



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

- 📖 Deepening the Mystery of Freedom  
(*Freedom*, pp. 64-73)

### Suggested Article:

- 📖 Under Assault  
(*Freedom*, pp. 44-47)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Deepening the Mystery of Freedom

As freedom becomes the single ambition that possesses Hazel Motes – the protagonist in Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood* – freedom’s competing definitions dramatically play out through plot twists and turns. “Freedom cannot be conceived simply,” O’Connor observes. “It is a mystery and one which a novel...can only be asked to deepen.”

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 3:17-18

### Meditation†

All of us are made according to the image of God. But only those who through great love have enslaved their own freedom to God are in his likeness. When we no longer belong to ourselves, then we are similar to him who has reconciled us to himself through love.

*Diadochus of Photikē* (5th Century)

### Reflection

In her first novel, *Wise Blood* (1952), Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964) deepens the mystery of freedom by contrasting two views of it through the extreme life of Hazel Motes: a popular modern view of freedom as personal autonomy and a Christian view that accepts our limitations as creatures made in God’s image, living in a world that is divinely ordered.

Since O’Connor believes every free act is significant for leading us either toward or away from our true end, she does not neutrally depict the differences between these views or seek some compromise between them. Rather, she shows that the modern freedom of autonomy is imprisoning because it is based on the illusion that we can control our lives. O’Connor depicts how accepting Christ’s gift of freedom (along with our creaturely limitations) enables us to become our true selves, the people God made us to be. Her protagonist Hazel Motes eventually comes to understand this positive conception of freedom through the back door, by his failure to achieve the impossible autonomous freedom he so desperately seeks.

Hazel’s striving for autonomy degenerates as he grows older:

- ▶ *As a child* Hazel believes his family’s teaching that Jesus shed his blood for our sins, but he does not willingly accept this gift of salvation. Instead, he does everything he can to avoid it. By carefully controlling his desires and managing his experiences, Hazel tries to live a perfect life that limits how much he is indebted to Christ’s saving work on the cross and reduces his need for anything external to his own capacities.
- ▶ *As an adolescent* Hazel’s longing for autonomy undergoes a radical transition when he is drafted into the army and new friends give him very different ideas about God and humanity. No longer must he futilely strive against his family’s Christian perspective; instead he embraces a view of reality that is compatible with his desire for freedom as autonomy. Hazel becomes a nihilist: he believes there is no God and devil to choose between (since



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nothing is valuable at all) and he has no immortal soul (because it is only a burden, making him indebted to God for its perfection).

- ▶ As an adult Hazel moves to the big city and preaches his newfound nihilism – starting what he calls the Church Without Christ. However, he discovers “The Church Without Christ don’t have a Jesus but it needs one! It needs a new Jesus...one that’s all man, without blood to waste.” His belief in nothing becomes focused on what human beings can do for themselves – apart from any prescribed goal or *telos*.

Hazel Motes does not gain the autonomous freedom he longs for, and cannot escape his attraction to the Christian view of reality taught to him as a child. His thinking is haunted by Christ, even when he proclaims, “Nothing matters but that Jesus don’t exist.” Ironically, Hazel’s proclamation implies that Jesus Christ’s existence is what matters most, if anything matters at all.

For modern readers who think belief in Christ is no great matter, “Hazel’s integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind,” O’Connor notes in her introduction to the novel. “For the author Hazel’s integrity lies in his not being able to.”

### Study Questions

1. Contrast the two views of freedom that Flannery O’Connor explores in *Wise Blood*. What is most valuable on each view?
2. Review the extreme nihilistic ideas that Hazel Motes preaches in the Church Without Christ. How do they parody some popular ideas of freedom in American culture?
3. With the meditation of Diadochus of Photikē as your guide, reflect on 2 Corinthians 3:17-18. How does this apostolic teaching relate to O’Connor’s vision of Christian freedom that freely embraces creaturely limitation?
4. How does Martin Schongauer depict the spiritual freedom of St. Anthony the Great of Egypt (c. 251-356) in the etching *Saint Anthony Abbot Tempted by Demons*? Contrast the saint’s freedom to the autonomy that Hazel Motes seeks.

### Departing Hymn: “Make Me a Captive, Lord” (vv. 1a and 4)

Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free;  
force me to render up my sword, and I shall conqueror be.  
My will is not my own till you have made it yours;  
if it would reach a monarch’s throne, it must its crown abjure.

It only stands unbent amid the clashing strife,  
when on your bosom it has leant, and found in you its life.

George Matheson (1842-1906), alt.

Suggested Tunes: ST. MICHAEL or TRENTHAM

† Diadochus of Photikē, *Discourses on Judgment and Spiritual Discernment*, chapter 4, in Cliff Ermatinger, trans., *Following the Footsteps of the Invisible: The Complete Works of Diadochus of Photikē* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010).

