



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Consumer Culture and the Deformation of Work  
(*Work*, pp. 11-18)

### Suggested Articles:

📖 To Labor Not in Vain  
(*Work*, pp. 84-88)

### 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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# Consumer Culture and the Deformation of Work

Work can be a powerful source of livelihood, purpose, individual agency, social place, and connection to the divine, among other things. Yet work's ability to confer these positive meanings is threatened by the dynamics of today's consumer culture.

## Prayer

Scripture Reading: Genesis 2:1-15

## Meditation†

Somewhere along the line, Adam got a bad rap, or at least the God of Adam did. Someone...misread the story of Creation and Fall and came to the conclusion that work was a result of the Fall, not part of God's original creation design for human beings. On closer inspection, it is perfectly clear that God's good plan always included human beings working, or, more specifically, living in the constant cycle of work and rest.

*Ben Witherington III*

## Reflection

"According to the book of Genesis," Darby Ray observes, "humanity's work is intended to mirror God's work, which is to say it is intended to be fundamentally life-giving: a means of establishing our place in a complex and chaotic world; an opportunity to act on the world—shaping, building, growing, and delighting in it; and an avenue for connecting generously and responsibly to the diverse others with whom we share the world."

But the ultimate purpose of work shifts in a consumer culture. "Put simply, we work so that we can buy," Ray explains. We do not buy just the things we need to live; rather, buying "is how we integrate into society, how we participate in today's world." As the products and services we purchase begin to define us, our work becomes a means to the end of consumption. She sketches how these other good ends of work are being deformed:

- ▶ *Helping people survive.* Both rich and poor people skimp on or risk necessities of life (healthy food, reliable transportation, adequate housing, clothing, and education) to buy consumer goods they need for social acceptance. "We should also consider the role consumer culture plays in the widening gap between rich and poor, the increasing difference between minimum wage and a living wage, and other contemporary threats to work as a means of survival in today's world."
- ▶ *Giving structure (routine, discipline, reliability, integrity) to life.* Consumerism engenders an "always on the move" mindset of seeking new and better products, services, and opportunities. Ray notes, "Loyalty to the 'old,' whether a car, a job, a marriage, a community, or the religion of our upbringing, is seen as a liability.... We are more mobile than ever, and although we have hundreds, sometimes thousands, of 'connections' and 'friends,' there are precious few who know us deeply." In work this does not foster craftsmanship or encourage loyalty to a company or team, but puts the focus on one's own self-advancement.



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► *Buoying self-respect.* “The flip-side of widespread and incessant consumer craving for new products is an economy focused on the promotion of cheap goods” that everyone can aspire to have, though they last or satisfy a short time. Thus, she writes, “more and more jobs today focus on the production or sale of cheap goods or spurious services no one really needs.” But not only craftspeople suffer. Medical caregivers have intense quotas and teachers “teach the test” to survive next quarter’s performance goals.

► *Supporting individual identity.* As the value of work is reduced to a paycheck, it’s not our contribution to the world but our buying power that “puts us on the social map or gives us a place in the larger whole.” Thus, “consumerism...reduces ‘the world’ to Walmart and Wall Street and invites us to leave our mark not through creative effort or hard work but by investing our money, time, and energy in the consumer market. Work is still important, but its main value is its bankrolling of that investment.”

Ray concludes, “If we want to have lives and work that are not enslaved to consumerism, then we will have to become nonconformists. This means training our hearts and focusing our desires on the most worthwhile things—the love that endures, the work that gives life—and allowing those things to take priority over everything else.” She warns that this will “require hard work, stubborn persistence, and a community of support, for the market’s version of reality and value is pervasive and deeply ingrained.”

### Study Questions

1. What central roles does human labor have in the biblical creation story? How does this give meaning to our daily work?
2. What positive meanings can work—whether paid or volunteer, full-time or part-time—confer on our lives, according to Darby Ray? Which of these meanings have been most important in your personal experience?
3. How does consumerism alter our ultimate goal for working? Consider how this change can deform the positive meanings of work that have been most important to you.
4. According to Ray, what are some concrete steps that we can take to resist consumerism and to retrain our hearts to seek the most valuable goods of work? How might your congregation encourage and support this transformation of desire?
5. Ben Witherington III defines good work as “any necessary and meaningful task that God calls and gifts a person to do and which can be undertaken to the glory of God and for the edification and aid of human beings, being inspired by the Spirit and foreshadowing the realities of the new creation.”<sup>†</sup> How does this point to the sort of work we should seek?

### Departing Hymn: “I Offer All I Am to You”

<sup>†</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011), 2.

