



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 When Work Disappoints
(*Work*, pp. 60-66)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 The Theology of Work in the New Economy
(*Work*, pp. 75-79)
- 📖 Dismissed
(*Work*, pp. 44-45)

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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When Work Disappoints

When work is linked to personal identity, this heightens the spiritual toll of underemployment and unemployment. No balm is to be found in modern motivational mantras, but in practicing the presence of God in our work.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Colossians 3:23-24

Meditation†

When we see work as tedium or unimportant, we diminish ourselves or others. Seen as a calling, work is lifted to a higher plane. Recognized as an essential part of being human, work becomes infused with holiness.

When we take work seriously and as a partnership with the Creator, we participate with God's work in the world. When we work as stewards of God's creation, our work becomes a gift to God, a blessing to others, and a labor of love for ourselves.

Jeanie Miley

Reflection

"We often experience work as an integral aspect of our personal identity; it could be described as our identity in motion," counselor Matt Beal explains. "Vocationally suitable work is both the accurate embodiment of our current identity and the realization of adequate progress toward our aspirations. In other words, our work takes on the *telos*, or goal, of our identity being developed." Beal serves clients who face disappointment in work, so he knows, "When adequate jobs are scarce, and excellent ones are even rarer, life becomes more difficult than anticipated. Dreams sometimes die, and the spiritual toll of underemployment becomes steep."

Many today would respond to this problem by urging those who have suffered disappointment to "dream big." Beal notes the secular version of this motivational strategy is consonant with the American Dream: "'if you can dream it, you can do it' because the economic environment allows single-minded, energetic persons to attain whatever financial goals and attendant lifestyle accoutrements they desire." And a theological version is lurking in the neighborhood: it is the "prosperity gospel" that says God blesses the faithful with wealth. In business seminars and congregations, then, "Dreaming big has blossomed into an exquisite flower of modern capitalism," Beal writes. "However, its pollen is an allergen hazardous to many."

The dreaming-big model promises we will find purpose in our work at the intersection of passion, mission, vocation, and profession, when these are understood in peculiarly modern ways. But Beal protests that this commonplace "promotes an unrealistically high ideal"; is misleading because people find purpose when some of these elements are missing; "makes flourishing depend too much on external, transitory conditions" of the workplace; and focuses too much on workers' "subjective responses to those conditions." He believes when Christians employ this model, "They will add insult to injury when work disappoints, rather than point people toward abundant life."

A better balm for the stress and despair that accompanies work disappointment is found in the advice of Brother Lawrence (1611-1691)



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to discern within our mundane work the presence of God. This is theologically grounded in the Apostle Paul's teaching (Colossians 3:23) and is psychologically insightful – Beal calls it “a thoroughly Christian analogue of the counseling treatment called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.”

Beal concludes, “When we follow Brother Lawrence in being mindfully aware of God’s presence in our daily work, we do not ignore the pain of disappointment, frustration, sadness, anger, and stress caused by underemployment and unemployment. Rather, we realign our purpose in a manner that allows us to cope with this pain productively, by placing our labor into the metanarrative of God’s love and work of redemption.”

Study Questions

1. How did Brother Lawrence respond when his superiors assigned him “a very unwelcome task”? What insight does Matt Beal glean from this for our work disappointments?
2. Consider how George Herbert’s “Teach Me, My God and King, in All Things Thee to See” captures the heart of Brother Lawrence’s way of finding God’s presence in ordinary work.
3. According to Robert Dickie, while “the poverty gospel” and “the prosperity gospel” appear to be polar opposites, what mistaken assumption do they share? How does the stewardship model he commends improve on those “false gospels”?
4. Discuss how Philip Evergood’s *The Pink Dismissal Slip* depicts righteous anger at being unjustly laid off from work.

Departing Hymn: “Teach Me, My God and King, in All Things Thee to See”

Teach me, my God and King,
in all things thee to see,
and what I do in anything,
to do it as for thee.

A man that looks on glass,
on it may stay his eye,
or, if he pleaseth, through it pass,
and then the heav’n espy.

All may of thee partake:
nothing can be so mean
which with this motive – “For thy sake” –
will not grow bright and clean.

This is the famous stone
that turneth all to gold;
for that which God doth touch and own
cannot for less be told.

George Herbert (1593-1633), alt.

Suggested Tunes: EMMAUS or ST. MICHAEL

† Jeanie Miley, “Worship Service,” *Work*, *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, 56 (Waco, TX: The Institute for Faith and Learning, Baylor University, 2015), 56.

