



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection

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Study Guides for Inklings of Glory

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to help us appreciate how Tolkien, Lewis, and Sayers's stories can transform our vision to glimpse God's glory-reflected dignity in human beings and profoundly sacrificial moral demands. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

The Baptized Imagination 2

How do stories transform moral vision? The stories of Tolkien, Lewis, and Sayers enable us to see "the enduring goodness at the heart of all things and our fundamental connection with all creation." They nourish our deep hunger for transcendence, significance, and community.

Irrigating Deserts with Moral Imagination 4 (C. S. Lewis)

Without imagination, moral education is a wasteland of abstract reflections on principles that we might never put into practice. With imagination, we connect principles to everyday life and relate to the injustices others face when we picture what they experience. Stories develop our moral imagination and nurture the judgments of our heart.

Permanent Things (C. S. Lewis) 6

In his fiction Lewis displays "the permanent things" – those features of the moral order to the cosmos that in turn hold all cultures and eras accountable. Can this natural order, because it commends itself to reason and lies beyond current political fashions, be a bridge between Christian and non-Christian morality?

Frodo's Forgiveness (J. R. R. Tolkien) 8

Tolkien captures the transcendent quality of love, utterly unknown either to warrior cultures of the ancient world or to our equally merciless culture of consumption. "The pity of Bilbo" is not only for Middle-earth; it's the key to our transformation as well.

Live Large, Dream Small (J. R. R. Tolkien) 10

God calls us to dream small – to live within limits, instead of destroying creation so we can have more. At the same time, we are called to live large – to live with courage and passion as we give ourselves to the greatest quest of serving God in peace, justice, and harmony.

The Mystery of Vocation (Dorothy L. Sayers) 12

Our creative work can be a source of fulfillment and blessing, and a celebration of God's creativity through the material world. Indeed, we are most like our Creator when we create.



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Focus Article:

📖 The Baptized Imagination
(*Inklings of Glory*,
pp. 11-20)

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The Baptized Imagination

How do stories transform moral vision? The stories of Tolkien, Lewis, and Sayers enable us to see “the enduring goodness at the heart of all things and our fundamental connection with all creation.” They nourish our deep hunger for transcendence, significance, and community.

Prayer

O God, we are grateful for the gift of friendship and the grace it confers and the grace it inspires. We thank You especially for the friendship of the Inklings, whose coming together grants a model by which brothers and sisters can come together in reverent awe and unabashed praise.

Thank You for the agility of their minds and hearts that challenges us even today to look within and without for new means of seeing and believing. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 14:15-24

Reflection

As Jesus enjoys a sabbath banquet with a leading Pharisee (Luke 14:1), a guest announces in a haze of self-righteousness, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Jesus tells the parable of a great dinner, which exposes the fellow’s pride, yet extends to everyone the gracious invitation to join God’s feast. Like all parables, this one has two levels: a fictional tale and an underlying reality that it reveals to an attentive listener. “In effect,” Kline Snodgrass keenly remarks, “parables are imaginary gardens with real toads in them.”[†]

C. S. Lewis said about his experience of reading the fantasy stories by nineteenth-century pastor George MacDonald, “I know nothing that gives me such a feeling of spiritual healing of being washed as to read MacDonald.” Stories can “baptize our imagination” and transform our moral vision when they feed the deep hunger of the human heart for:

- ▶ *transcendence*, by encouraging a “bi-focal” perspective to “perceive the brokenness in our lives and our world, while simultaneously being drawn into the wonder of goodness and grace at the heart of all things.” This counters our tendency to avoid life’s struggles, because we are overwhelmed by human suffering and have lost sight of God’s kingdom that Jesus proclaimed, or because we retreat into escapism. With “gifts from baptized imagination,” Dearborn writes, “we are emboldened to come out of our comfort and fears and to participate in God’s purpose of drawing all things into God’s ‘bright shadow.’”
- ▶ *significance*, as they “ignite a sense of the significance of our own life and of each life we encounter, no matter how seemingly inconsequential. We can see more clearly through story that people’s lives and actions have lasting impact.” Stories help us see that truly significant actions often occur out of the spotlight. Significant actions require endurance and commitment, and “inspired stories reveal that pragmatic solutions are less important than personal character formed through discipline and



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determination." Finally, these stories reveal how significance involves taking up humble responsibilities, not acting out of pride. "None of these ways of significance should surprise those who follow Jesus," says Dearborn. "His way among us was hidden and inglorious. His was a long-suffering way of endurance. And he too relinquished his rights as the Son of God to bring liberation and the defeat of evil. The baptized imagination is able to convey these truths as newly enfolded so that the old truths shine with greater radiance and relevance for our own lives."

