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## From the American Dream to Shalom: A Review of The Myth of the American Dream

Erin Olson

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## From the American Dream to Shalom: A Review of The Myth of the American Dream

### Abstract

"Mayfield's book is full of stories from her own experiences of living a life of curiosity and seeking justice as she talks about times living in intentional community in both Minneapolis and Portland."

Posting about the book *The Myth of the American Dream* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/from-the-american-dream-to-shalom-a-review-of-the-myth-of-the-american-dream/>

### Keywords

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### Disciplines

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### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

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# in things

August 27, 2020

## From the American Dream to Shalom: A Review of *The Myth of the American Dream*

Erin Olson

**Title:** *The Myth of the American Dream: Reflections on Affluence, Autonomy, Safety and Power*

**Author:** D.L. Mayfield

**Publisher:** InterVarsity Press

**Publishing Date:** May 5, 2020

**Pages:** 216 (Hardcover)

**ISBN:** 978-0830845989

D. L. Mayfield wrote *The Myth of the American Dream: Reflections on Affluence, Autonomy, Safety, and Power* before the United States—and the world—fell into the coronavirus pandemic. As I was reading the book (and living through the pandemic), I couldn't help but see how Mayfield's ideas on the American dream are even more challenged today as people have been impacted by the physical, social, and economic ramifications of this pandemic.

Covid-19 has done many things, but one thing it has clearly accomplished is drawing lines between those of us with privilege remaining relatively unaffected, while exposing the most vulnerable in our society to higher risks and often more suffering. The pandemic has disproportionately impacted people of color, the elderly, and vulnerable children. There have been disproportionately more cases of Covid-19 in communities of color and more deaths from Covid-19 in those over the age of 75. Vulnerable children were sent home from school, a place that provided them with two warm, healthy meals and a break from a home that may not be safe. Meanwhile, many of the people I know (myself included) were able to work from home. I continued to earn my paycheck, and worked with my kids' private Christian school to transition to at-home learning. Even

though I vociferously complained about trying to homeschool and work from home, it ultimately was a privilege and one I should not take so lightly.

### *A Broken System*

The pandemic has made us aware of metaphorical cracks in the sidewalk that existed before, but have become deeper and more dangerous since. Looking at those cracks, we have likely realized they stem from a deeper, more foundational problem. In *Myth of the American Dream*, Mayfield says,

...if a system works for you but not for everyone, then how can we continue to view that system as just? Once we begin to understand that we have benefitted from the same system that has crushed others, how can any follower of Christ accept this reality as part of God's plan? (163)

One of her key theses is to identify how the systems oppress and how our individualism blinds us from loving our neighbor as we're called. But, she also tells of the joy that can come from us challenging that blindness, and stepping into community with people living under the oppression.

The prosperity gospel says that if I work hard enough and do enough good, then God will bless me and my family. Then, once I've lined my own coffers, I can share my blessings with others. Mayfield talks about the mantra of the man-made millionaire propagated by a popular Christian financial guru who says, "If you will live like no one else later you can *live* like no one else." What he means is that living a life of frugality and conscious spending *now* can later mean you become a millionaire and get to live the life of luxury and leisure. He does encourage people to be generous with their money once they've followed all his steps of financial freedom, and I am sure many of us give to those in need. We put money in the collection plate on Sundays, donate time and money to our local non-profits, give to food drives, and maybe even sponsor a child in another country.

But Mayfield, in *Myth of the American Dream*, wonders if we have become blind to the difference between charity and true justice. Charity allows us to give, while remaining in our place of comfort (or returning there very quickly); true justice for those in need and for the oppressed should call us out of our comfortable pews and picket fences and into the world where people are suffering.1

## *The Good Samaritan and the Good Neighbor*

One of Jesus's most well-known parables has to be the parable of the Good Samaritan. A Jewish man gets robbed, beaten, and left for dead on the side of the road. People pass by him—specifically a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan—and the priest and Levite ignore him or move to the other side of the road to avoid him. But, the Samaritan stops to help. He gets out of his position of comfort (if there was such a thing for him) to bandage up the man's wounds, take him to a local inn, and pay the innkeeper for continued care. Samaritans were despised in Jesus's day, and yet this Samaritan did not treat the man on the side of the road as he would have been treated himself. Instead, he provided what was likely live-saving care.

