



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Doing Good Work
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 58-64)

Suggested Articles:

📖 A Mirror to Nature
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 54-55)

📖 Enjoying a Wintry Park
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 56-57)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Doing Good Work

Wendell Berry envisions good work—the sort of work that connects us caringly to our place and honors the gifts that we have received of land and life, of membership in a holy creation—as the practical means to fulfill our divine calling to love and steward creation. Given our inevitable ignorance of the places we care for, good work requires cultural practices that develop key virtues like fidelity and humility to guide and delimit our work.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 80:7-19

Reflection

“What are people for?” Wendell Berry answers we are fellow members and stewards of God’s beloved creation, which should lead us to the “inescapably necessary work of restoring and caring for our farms, forests, and rural towns and communities.”

But while Berry’s vision of humans doing good work to care for the places where they live is enticing, it is very daunting “in our globalized consumer economy,” Jeff Bilbro remarks. “It is hard to imagine what good, caring work on behalf of the world might look like when reliance on electronics and labor-saving technologies obscures the Christian belief that God has given humans meaningful work to do, and instead encourages us to act as if humans are pleasure-seeking units of consumption.”

Berry says good work that restores and cares for the world:

► *is thoroughly grounded in God’s love.* He confesses, “I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love.” God’s love is expressed in Christ, who was God incarnate in a particular place and time. Jesus cares for all sufferers with “not just a feeling...[but] a practical love.”

If our love for the world is to be fully practical like Jesus’ love, then paradoxically it must be both universal and very particular. It “cannot stop until it includes all Creation, for all creatures are parts of a whole upon which each is dependent, and it is a contradiction to love your neighbor and despise the great inheritance on which his life depends,” Berry notes. But “love is never abstract” and so puts itself in “the presence of the work that must be done” in a particular place.

► *requires fidelity, humility, and imagination.* Since we must care for persons, places, or processes in the world that we do not fully understand, our best work is done in the bounds of rich cultural practices like farming, marriage, teaching, medicine, and worship. Such practices share accumulated insight, draw us into supportive communities, and inculcate virtues we need to guide our work. Caring for things requires commitment, awareness of our limits, and imagination “to envision and embrace...how we can participate in healing broken places and preserving abundant life,” Bilbro explains. “When it is disciplined by virtues like fidelity and humility, our work can contribute to the healing of both our damaged places and our insufficient imaginations; work thus cultivates a reciprocal relation between imagination and reality.”



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► *starts small*. We learn to do good work – to love faithfully and humbly, to exercise and correct imagination by attending to reality – by doing it. But getting started in a consumer culture seems difficult, if not impossible. We have learned to mass-produce products we will never use for people we will never see; to shop for another spouse, friend, or congregation when a current one does not please. So, caring for creation is more than we can handle! In our predicament, Berry suggests starting with good work where we are – like growing a garden. This is not copping out, it is going to school. Bilbro explains, “Our imaginations will be expanded as we participate in the healthy economy of the soil, where water and sun and organic nutrients, brought together with human care, grow good food. We will then be better able to imagine how this healthy pattern of the Kingdom of God might be cultivated in our marriages, churches, and communities.”

Bilbro adapts a conclusion from Berry’s essay about how language binds us to one another: “‘When we promise in love and awe and fear, there is a certain kind of mobility we give up. We give up the romanticism of progress.... We are [working] where we stand, and we shall stand afterwards in the presence of what we have [worked].’ And if our work is done with love, humility, and fidelity, we will be standing in a healthier place.”

Study Questions

1. According to Wendell Berry, what is good work and why should we do it? What virtues will we need in every case?
2. List some opportunities to do good work in your life roles. Select one role and discuss the barriers to doing good work.
3. What new good work can you take up that would care for creation? How can your congregation support you?
4. How is God depicted as doing good work in Psalm 80:7-19?
5. Consider how Asher B. Durand’s *Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York* and George Bellows’s *The Palisades* depict humans doing good work to care for the creation.
6. Trace the theme of humans doing good work through Burt Burlleson’s hymn “Chosen in Creation’s Plan.”

Departing Hymn: “Chosen in Creation’s Plan”

Chosen in creation’s plan, set in place by God’s own hand,
blessed to bless all life in deed, naming, taming earth in need.
Like our Maker, every care, ours to nurture and to bear,
every sacred treasure known, held as gifts but never owned.

Every being, all that is, each in the Creator lives;
not a thing apart, alone – yet creation longs and groans.
Shamed, we separate in sin, Eden lost time and again;
thorns and thistles, dust to dust, hear the gospel, now we must.

Chosen in redemption’s plan, set in place by God’s own hand,
blessed to bless all life in need, setting right with truth and deed.
Like our Savior, every care, ours to nurture and to bear,
all of life a treasure known, lifted high to heaven’s throne.

