



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

📖 The Mystery of Vocation
(*Inklings of Glory*,
pp. 59-67)

📖 Showing the Truth
(*Inklings of Glory*,
pp. 68-71)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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The Mystery of Vocation

Our creative work can be a source of fulfillment and blessing, and a celebration of God's creativity through the material world. Indeed, we are most like our Creator when we create.

Prayer

O God, open our eyes to the pervasiveness of economic envy and avarice that shapes our world of work, that the church might reclaim the "absolute values" of the Kingdom of God.

Give us hearts for craftsmanship and hands for creating things worthy of our talents. Teach us the divine understanding of work, that the church might show the truth of your ways. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Galatians 1:1-12

Responsive Reading: John 1:1-3

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through him,
and without him not one thing came into being.

What has come into being in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness did not overcome it.

Reflection

Dorothy Sayers investigates a deep Mystery: the God who has called us into being in his own image, and is calling us to live in his marvelous light, is the Creator of the cosmos. We must look beyond economics to understand how this call should be expressed through our work.

To begin, we should encourage one another to do work worthy of our best efforts, Sayers observes, whether we do "church embroidery, or sewage farming."

In her debut mystery novel *Whose Body?*, Sayers's gallant detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, troubles over his professional calling. Turning for counsel to his friend Detective Inspector Charles Parker, Peter asks, "D'you like your job?" Parker puts aside the Galatians commentary he has been reading, mulls over Peter's question, and replies, "Yes — yes, I do. I know it to be useful, and I am fitted to it. I do it quite well — not with inspiration, perhaps, but sufficiently well to take pride in it. It is full of variety and it forces one to keep up to the mark and not get slack. And there's a future to it."

Sayers here suggests that meaningful work must be:

- ▶ *useful*. It's not just a matter of employment. Work should improve our lives, serve the welfare of other people, and protect and celebrate the creation.
- ▶ *appropriate to our abilities*. Lord Peter Wimsey's detective-novelist wife Harriet Vane observes, "A ploughshare is a nobler object than a razor. But if your natural talent is for barbering, wouldn't it be better to be a barber, and a good barber...? However grand



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the job may be, is it your job?" Rather than measuring jobs for their prestige or power, we should enjoy work for which we are well-suited. Good work makes use of our giftedness.

- ▶ *varied*. Overly mechanistic, assembly-line work dampens our creativity and imagination. The Christian's "task is not to run away from the machines, but to learn to use them so that they work in harmony with human nature instead of injuring or oppressing it," Sayers writes.
- ▶ *endlessly challenging*. As we hone skills and develop our giftedness over time and through trials, our creativity grows.

Study Questions

1. Is your work meaningful when measured by Sayers's criteria? If not, how can it become more meaningful?
2. We ask a new acquaintance, "What do you do?" Should we also ask "Why do you do it?" and "How do you do it?"
3. "In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing" celebrates artists' work as creative and prophetic contributions to God's kingdom. Can other kinds of meaningful work be prophetic as well? How can our work reveal "truth we need to know" in both "life's dirges and life's dances"?

Departing Hymn: "In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing"

In their speaking, art, and writing,
in their music, hear God's voice.

Why composer, painter, poet,
why the note and color choice?
God has whispered, granted glances,
to the prophets, who, then, show
that life's dirges and life's dances
harbor truth we need to know.

In their speaking, art, and writing,
in their music, prophets know
that their gifting has a calling;
through their living it must flow.

Ev'ry morning, in their waking,
prophets hear, as being taught,
words to bolster weak and weary;
often, words they have not sought.

Back to old days for the new days,
to the path from which we've strayed.
With the truth before them always,
preaching, painting, lest it fade.
Call us forward, to the morning,
lead us to God's promised day.
Through the darkness, from our wand' ring,
write and paint and sing the way.

Terry W. York

Suggested Tunes: EIGHTH AND SPEIGHT or BEECH SPRING

The Mystery of Vocation

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Question 1 or 2 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how our work can be a source of fulfillment and blessing, such that we celebrate God's creativity through our craftsmanship.
2. To recognize that work becomes meaningful when it is useful, appropriate to our abilities, varied, and endlessly challenging.
3. To critique the mechanistic nature of much contemporary work.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Inklings of Glory (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting. Download "In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing" set to the tune EIGHTH AND SPEIGHT from the Center's ethics library, www.ChristianEthics.ws. Or locate the familiar tune BEECH SPRING in your church hymnal.