While we are probably all somewhat familiar with this parable, it is easy to forget what prompted Jesus to tell it in the first place. Jesus was talking to a lawyer who was wondering how he could inherit eternal life, and Jesus responded that he must follow the law—love God and love his neighbor. The lawyer, maybe trying to trick Jesus or just out of sheer curiosity, responded with the question, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus answered by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. Afterward, Jesus asked which person acted as a neighbor to the Samaritan—the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan man? The lawyer responded, of course, that it was “the one who showed him mercy.” Jesus then told him to go and do likewise. This parable has just as much meaning (if not more!) for us as it did for the lawyer in Jesus' time.

The *Myth of the American Dream* encourages us to think like the lawyer whose question prompted Jesus to tell the parable. We should both individually and communally be thinking, *who is my neighbor?* Is it literally just the people in my neighborhood—to quote Sesame Street, is it the “people that you meet when you're walking down the street”? But with our urban and suburban neighborhoods as segregated both racially and socioeconomically as they are, does that mean we are only meant to care for those who look like us and earn like us and spend like us? Does this mean we can feel comfortable when it seems like those around us are comfortable as well? If you instead put yourself in a position of awareness and curiosity about those in need both in your community and globally, you will find plenty to do.

Mayfield tells the story of how Dr. Martin Luther King Jr would often take time to reflect the global nature of his morning routine—“coffee from Latin America, soap made in France, bread grown by farmers in the Midwest” (21). Dr. King reminded us that all of life is interconnected and therefore what happens to someone somewhere else (like those who live in Beirut and recently lived through major explosions) ultimately affects us all, albeit indirectly at times.

## *Living a Life of Curiosity*

We must start paying attention to what is happening to our neighbors both here and thousands of miles away. This inevitably leads to a recognition that individuals are not always entirely responsible for their own station in life. While we like to praise our own prosperity on our hard work and God's goodness, a conversation with someone from a lower socioeconomic status soon makes you realize they are often working harder. Mayfield states,

the irony is, the more you try to be the good neighbor, the good Samaritan with eyes to see the world, the more the battered and bruised bodies start to pile up... you can only help so many people on the side of the road before you start to wonder where all the robbers are coming from. (20)

When you start looking for robbers, you often start to notice how the "system" or society has been structured in a way that continues to create robbers and the victims.

Curiosity, says Mayfield, is the way to connect with our neighbors and a larger world in need. When we are curious, we take an interest in other people's stories and want to hear about from where they have come, where they are going, and the obstacles they have encountered along the way. The idols of consumerism and individualism, however, promote a competing message telling me that I cannot get ahead until I push someone down or push ahead of them and this spirit does not encourage curiosity, but judgment. Justice says the opposite—"I can never be what I ought until you are what you ought to be" (22).

Mayfield's book is full of stories from her own experiences of living a life of curiosity and seeking justice as she talks about times living in intentional community in both Minneapolis and Portland. Each chapter in the book tells a story of the lessons she has learned living this curiosity as she experienced both successes and failures building relationships with the marginalized in both cities.

Based on the title, one might assume the book would be overly critical, pessimistic, and negative, but it was just the opposite. Mayfield's stories of building relationships with her neighbors (both near and far) provide energy, optimism, and hope to those seeking uplifting and helpful ways to live in community with their neighbors. The book's focus on systemic oppression will be challenging for some who might see her as trying to promote a certain political platform or perspective, but her stories should be eye-

opening to many Christians as they hear the stories of the reality experienced by many people.

*From the American Dream to Shalom*

Although Mayfield herself lives in community and neighborliness with people of different socioeconomic status and ethnicity than herself, she doesn't claim that proximity solves all problems. Instead she says,

living side by side with one another can even make a situation worse: when the oppressed and the oppressor are locked in a dance to keep one subservient and the other in power, anger and violence (both physical and ideological) are inevitable. (189)

We cannot change a system unless we are willing to enter it and take on all the suffering that it causes: "Only when we take on the suffering of other people to the point that we will do whatever we can to make it right, even if it includes losing some of our own money, rights, safety, and power" (189). This is how we bring about relational restoration and God's shalom in a broken world—we have to be willing to give up on our pursuit of the American Dream in order to break the bonds of oppression for our neighbors.

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**FOOTNOTES**

1. Mouw, R. (2011). *Uncommon decency: Christian Civility in an uncivil world*. Westmont, IL: Intervarsity Press.