► *community*, as the imagined rational creatures that populate the Inklings' fantasy stories clarify the nature of our common humanity. In their fellowship we see diversity and the power of grace that sustains their unity. In *The Lord of the Rings*, contrast the dreary sameness of the nine Ringwraiths to the rich diversity of gifts among the nine members of the Fellowship. "As hobbits, humans, elf, and dwarf are all clothed with elvish cloaks, Christians can be reminded that in the midst of many differences we are all clothed in Christ, and need one another on the frontlines to which we are daily called." Further, we see their enduring fellowship requires sacrifice, "for relationships thrive with self-giving not self-aggrandizement.... The baptism of the imagination can serve to remind us that dying to oneself is the foundation of every relationship and every healthy community."

Not every story, of course, takes us "through cleansing waters to baptize the imagination." Morally discouraging and purely escapist stories can "blur our vision, blunt our sense of purpose, and inhibit us from wanting to get anywhere near the authentic realities of people and creation." Human imagination rises to be incisive and inspiring. George MacDonald believed, only by the "presence of the Spirit of God." That is why he preferred to call us "makers" rather than "creators"; at its best, our storytelling is done in prayerful dependence on God's creativity.

Study Questions

1. What does Dearborn mean by "bi-focal" moral vision, and why is it important in the moral life?
2. Using examples from C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, or other favorite writers, illustrate how stories can remind us of the significance of each human person and call us to true community.
3. Do you have a favorite parable in the Bible? How does it "baptize your imagination" or enrich your moral vision?
4. In addition to satisfying our deep hunger for transcendence, significance, and community, can stories enrich our moral vision in other ways?
5. What kind of stories do you enjoy reading? Which recent television dramas and movies have been your favorites? Why are these valuable to you?

Departing Hymn: "Imagination's Stream"

¹K. R. Snodgrass, "Parable," in Joel B. Green, et al., eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 594.



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Focus Article:

📖 Irrigating Deserts with Moral Imagination
(*Inklings of Glory*, pp. 20-28)

Suggested Article:

📖 Back to the Future
(*Inklings of Glory*, pp. 38-43)

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Irrigating Deserts with Moral Imagination

Without imagination, moral education is a wasteland of abstract reflections on principles that we might never put into practice. With imagination, we connect principles to everyday life and relate to the injustices others face when we picture what they experience. Stories develop our moral imagination and nurture the judgments of our heart.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 119:9-16

Responsive Reading†

Jesus told them a parable: “Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?

A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher.

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye?

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.

The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

Reflection

Moral education is as much about shaping students’ hearts as training their minds. Becoming morally attuned to other people and the natural world involves more than merely coming to understand our obligations toward them. It requires our loving them as they deserve to be loved, taking offense when others deliberately abuse them, and feeling remorse if we’ve purposely harmed them. Qualifying for a moral ‘diploma,’ therefore, is more akin to being deeply and steadfastly in love, than to earning a perfect score on the toughest math exam. As moral ‘graduates’ we will experience joy, indignation, and shame when we should and for good reasons.

Just as it takes a lover to teach about love, only a person whose heart is morally attuned can provide effective moral instruction. Or, as Jesus quips, “Can a blind person guide a blind person?” (Luke 6:39). He warns us to remove the logs from our own eyes before we try to improve our pupils’ moral vision.

This truth about teachers comes out in response to the psalmist’s query, “How can young people keep their way pure?” (119:9). The answer turns out to be intensely personal and confessional: “I, the



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teacher, must treasure God's word in my heart, so that I may not sin against God" (11). To be good teachers, we must first be pupils before God—"teach me your statutes" (12)—and our truthful speech requires that we not only meditate on, but also take deep joy in God's precepts (14-16).

In *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis explains that young people will develop practical reason, or become skilled at discerning what they should do, only when they:

- ▶ *learn objective standards*. They should embrace norms and values that are true regardless of our opinion about them.
- ▶ *develop proper emotional responses*. They should learn "to feel pleasure, liking, disgust, and hatred at those things which really are pleasant, likeable, disgusting, and hateful," Lewis says. These properly trained emotions become an essential, powerful ally of the intellect in molding their behavior.

Young people's practical reason continues to develop as they read and respond to literature. "The imaginativeness of stories enables children to form and internalize 'sentiments,' those complex combinations of feelings and opinions which provide a basis for action or judgment," Schakel observes. "In 'On Three Ways of Writing for Children,' Lewis wrote that a writer should not impose a moral lesson upon a story: 'Let the pictures [i.e., verbal images] tell you their own moral.' Here, in sum, is Lewis on the moral imagination: the moral of the story must be embodied in the images and the images can be perceived only through the imagination."