Begin with a Quote

In reply to a reviewer, Sayers once wrote: "[Some today assume that] mankind's normal way of working approximates to that of the conveyor-belt, to which each operative contributes his small, standardized operation with as little variation as may be. Now this may be usual, but it is not the normal, in the sense of the natural function of an artist, or of a craftsman—or indeed of a human being at all; it is the function of a machine; and we cannot subdue either art or man to the rhythm of the machine without destroying their proper nature as man and art" (quoted in *Inklings of Glory*, p. 63).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group, especially those related to work. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Galatians 1:1-12 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Dorothy Sayers believes that when our work is performed with creativity and imagination, we are laboring along the grain of divine intention. Too often the mechanistic world of work dampens human creativity and imagination. Our task "is not to run away from the machines but to learn to use them so that they work in harmony with human nature instead of injuring or oppressing it." Only when we serve God in our work lives, and cease aiming merely to please bosses or meet corporate quotas, can the assembly-line sickness of our work be cured.

Sayers critiques the spiritually hazardous patterns of work, especially defined as simple employment and the production of goods. She also urges us to develop a sacramental attitude toward work—that in

and through our labor, God also is working to bring God's kingdom. This attitude brings not only a proper understanding of an employer's duty to the workforce, but also a profound sense of the laborer's duty to the work. By contrast, work and worker both suffer in the modern economics-based culture: "The worker becomes bored with work he finds meaningless, and the work is often shoddy." Only when we can say with the apostle Paul that "If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10), will we measure our work by the "absolute values" of God's kingdom.

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to use Sayers's four criteria to evaluate their work lives. Perhaps they will suggest additional standards for meaningfulness in their labor. Must our work satisfy all of these criteria in order to be meaningful before God?

What should we do if our work is useless, inappropriate to our talents, monotonous, or mundane. Sayers was fortunate to change her career: she left behind her less-fulfilling writing of advertisements and mystery novels in order to pursue theological reflection and understanding of Dante's great poetry. Most people do not have the financial flexibility to make such a total change, but we can encourage one another to do work worthy of our best efforts, whether we do "church embroidery, or sewage farming." Meaningful work is not only defined by *what* we do, but *how* and *why* we do it. If our work seems meaningless, a sacramental understanding of work can help us see it in a new light. If change of career or employment is called for, the congregation can help us learn a true sense of usefulness, discern our talents and interests, and forge a meaningful and creative work life.

2. Sayers encourages us to see work not merely as employment, but a celebration of the material world as the expression of God's creativity. This is what she means by a "sacramental view" of work — our participation with God in creative projects worthy of our efforts. We answer the question "*What* do you do?" by describing our title or position in the company. The questions of *why* and *how* we work would encourage us to mention the richer meaning of our work: "I work to serve God's kingdom by..." and "I do my best and grow in my work because..." would be appropriate answers. Going beyond *what* to *why* and *how* we work would allow us to reflect the joy in our work and the creativity with which we do it. "If I were still trying to please men," scolds Paul, "I would not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10). We serve Christ best in our jobs when our work is a testimony to God's good creating.
3. Perhaps all meaningful human work to some degree images for the world the creative activity of God: as useful and caring beyond measure, as endlessly varied, and as patient and persistent to accomplish its good purpose. Interestingly, our work's meaning rests neither on its ability to stave off discontent nor to foster happiness. Our work prophetically reveals that both "life's dirges and life's dances harbor truth we need to know."

If our work truly has a future to it, as Detective Inspector Parker assumes, then we might endure the "dirges" and appreciate the "dances" that arise within our work lives. Dirges are necessary trials in the endlessly challenging world of meaningful work. It is the hardest of tasks to find the goodness and truth in a "dead-end" job. We must always ask who defines a particular job as "dead-end" and dirgeful? If such definition relies upon commitments to power, prestige, and excessive wages, then the truth to be found is that these are pillars of a deformed view of work that the gospel rejects. When we can find the truth by enduring the "dirges," then we have appreciation all the more for the "dances."

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.