



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Why We Need a Vacation  
(*Traveling Well*, pp. 11-18)

### 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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# Why We Need a Vacation

When they are done well, personal and family vacations can be a corrective to both our overweening busyness and our fear of creaturely dependency. Moreover, vacations can be a joyful welcome of our grace-filled relationship with God.

### Prayer

No matter where we are, where we are going, or what we are doing, we know that we find our help in you, our Lord.

**In our coming and going, draw near to us and stay.**

We know that you watch over all our living; you have in the past, and we know that you are now.

**In our coming and going, draw near to us and stay.**

Your promise holds for the future and for eternity, and we praise and thank you for that.

**In our coming and going, draw near to us and stay. Amen.**

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:1-5

### Reflection

“Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) may seem like an unlikely advocate for personal and family vacationing” due to certain “biographical disadvantages,” Karl Aho admits. Kierkegaard “did not marry and start his own family, and rarely journeyed away from his native Copenhagen, Denmark.”

Yet in other ways, Kierkegaard is an apt guide for thinking about the significance of vacations. He is among the first Christian thinkers to reflect on work and leisure from a modern perspective, he usually addresses the topic from a “common man’s” point of view, and he knows well Tivoli, one of the first amusement parks in the world, for it opened in his hometown in 1843.

Drawing on facets of Kierkegaard’s thinking, Aho discerns several ways that taking vacations can help us grow spiritually.

- ▶ *We resist the vice of busyness.* Bustling activity can distract us from our calling “to grow into the loving, productive selves that God intends for us to be.” Aho notes that becoming these selves, for Kierkegaard, is “both a gift and a task – something we receive from God and others, and something we achieve through our attentiveness to it as a project. When we are lazy or slothful, we do not pursue this calling because it seems difficult. When we are consumed by busyness, we pursue too many other, less important things instead.” Of course, we may be inadvertently sidetracked from our relationships with God and others by the pressure of events, but sometimes we wrongly seek out and welcome distractions.

Is the remedy simply to vacation with family and friends? Aho warns us to not take busyness with us. “I struggle with doing too much during vacations,” he admits. “I want to see too many sights or visit too many people. That is a recipe for avoiding true, lasting connections with my fellow travelers, the places we go, and the new people we meet there.”

- ▶ *We wisely welcome our dependence.* Kierkegaard imagines a rather self-sufficient, prosperous fellow who knows he needs to slow down and rest, but dithers each day about going to Tivoli because he fears it reveals a shameful weakness. Aho suggests a more faithful response would be to accept “one’s need for diversions



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and acknowledge one's dependence on them – and on the God who created human beings with such needs and who makes such diversions available."

So, when is taking a vacation appropriate, rather than a frivolous indulgence or harmful distraction? "We should evaluate potential vacations according to the real needs and lasting desires of all concerned, rather than their whims or inclinations," Aho advises, and then "welcome our vacations as expressions of our human dependence on God."

► *We learn to experience deep joy.* For Kierkegaard, all human beings are "equal before God in the sense that divine grace is offered to every imperfect person – 'that is, to everyone.' Beyond worthily accepting God's grace, nothing further is required of us for salvation," Aho explains. "When we accept God's gracious welcome, the great pressure to make ourselves happy by ourselves is removed. Relieved of this onerous chore, we can finally relax and rejoice in the world in general, and in the love of friends and family in particular."

Aho concludes, "we should vacation with family and friends not only because vacations provide a counterbalance to the busyness of our lives and because our human finitude requires us to pursue diversions, but because our God-relationship frees us to enjoy God's good creation with them. To rejoice in our families and friends and, through their companionship, in the wonders of creation is a deep gladness that God intends for us."

### Study Questions

1. How, according to Søren Kierkegaard, is becoming the self that God intends for us to be "both a gift and a project"?
2. How can personal and family vacations be spiritually good for us? Do vacations need to be costly to be good?
3. Why does Kierkegaard deride "travel around the world to see rivers and mountains, new stars, flamboyant birds, freakish fish, ludicrous breeds of humanity" – exactly the sort of grand-sightseeing tour that fills glossy travel magazines? Consider what sort of vacation he would prefer, and why.
4. If you recall a wonderful personal or family vacation, consider why it is so special in your memory. What made it so restful, a great gift, or an encounter with joy?
5. In Matthew 18:1-5, what spiritual qualities of children does Jesus commend to his disciples? How would these prepare them to truly enjoy a vacation?

### Departing Hymn: "Simple Gifts"

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,  
'tis the gift to come down where we ought to be;  
and when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
'twill be in the valley of love and delight.  
When true simplicity is gained,  
to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed;  
to turn, turn will be our delight  
till by turning, turning we come 'round right.

