West: But they employ other people, so they do a l- a lot of good things. And I think that that understanding also that in classical economics- Good economic transactions benefits both sides. So this idea that, someone who's getting wealthy on, the, the... by trampling over someone else, that's not what makes capitalism work.

John West: Now, the question is, well, what do you do when you have greedy capitalists or when you have people who are doing bad things? Hmm. And I think that where you see today a lot of the injustice, if you say comes, are from, and oligarchies even, from government protected, corporations that get special... One of the problems is if you become really successful on your own, then you don't wanna just always be subject to the market because the market could, again, vote you down.

John West: think about for, for people, actually if they're younger they may not know this, but if you think about like when IBM was the be all end all or Polaroid or something, and but they were subject to the pressure of the market and when they didn't keep creating or offering things that were actually helpful to people, they lost out.

John West: Yeah. So then this i- But what changes that is if you have entities that then get government to come alongside and basically give them permanent sinecures to protect them from market pressures. And I think a lot of the so-called evil corporations, which are just, corporations run by human beings and human beings are sinful, so But a lot of that is done by government working overtime to give, monopoly sorts of powers that actually is antithetical to free market economics. And so I think one of the things we have to communicate is, first of all, free market economics, when it works, it's actually because what the entrepreneurs and business people are doing is good.

John West: They're providing services and benefits to everyone, and often scraping by through long hours and sacrificing plowing back their money into it. So, so they're engaging in self-sacrificing behavior and, and creativity too, which reflects God's creativity to bring good things. And so that, that's the heart of capitalism but then when it's abused, I think people need to recognize the dangers.

John West: so often they think, "Well, let's get more government. Let's have government control everything." Well, government is also controlled by sinful human beings. Yeah. Absolute power, as Lord Acton likes to say, corrupts absolutely. That doesn't help the problem. If, if there are oligarchical corporations, the solution is not to give, g- fuse it with government power.

John West: So I, I think we need to have a better understanding of that, what genuine capitalism is about, because this also is important when you're training business students. I know, Cornerstone has a big business program, and y- you, you wanna train business students to, that adding value, sacrificing for others, bringing products and services that, that people haven't even conceived of that could make things better, that's your calling.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah. And, and, and not just getting the cheap buck. And so w- we wanna train entrepreneurs and, and, and people that way, but we also wanna train people about the dangers of government monopolies and governments enforcing, and giving, corporations huge powers that they shouldn't have. John, Victor Davis Hanson just wrote this great piece in the New Criterion on, on...

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: That what we're seeing in America right now has happened before throughout history. And he goes all the way back to, before Christ in the, in the, in Greek with Athens and Sparta. He speaks about several eras of the Roman Empire. It's a fascinating essay in the New Criterion. I would encourage our, our readers to get a hold of it by Victor Davis Hanson.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And then he, he demonstrates that all these things that we're going through right now in our, in our country, United States, the, the criticism against government, the oligarchy, the taxing, all these things that people are, are very angry about a- and pushing for, pushing against, and the protests with immigration and control and naturalization, all...

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years, every ad- Some of the most advanced societies had been going through the same exact thing. It remind me of the scripture, there's nothing new under the sun. Yeah. You had it with Athens, you had it with Sparta, you had it with the different eras of the Roman Empire, and here we are, right?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And as I was reading the essay, I thought, "Okay, where is he gonna take this? Like, what, what's the upshot here? What's the conclusion?" And he says something very fascinating. He

says that, that the most advanced and prosperous societies breed about a certain kind of decadence that brings about a certain kind of self-disgust.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah. That's what he says, right? Yeah. That in so- in many ways, prosperity, right- Mm ... flourishing and prosperity bring about a decadence where we become disgusted with ourselves, almost as if to say we're bored with all that we have, we're bored with all that we've accomplished, with all the prospering and flourishing, and now we begin to really nitpick in lots of different things, right?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm-hmm. And I thought, "What an incredible assessment of our current era." Right? And so I wa- I wanna ask you at the talk, to, for us to talk about decadence. Ross Douthat at The New York Times wr- speaks about this as well, about decadence, and he tries to sort of try to define and embrace what this is and how we're going...