Study Questions

1. Do you agree that it is important for a teacher to be a moral exemplar, to be a person whose emotions and intellect are properly attuned? Can children and young people learn to be moral if they have immoral teachers?
2. In the context of this study of moral education, discuss Jesus' saying: "A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher" (Luke 7:40).
3. What does Lewis mean by "sentiments"? Why is the formation of proper sentiments so essential to moral education?
4. What stories have shaped your moral imagination? What images of virtues like self-control and generosity, or vices like pride and cowardice, have stayed with you after reading or hearing a story?
5. In the late medieval period, Christians valued legends like *St. George and the Dragon*. What sentiments would it encourage in readers?
6. Does your congregation tell stories about "local saints"—women and men in the church whose exemplary discipleship continues to shape the faith of members today?

Departing Hymn: "Imagination's Stream"

†Luke 6:39-45.



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Focus Article:

📖 Permanent Things
(*Inklings of Glory*,
pp. 54-58)

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Permanent Things

In his fiction C. S. Lewis displays “the permanent things” – those features of the moral order to the cosmos that in turn hold all cultures and eras accountable. Can this natural order, because it commends itself to reason and lies beyond current political fashions, be a bridge between Christian and non-Christian morality?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 119:89-96

Responsive Reading[†]

All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves.

They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

Reflection

We’ve all missed the mark, concludes the Apostle Paul (Romans 3:23). And our miss is sinful, not merely bad luck, or an accident, or carelessness, for we’ve violated standards that we knew we were created to obey. Those objective standards measure us all.

Paul is very thankful that he was raised Jewish, or “under the law” – (“we are Jews by birth, not Gentile sinners” he reminds the Galatians). Yet, though Jews enjoy the benefit of hearing the law read in the synagogue, “it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous ...but the doers of the law” – and no one is a faultless doer. What about the rest of the people who “do not possess the law”? Gentiles have no excuse either, Paul reasons, for “their own conscience also bears witness.” As children of the Creator, “what the law requires is written on their hearts” and they have not been reading their hearts (Romans 2:12-16).

To develop practical reason, or become skilled at discerning what we should do, we must embrace the standards God has written on our hearts. Moral education, C. S. Lewis explains in *The Abolition of Man*, includes the gracious discovery of these permanent norms and values. We discern them by reflecting on:

- ▶ *experiences of pure and spontaneous pleasure.* God created us to enjoy all that is good. These moments of joy – because they are not distorted by sinful desires – are “patches of Godlight” breaking into our daily lives. They illumine who we are as human beings and what we were meant to become.
- ▶ *disordered pleasures.* Even inordinate human desires, if they are unmasked as “the sweet poison of the false infinite” that they



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truly are, shed indirect light on human nature. In his fiction, for instance, Lewis “is extremely adept at exposing...the inordinate love of possessions that, because of human fallenness, masquerades as satisfaction in the present life.”

► *humankind’s common moral treasury*. In many cultures we find moral beliefs that commend themselves to our reason.

Permanent truths about human joys and needs, God, and the world give us a perspective above changing political fashions. The unhealthy option, T. S. Eliot warns, is simply to assume “the actual constitution of Society, or that which [our] more generous passions wish to bring about, is right, and Christianity must be adapted to it. But the Church cannot be, in any political sense, either conservative or liberal, or revolutionary. Conservatism is too often conservation of the wrong things; liberalism a relaxation of discipline; revolution a denial of the permanent things.”²

The permanent things may also serve “as a bridge between Christian and non-Christian morality,” Charles suggests, for “in civil society, religious and non-religious people conform to the same ethical standard in order to be governable.”

Study Questions

1. Do “moments of joy” illumine who we are as human beings and what we are meant to become? Have you learned something about being human in such moments?
2. Discuss T. S. Eliot’s warning that Christians should not be conservative, liberal, or revolutionary. How is that possible?
3. Is belief in what Eliot calls “permanent things” fashionable in contemporary American culture?
4. In G. K. Chesterton’s hymn “O God of Earth and Altar,” what is causing society to drift? What is the corrective?

Departing Hymn: “O God of Earth and Altar”

O God of earth and altar, bow down and hear our cry,
our earthly rulers falter, our people drift and die;
the walls of gold entomb us, the swords of scorn divide;
take not Thy thunder from us, but take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches, from lies of tongue and pen,
from all the easy speeches that comfort cruel men;
from sale and profanation of honor and the sword;
from sleep and from damnation, deliver us, good Lord!