<sup>‡</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

# Consumer Culture and the Deformation of Work

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2, 3, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To identify the value of human work in the biblical creation story.
2. To consider how a consumerist culture reshapes human desire and thereby distorts our attitude toward work.
3. To discuss how your congregation can help members resist consumerism and retrain their hearts to seek the most valuable goods of work.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Work (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. The departing hymn "I Offer All I Am to You" is located on p. 50 of *Work*.

## Begin with a Story

Darby Ray writes, "One of my favorite ways to begin a class, workshop, or discussion about work is to ask this question: Would you work if you didn't have to? That is, if you had enough money, good healthcare and retirement options, and adequate opportunities to be with other people, would you still want to work? Despite posing this question in a wide range of settings and to diverse audiences, I almost always get the same response: a resounding 'Yes.' Those who are dissatisfied with their current work situation sometimes take a moment or two to reflect, but before long they tend to make their way to a clear affirmative answer.

"What is it about work, or about this particular moment in the history of work, that makes it an apparently indispensable dimension of what it means to be human? In other words, what work is work doing for us these days?"

How would you answer her questions? In this study she contrasts a biblical perspective on the answers with the consumerist perspective that dominates Western culture.

## 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 bless members with work through which they can express their love for God and neighbor.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Genesis 2:1-15 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

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

## Reflection

To orient us toward the Christian theological perspective on work, this study introduces the roles of labor in the biblical creation story and the positive meanings that work can confer on our lives. Those positive meanings

are grounded in the roles of work as stewardship before and partnership with God the Creator. Within a consumerist culture as the role of work shifts toward making money to purchase more and better goods and services, those positive meanings of work are threatened or deformed.

The books reviewed in Greg Clark's "To Labor Not in Vain" are excellent resources to continue your group's study of the biblical and recent Christian theological perspectives on work.

### *Study Questions*

1. In the biblical creation story, "God is first and foremost a worker. God shapes the world with intelligence and care, patiently attending to both high-level concept and nitty-gritty detail, and taking great satisfaction in both the process and the outcome of the work," Darby Ray explains. Then God creates human beings in God's own image (Genesis 1:26-27). Humans are to be stewards before God of the creation, and to work and rest with God in the Garden. This implies "that humanity's work is intended to mirror God's work, which is to say it is intended to be fundamentally life-giving: a means of establishing our place in a complex and chaotic world; an opportunity to act on the world – shaping, building, growing, and delighting in it; and an avenue for connecting generously and responsibly to the diverse others with whom we share the world."
2. Ray focuses on these positive meanings: providing resources for our survival, giving structure to our lives, fostering individual and social identities, and developing our self-respect. Work can provide these meanings whether it is full-time or part-time, paid or volunteer. (In our economy, of course, making money is often an essential means to providing the resources for survival.) Encourage members to discuss how their work experiences have had some or all of these meanings. Which meaning(s) might keep them working even if they did not need to work in order to make money?
3. Consumerism shifts the purpose of work to making money in order to purchase more and more goods and services, including many that are not needed for adequate and good living. Thus, "the value of work is reduced to a paycheck or, more accurately, to the buying power that the paycheck represents," Darby Ray explains. If time permits, form four small groups to summarize and expand on her discussion of how this shift threatens or deforms each of the positive meanings of work. Or, encourage the whole group to consider the threat to one or two positive meanings of work that they judge to be most important to them.
4. Ray mentions these steps: identifying and opposing abusive work practices encouraged by short-term profit taking, such as "wages that are too low to support life's necessities, corporations that focus on short-term gains at the expense of long-term well-being, work that trades human dignity for higher profits"; learning to judge when we have enough, and teaching our children to judge when they have enough things; "learning a craft, taking the time to develop skill and even mastery, and having the patience and foresight to teach the next generation"; and measuring our work "not primarily for the buying power our work produces but for the 'higher' goods work can confer on human life – things like livelihood, purpose and structure, self-definition, social connection, and civic responsibility."

Consider how your congregation encourages these steps. Do members recommend other stratagems to resist consumerism, such as 'fasting' from advertising and shopping, sharing essential goods between families, learning about and publicly honoring different types of work among congregation members, and so on.

5. Greg Clark briefly discusses Witherington's definition in "To Labor Not in Vain." Clark notes that "a Christian definition of work should enable us to determine what work Christians can, must, and must not do." Witherington uses words like "the new creation" to give eschatology a central place in defining good work. In the eschaton there will be no war, but there will be work. So, Witherington suggests Christians may not work to further and expand war, and they should reconsider the dream of working in order to achieve retirement.

### *Departing Hymn*

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