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: what we're, what we're going through i- in, in this decadent period in American history. But we are the, because of God's grace and goodness, and we are the most prosperous country probably in history. Incredible amounts of p- p- power, incredible amounts of prosperity and flourishing.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Perfect? No. But boy, it's, it's pretty... It's amazing. my father al- al- always says, we've been here in this country for 45 years. We immigrated from South America 45 years ago, and my father always says, "If I had to be poor, I'd rather be poor in America." That's what he would say, "It's better to be poor in America than anywhere else."

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And he was a man who grew up with a lot of poverty in Colombia, South America. tremendous amounts of poverty, almost unimaginable kinds of poverty, and he, he says that. And yet, so here we are in this very, very prosperous, flourishing country, and we're sick of ourselves. Right? Yeah. I spoke in a couple of interviews a few weeks ago of, of how often the protesters and even the educated activists now are very well-educated people- Yeah

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: who go to Cal State or who go to these great schools and are accomplished, and yet we're doing these things. So talk with us about this i- this, this notion of decadence, self-disgust that we're going through and, and how do we address it? because it can't just be a mere, a civility, a revival of civility and a revival of humility.

John West: There has to be something more here that has to happen Yeah. I, I think that is a natural propensity because I think, again, we're, we're sinful, and if you look at cultures when you... I, I, I don't think prosperity is a bad thing, but the temptations of prosperity, can make one decadent, and because you're not forced to face the realities of the universe that we're not- Hmm

John West: our own God. that we're- Hmm ... not God. And if you become too prosperous, you can sometimes forget that. Now, having said that, I, I actually think the Bible provides a, a vision of human flourishing that includes, a, a certain amount of prosperity that, it's not a bad thing. But if it replaces God, it, it can be, and, and that's the big, tension.

John West: I would say that in our own society, what this shows is the desperate need for biblical churches and biblical faith communities because, what you need to be d- is not be focusing on your prosperity as a goal. You need to be focusing on higher things. Whether it be as an entrepreneur, your focus shouldn't be on making the maximum amount of money.

John West: It's on bringing goods and services that either, are the result of your creativity or, or you think will make lives better. Similarly, though, in, in your own life, our biggest challenges are how do we raise our kids? How do we create loving communities? How do we help, rescue people from... in, in

Seattle where I go to work, the homeless population has exploded, and mostly in Seattle these are fentanyl abusers or mentally ill or- Hmm

John West: or drug abusers, and that doesn't mean that they're not precious to God. But that's a challenge. And- Yeah ... and, um, and, and they're being ill-served, say, by- Yeah ... programs that simply treat it as a homelessness issue, not a deeper issue. And so I, I think one thing that churches can bring to, and I think one reason America's founders thought vibrant churches were so important is because the churches could call us back to our eternal end And our eternal end is, is, much grander and greater than, physical flourishing right in the here and now.

John West: Physical flourishing isn't bad, but it needs to be seen in light of our eternal ends as, to, to, worship God, enjoy him forever, to, to be, in eternal relationship with him. And so I think insofar as the churches call us to those higher goals and our higher, ideals and our higher calling, if you will, then that helps place, the, the prosperity in its proper place, and it helps direct people away from, say, unbridled sexual immorality, which leads to the breakdown of families, or the misuse of drugs or alcohol and other forms of dest- pornography, prostitution, you name it, all sorts of destructive forms- Yeah