Joseph Brackett (1797-1882)

Tune: SIMPLE GIFTS

# Why We Need a Vacation

## Lesson Plans

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

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider how personal and family vacations can be spiritually good and necessary for us.
2. To learn how to plan such spiritually refreshing vacations.

## 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 *Traveling Well (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Simple Gifts” locate the familiar folk tune SIMPLE GIFTS in your church’s hymnal or on the Web.

## Begin with a Story

When I was a child, my family very much enjoyed traveling together, but getting away for a vacation was difficult. Dad was the minister of a large congregation, and just before we left home or in the middle of our trip, some church member would fall gravely ill or pass away, and Dad would return for ministerial duty. Our carefully planned, two-week vacations inevitably were cut short by several days.

I had hoped to escape such disappointments after I married and began to travel with my wife’s family, but it was not the case. My father-in-law was too important to the railroad he worked for. When cell phones became available in 1983, he picked up a Motorola unit that looked like a white brick sporting an antenna and cost \$4,000. The calling minutes were not cheap either. That cell phone was a mixed blessing. He no longer had to search for a suitably private pay phone to call the office twice a day. However, the “brick” might ring anywhere and anytime, forcing us to stop the car where the cellular signal was strong so that he could talk business for an hour or more, while the rest of us whiled away the time with quiet conversations or naps. My mother-in-law once threatened to heave the cell phone out the window.

Undoubtedly my dad and father-in-law wanted to relax with and enjoy their families on vacation, and they knew something was wrong when they couldn’t. In this study, Karl Aho reconstructs some theological reasons why we need a vacation. Hopefully those can help us do better.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read aloud responsively the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 18:1-5 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

What does it mean to travel well? It depends, of course, on the kind of traveling we are doing. This study considers what it means to travel well on personal or family vacations. Karl Aho assumes the goals of vacationing include physical rest, spiritual restoration, and enjoyment of deepening relationships – with the family and friends who accompany us, the people we meet, the places we visit on our travels, and the God who created us for such joy. In the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, Aho identifies two spiritual attitudes that frustrate our achieving those goals: our overweening busyness and fear of creaturely dependence.

### *Study Questions*

1. Begin by listing the many resources human beings need in order to become the loving, productive self that God intends for them to be – mental and physical capacities, the care of nurturing families and loving friends, a healthy physical environment, adequate education, work opportunities, and so on. All of these are gifts. Yet they do not automatically produce loving, productive selves. Each person must welcome others' care, preserve and use environmental resources wisely, take advantage of opportunities one receives, and so on.
2. Drawing from Søren Kierkegaard's writings, Karl Aho discusses two spiritual goods that we can gain from a vacation: a lessening of the grip of the vice of busyness, and an acknowledgement and welcoming of our dependence on other people and on restful, entertaining diversions. Of course, we will be tempted to take our busyness and bossy self-sufficiency with us on our trips; when we do, our vacations might make us worse!

Encourage members to name other spiritual goods they have enjoyed on vacations: meeting new friends, enjoying the beauty of God's creation, learning more about another culture, drawing closer to traveling companions, seeing familiar places through others' eyes, and so on. How can we plan our travels in order to enjoy these good things? Ask members to select one of these good things and imagine an inexpensive vacation that can deliver that good.

3. Kierkegaard derides traveling merely for the sake of observing spectacle. Aho explains, "Such travel objectively serves as a splendid diversion, but fails in the more important inward movement of acknowledging one's dependence." Also, such travel could have wrong motives – to show off one's wealth, brag "I've been there," and so on.

What sort of personal or family vacation might Kierkegaard recommend? First, it would not divert us from the task of becoming the loving, productive selves that God wants us to be, and, second, it might help us engage in that task. Its appropriate diversions would be welcome as a sign of our dependence on God and others. They would (at least) leave us rested and restored for the work we are called to do; they might enrich our lives and make us better persons by helping us know more about ourselves, form deeper relationships with others, appreciate and care for God's wonderful creation, and so on.

4. Invite members to describe their especially wonderful personal or family vacations. Use the template of goods discussed by Aho (or the longer list that members developed in response to question two) to reflect on why those vacations were so memorably pleasing.
5. In contrast to the disciples, the children whom Jesus commends are humble (Matthew 18:4). They are not preoccupied or overly concerned about their status or rank. Humility is a corrective to inordinate status-seeking. It undermines a status-chaser's busyness and desire for self-sufficiency. It helps us admit our limits (to ourselves and others), rest (when it's appropriate), and welcome our need for relationship and shared time with others.

### *Departing Hymn*

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