Burt Burlleson

Tune: BOZRAH

Doing Good Work

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

1. To understand Wendell Berry's concept of doing good work in caring for creation.
2. To consider why we should do good work, and what virtues we will need (in every case) to do it.
3. To reflect on the depiction of good work in painting and poetry.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Caring for Creation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

"By forcing us to grapple with physical reality, work can reveal our misconceptions of our places," Jeff Bilbro writes. "In Berry's novel *A Place on Earth*, Virgil Feltner wants to grow crops on a steep Kentucky hillside, but when he attempts to work out this vision, heavy rains wash away the plowed soil and cause lasting damage to the land." Virgil's father, Max, recalls the morning after the storm:

It was hurt. Bound to have been. There's no way to plow sideling ground so it'll hold in a rain like that. "Virgil," I said, "this is your fault. This is one of your contributions to the world." That was hard for me to say. And he took it hard. I saw he was about to cry. As bad as I hated to do it, I let it work in him while we stood there and looked. I knew he was hating the day he ever thought of raising a crop, ready to give up. Finally I put my arm around him and I said, "Be sorry, but don't quit. What's asked of you now is to see what you've done, and learn better." I told him that a man's life is always dealing with permanence—that the most dangerous kind of irresponsibility is to think of your doings as temporary. That, anyhow, is what I've tried to keep before myself. What you do on the earth, the earth makes permanent."

Wendell Berry, *A Place on Earth* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2001 [1967]), 180

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 to guide you to opportunities to do good work in caring for creation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 80:7-19 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this study Jeff Bilbro guides our reflection on the concept of "good work" in the writings of Wendell Berry (b. 1934), a renowned agrarian writer and a farmer in Henry County, KY. The primary focus is on loving and stewarding the creatures and places of the natural environment, both cultivated and uncultivated. However, consider how the concept also applies to our caring for the people and institutions in our lives.

Study Questions

1. By doing "good work," Wendell Berry refers to the meaningful tasks of caring for the world that God has given to humans. Jeff Bilbro explains: "Human work should serve the health of all God's creation, Berry

insists. He uses 'the Kingdom of God' to refer to this healthful creation – the source of all real value; it is an economic order in which 'the fall of every sparrow is a significant event' and an ecological process through which sunlight and soil make 'life out of death.'" We'll need virtues specific to the particular thing we are caring for – a farm, forest, community, family, congregation, etc. – but in every case we'll need fidelity, humility, and loving imagination. These virtues are salient because we are working with creatures, places, and processes we cannot fully understand. We must learn to care for things by imagining their good, remaining faithful to them, and humbly correcting our inevitable mistakes.

2. Encourage members to reflect on good work in caring for their particular family members, friends, work-places, congregation, neighborhood, etc., as well as particular creatures, places, or processes of the natural world. Select one thing and consider why it is difficult to understand, imagine its good, remain faithful to it, and humbly accept one's limitations in caring for it. Berry notes that our consumer-driven culture undermines loving attention, faithfulness, and acceptance of limitations. Discuss how his analysis applies to the case at hand.
3. Members might select a project that extends their current good work, or one that is different in some way that stretches their understanding and love. Discuss how other members of the congregation might provide knowledge about the good of the people, creatures, places, or processes that are involved, encouragement to withstand the difficulties, or cooperation in doing the work. Consider how the elements of the primary work of the congregation, which is worship and praise of God, engenders loving imagination, faithfulness, and humility.
4. The Psalm depicts God as caring for the people of Israel as a loving gardener transplants a grapevine into verdant soil and then protects it from scavenging animals and human intruders. This image of God's people as his vine or vineyard is common in prophetic writings (cf. Jeremiah 2:21 and 6:9; Ezekiel 15 and 17:1-10; Hosea 10:1 and 14:7). Jesus deploys the image in the parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1-12) and transforms it in his teaching "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower" (John 15:1 ff.).
5. Asher B. Durand's *Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York* celebrates the beauty of a particular human-cultivated landscape. Heidi Hornik reports that "his meticulous attention to the details of the landscape enables viewers today to locate the exact position from which he painted this scene." He depicts a picnicking family enjoying the vista that includes contented cattle and sheep, and cultivated fields, stands of trees, and ponds.

George Bellows *The Palisades* portrays a harmonious use of the Hudson River environs for recreation (the foreground figures stroll through "the snowy terrain of the park") and commerce (in the background are fishing buildings and a steam engine). Hornik explains, "In this image we see Bellows, like Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand before him, turning from the urbanization occurring around him to a more pure landscape tradition that emphasized the beauty of God's creation and humanity's welcoming enjoyment of it."

6. In the first verse, humans are "set in place by God's own hand / blessed to bless all life in deed." They are meant to work alongside God, their Maker: "every care, ours to nurture and to bear." They do not own the garden, but can know and care for its "sacred treasure...held as gifts but never owned." The second verse confesses the sinful work that separates us from fellowship with one another and God in the garden ("Eden lost time and again"). Nevertheless, "all that is, each in the Creator lives" in a way that allows us to "hear the gospel" of Christ's peace. In the final verse, redeemed humans are given places of responsibility to help restore the broken world ("setting right in truth and deed") as they work alongside Christ, their Savior, so that all things can honor God ("lifted high to heaven's throne").

Departing Hymn

"Chosen in Creation's Plan" is on pp. 43-45 of *Caring for Creation*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.