John West: of behavior that are in our society. it's really interesting. If you compare, you know, certain families and stuff, if you have intact parents, they go to church regularly, and their church teaches solid teaching, that's not a perf- that's not a recipe for perfection, but the likelihood that that family and those kids are gonna grow up to be actually contributors to the greater society and not, overly wedded to either prosperity or dysfunctional behaviors, I, you're, y- you have a much better probability of that.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: So I think as a society with this decadence, the answer is Jesus, and the answer are vibrant churches that, point this out and are calling people to biblical faithfulness. Yeah. I'm mi- I'm mindful in here, we'll, we'll close to this, John, and get your commentary, on all of this. It's, I'm mindful of the calls to repentance o- o- on the part of some of our founders and early presidents.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: you think about George Washington. I, I think about Abraham Lincoln, so many of his declarations calling the nation to repentance, right? Calling the nation to a humility before God and a repentance, before him. And, and then I, I, I reflected on the comment of, one of the presidents last night at the Econ Club Gala here in Grand Rapids, where at the very close, and this, this particular president said, we need a, we need a revival of faith in America," it's what he said.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: "And I'm confident it's gonna, it's coming our way. But it's not a revival of any particular faith- ... or any particular religion." Right? It's a revival of the go- we need to just follow these basic tenets that are time-honored, time-tested, the golden rule, right? Do unto others as they would have, you do, them, do unto you.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And it was President George W. Bush who made this comment. Mm-hmm. And that's all he said. He commented there's a revival of faith, not of a particular faith or- Mm-hmm ... a particular religion. And then I thought about that, and I reflected on, this morning, on the call of Jesus to repentance, right? the message of the kingdom of Jesus as he come is repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Repent. And the very w- Greek word for repentance is this profound, profound change of mind, right? A change of mind that leads to a change in the, in, in your life. So- Mm-hmm ... the fruits that meet repentance begin with a change in mind toward God, and a change of mind toward God, and a change of mind toward others that leads to a particular fruit of life, a kind, a kind of life you live.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: But what's fascinating is that the kind of revival he was speaking about tonight is only speaking about a particular behavior, but not a particular change of heart or mind toward God,

right? And, and it, it robs us from the full import of what revival really needs to be, and the r- kind of revival our country needs as we think about 200, the 250th in the future, that we need a real repentance on all of our parts.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: God's people first may come here with us first, and they may just break through and come across the entire country Yeah. And, in fairness to former President Bush, American civil religion has often shied away from particulars, and that's- Yeah ... gotten more so. But, I, I wish... A- a- and I, I, again, I, I think, that Christians should support religious liberty.

John West: The government shouldn't impose things. Having said that, George W. Bush is a self-identified Christian. he- part of his journey to faith was with- in his conversation with Billy Graham, and so I would like to hope that, George W. Bush have no reason not to, to think that he is a sincere Christian.

John West: But I wish he would realize, especially now that he's not president, he could have easily said, or maybe not so easily in that context, but he could have said, I'm a Christian, and I actually think that what we really need is, I think people have religious liberty, but what we really need is a revival of the Christian churches because I think, that's how you actually get whole."

John West: And something a little more specific that he could have shared. That- that's not, imposing your religion on someone else for a Christian, leader to actually be more specific about where, we think wholeness comes from. And so I, I do think that... But that actually is one of the challenges of why you don't really want a, a state religion because whether it's Christian or not, it will always gravitate i- if it's, if it's imposed by the government, it's always gonna be plain vanilla.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: that's just... Even if it calls itself Christian, the actual Christian content will be redefined to mean deism. it just, it just will. Yeah. And so- I, I, I agree. But what's so interesting is that it wasn't in a context of a state religion or anything like that. He himself brought up the idea that the notion that this is what we need, this is what's coming, but here's what it should be.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: But I, I think he's gun-shy, and I think, I wish he weren't gun-shy. I, I- Yeah ... I think he should have been... I, at earlier stage of life, I think he got in trouble by suggesting at one point the truth, which is that you're only gonna go to heaven if, if through Jesus. And, and some people shot that down. So I think he's, been, he's experienced that.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: But the, here's the call for courage, though. Right. Right. So, so, so, so what if people are appalled by that? It doesn't matter. And it, a- and of course, he's not even an elected official anymore. So be honest, be forthright. If, if you say that Christ is the way and we, we need to have a revival in our Christian churches, and that that, Christians of all peoples should be willing to say that whether they're in public life or not.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Agreed. John, it's been wonderful to speak with you again, my brother. Thank you for all you do for the Lord and our country and the Discovery Institute and for Cornerstone University. I look forward to seeing you in the, in the weeks ahead on our campus. But John, thank you for being with us today. Thanks, Gerson.

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