When Work Disappoints

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 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the spiritual toll of underemployment (and unemployment).
2. To critique the adoption in business motivational circles and congregations of the “dream big” (or “prosperity gospel”) response to underemployment.
3. To commend—here, as a better way of addressing the spiritual toll of underemployment—Brother Lawrence’s practice of seeing the presence of God in ordinary work.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 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 articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Teach Me, My God and King, in All Things Thee to See” locate one of the tunes EMMAUS or ST. MICHAEL in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/) or Hymnary.org (www.hymnary.org).

Begin with an Observation

Robert Dickie notes, “Understanding how God sees work in relation to Christian vocation and ministry is especially important today because young people who want meaningful work are facing a very rough road in a new economy” emerging after the Great Recession that wracked the world in 2008. “This new economy increasingly offers young people only part-time work.”

With underemployment on the rise, its spiritual toll is becoming more apparent. Work psychologist Doug Maynard reports, “Research shows that underemployment, whether it is involuntary part-time employment, underpayment, or intermittent employment, has negative psychological and behavioral effects, including low self-esteem, stress, substance abuse, health problems, and depression. In fact, being underemployed may be as traumatic and damaging as being out of work entirely.” [Douglas C. Maynard, “Underemployment,” in Vincent N. Parillo, ed., *Encyclopedia of Social Problems* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 967-969, here citing 969.]

Where can we find guidance on how to respond to these debilitating spiritual effects of underemployment? In this study Matt Beal points away from some contemporary motivational commonplaces and toward the insights of the seventeenth-century monk Brother Lawrence.

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 and be present to members in their daily work.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Colossians 3:23-24 from a modern translation.

Meditation

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

Reflection

Underemployment – when workers’ must take jobs in which their skills and education are underutilized, or take part-time jobs when they are seeking full-time employment – is increasingly common. Its spiritual toll in disappointment is greatly increased when work is tied to personal identity, dignity, and fulfillment. This study focuses on a Christian pastoral response to this disappointment, which should supplement, not replace, congregational efforts to improve opportunities in the economy and to help members find adequate work.

Study Questions

1. “[Brother Lawrence] gave himself no uneasiness about it... [Rather] he said to God, It was His business he was about... So likewise in his business in the kitchen (to which he had naturally a great aversion), having accustomed himself to do everything there for the love of God, and with prayer, upon all occasions, for His grace to do his work well, he had found everything easy during the fifteen years that he had been employed there” (*The Practice of the Presence of God*, 13-14).
Beal notes that Brother Lawrence advised a simplicity of heart, or mindfulness, to focus on “‘doing our common business... (as far as we are capable) purely for the love of God.’ Rather than depending upon a convergence of passion, mission, vocation, and profession for his sense of purpose, he rooted the motivation for his work in love, claiming that despite the apparent lack in one or more such categories ‘he was pleased, when he could take up a straw from the ground for the love of God.’”
2. The hymn text, shown here as it appears in contemporary hymnals, is drawn from George Herbert’s poem *The Elixir*. [The motive “For thy sake” – called “this tincture” in Herbert’s poem – is the elixir, or medicine, that cures the disappointments of common labor.] The poet prays that his way of seeing the world would be educated by God, so that he can see God through everything. The second verse employs the analogy of looking through a telescope to the heavens rather than at the reflection of one’s own eye in the glass of the telescope eyepiece. Even the lowliest work becomes a gleaming, golden treasure (a gift to the worker, or to others?), when done out of love for God.
3. Robert Dickie contrasts “the poverty gospel” (which says possessions are evil, godly people should work only to meet their basic needs, and giving is only from a sense of duty) to “the prosperity gospel” (which says we have a right to great possessions, and should give in order to get more for ourselves). He says these “false gospels” have the same flaw: they measure work by “what we earn and what we own rather than for whom we work and why we work.” The stewardship model gets the focus right: with possessions comes responsibility for their use; in our work we should serve God’s kingdom; and we should give prayerfully and responsibly out of love for God. Ask members to consider how the stewardship model is consonant with Brother Lawrence’s experiencing the presence of God in ordinary work.
4. A specific injustice is behind *The Pink Dismissal Slip*: the artist, Philip Evergood, was severely beaten for protesting the mass firing of 1923 artists and writers by the WPA in 1936. In the painting, the main figure (an artist) holds a pink slip for “John Doe,” indicating the injustice is happening to others, and could happen to anyone. Heidi Hornik notes the image is “dominated by a vibrant, almost violent, red color” on the doors, carpet, and railing that seems to externalize the figure’s rage.

Departing Hymn

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