# Deepening the Mystery of Freedom

## Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To contrast two views of freedom explored by Flannery O'Connor in her novel *Wise Blood*—freedom as autonomy from external limitations, and freedom as a welcome embrace of God's gift and creaturely limitations.
2. To consider the cultural critique suggested by the nihilistic sermons of her protagonist, Hazel Motes, in his Church Without Christ.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Freedom (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Make Me a Captive, Lord" locate one of the familiar tunes ST. MICHAEL or TRENTHAM in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Reading from the Novel

Flannery O'Connor recounts one of Hazel Motes' memorable nihilistic sermons:

"The next night, Haze parked the Essex in front of the Odeon Theater and climbed up on it and began to preach. 'Let me tell you what I and this church stand for!' He called from the nose of the car.... 'I preach there are all kinds of truth, your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is there's no truth,' he called. 'No truth behind all truths is what I and this church preach! Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place.'

"'Nothing outside you can give you any place,' he said. 'You needn't to look at the sky because it's not going to open up and show no place behind it.... You can't go neither forwards nor backwards into you daddy's time nor your children's if you have them. In yourself right now is all the place you've got. If there was any Fall, look there, if there was any Redemption, look there, and if you expect any Judgment, look there, because they all three will have to be in your time and your body and where in your time and body can they be?'

"'Where in your time and your body has Jesus redeemed you?' he cried. 'Show me where because I don't see the place. If there was a place where Jesus had redeemed you that would be the place for you to be, but which of you can find it?..'

"'Who is that that says it's your conscience?' he cried, looking around.... 'Your conscience is a trick,' he said, 'it don't exist though you may think it does, and if you think it does, you had best get it out in the open and hunt it down and kill it, because it's no more than your face in the mirror is or your shadow behind you.'" (Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007], 165-166)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for grace to embrace the limitations inherent for humans beings made in God's image and to grow in his likeness.

### **Scripture Reading**

Ask a group member to read 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 from a modern translation.

### **Meditation**

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

### **Reflection**

This discussion focuses on the depiction of Christian freedom in Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood*, largely and inversely through the spiritual degeneration of her protagonist Hazel Motes. A grotesque and often hilarious figure, Motes is a modern everyman who seeks personal autonomy without any limitations, including the love and saving action of Jesus Christ. "I don't think you should write something as long as a novel around anything that is not of the gravest concern to you and everybody else," O'Connor once wrote in a letter, "and for me this is always the conflict between an attraction to the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of the times." *Wise Blood* centers on this tension—the concurrent desires to embrace God and to reject God's existence, and the free will that we are given to choose between them.

### **Study Questions**

1. Hazel Motes hilariously seeks freedom as personal autonomy. According to this popular modern idea, freedom is opposed to any external limitation or standard; the free person values independence, self-reliance, and self-invention.  
On the Christian view, by contrast, freedom is the positive ability to grow more fully into God's likeness. The free person embraces the limitations inherent in the human condition and seeks to conform to the standards of God's nature over the desires of her personal will. She values the gift of God's grace that allows humans to grow more fully into God's likeness.  
These two understandings of freedom are at work in the fictional world of Hazel Motes, but they are also at work in our own. Encourage members to discuss examples of these opposed ideas of freedom in our culture and in their personal experience.
2. Though Hazel Motes is an extreme fictional character, many of his preachments—e.g., that there is only personal truth and thus no absolute truth; that all one needs is a good car—are apparent throughout our consumerist society. Ask members to come up with their own examples. A careful analysis of the sermon excerpt above should produce a fruitful discussion of how his views parody some common assumptions in modern culture.
3. The meditation and the scripture reading express the deep mystery of an active freedom to grow, through God's grace, into likeness to God. Freedom is not negative (i.e., an absence of constraint and influence), but positive (i.e., growth into the structure of limitation which is our identity as human beings made in God's image). In this sense, freedom is not something others can take away from us. We are made in God's image and are free to fill out this natural capacity by growing in likeness to God through participation in our own sanctification, regardless of any external constraint, exploitation, or mistreatment.  
Encourage members to discuss what it means to grow in likeness to God. Diadochus of Photikē identifies self-giving love that reconciles our enemies as a mark of likeness to God.
4. Martin Schongauer's *St. Anthony Tempted by Demons* depicts the saint's face as calm even while he is being attacked by terrifying demons. St. Anthony knows what Hazel Motes learns in *Wise Blood*: true freedom is not something that can be hijacked, wrecked, or stolen like a car. Trials of violence and evil cannot take this freedom away from those who embrace it as Christ did on the cross. "Like Anthony, we are not immune to life's temptations," Heidi Hornik and Bob Kruschwitz write. "They are opportunities for faithful obedience and resistance to evil. Through our struggle against them we participate in God's gift of spiritual freedom." By contrast to St. Anthony, Hazel Motes is a driven person who knows he is losing the war against his inner demons of vainglory, anger, and lust, but especially pride.

### **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.