Tie in a living tether, the prince and priest and thrall;³
bind all our lives together, smite us and save us all;
in ire and exultation aflame with faith and free,
lift up a living nation, a single sword to Thee.

Gilbert K. Chesterton (1906)
Suggested Tune: AURELIA

¹Romans 2:12-16

²“The Idea of a Christian Society,” in *Christianity and Culture* (Harvest Books, 1960), 77.

³With this medieval image, Chesterton refers to president, pastor, and citizen.



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Focus Article:

📖 Frodo's Forgiveness
(*Inklings of Glory*,
pp. 30-37)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Triumph of Spectacle
(*Inklings of Glory*,
pp. 83-87)

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Frodo's Forgiveness

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* captures the transcendent quality of love, utterly unknown either to warrior cultures of the ancient world or to our equally merciless culture of consumption. "The pity of Bilbo" is not only for Middle-earth; it's the key to our transformation as well.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:43-48

Responsive Reading[†]

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Reflection

The middle-aged, unadventurous hobbits Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee are mysteriously elected to destroy the Ring of Mordor – which, because it grants its bearer unassailable power, is the treasure sought by the Dark Lord Sauron bent on dominating Middle-earth. What draws us into their tale?

"The hobbits' struggles are our own. Like the other nobodies of this world, we remain at one with the hobbits in being summoned to resist – if not to defeat – the enormous forces of evil," Ralph Wood notes. "Against the craft and power of the demonic, our one hope lies in refusing the policies of the wicked – in repudiating their terroristic tactics by surrendering all coercive force, so that our weakness might become our strength."

The moral center of the epic is "the pity of Bilbo," the mercy shown by Frodo's uncle to Gollum, a wretched creature lost in self-absorption by his indulging use of the Ring. Bilbo's earlier pity for his enemy – he refused to destroy Gollum – echoes through subsequent events. In this leitmotiv we see forgiveness:

- ▶ *is a radical demand.* Within the Fellowship called out to destroy the Ring, Frodo and Sam experience friendship that kindles mutual support and forgiveness for one another. Yet Bilbo's pity had a deeper source, the wizard Gandalf reminds them, which he calls "pity" and Scripture names "agape." It is "the love of those who are not only radically 'other' to us, but who deserve our scorn and cannot reciprocate our pardon," writes Wood. "We can make friends only with those whose convictions we share, but we are called to have pity for those whom we do not trust, even our enemies."



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- ▶ *enables repentance*. "Repentance does not produce forgiveness, but the other way around: mercy enables contrition." Pity frees those who accept it for a life of service and virtue.
- ▶ *requires a sustaining story*. Hobbits, who are consummate storytellers, find life's meaning in the stories we inhabit. Forgiving enemies makes no sense in "mere adventures." Only when we are summoned into an infinitely "great tale," Sam concludes, does pity find its proper role: "Things done and over and made into part of the great tales are different. Why, even Gollum might be good in a tale."

"Sam has plumbed the depths of real hope," Wood explains. "The 'great tales' stand apart from mere adventures because they belong to the One Great Story. It is a story not only of those who fight heroically against evil, but also of those who are unwilling to exterminate such an enemy as Gollum. As Sam discerns, this tale finds a surprising place even for evil. For it is not only the story of the destruction of the ruling ring, but also a narrative of redemption."

Study Questions

1. Which characters are shown mercy in *The Lord of the Rings*?
2. Peter Jackson changes the climactic scene of the epic (p. 87). Why does Ralph Wood think Tolkien's version is more true?
3. As for mercy, what is the "huge distance between Tolkien's book and the heroic world that is its inspiration" (p. 34)?
4. How does Matthew 5:43-48 allude to the "great story" of redemption in which it makes sense to forgive enemies?
5. How can we practice pity toward our enemies in the thick of a war on terrorism?

Departing Hymn: "Heaviness of Heart and Conscience"

Heaviness of heart and conscience;
shadow, haunting still, at noon;
what can lift this bending burden?
Does this night have star or moon?

Echoes fill the heart and conscience,
words, once spoken, will not fade.
What can cease this pressing murmur?
Silence! What price must be paid?

Friendships lost reveal their treasure.
Guilt and pain reveal their might.
Then a Word with sudden freshness
resurrects the Way and Life.

Hear the word by God's Word spoken;
hear "forgiven" sung as gift.
Fresh and brisk the hope and healing;
feel the breeze as burdens lift.

Terry W. York

Suggested Tune: WEBSTER

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†1 John 1:5-10



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Focus Articles:

📖 Live Large, Dream Small
(*Inklings of Glory*,
pp. 72-71)

📖 The Power of Sam
(*Inklings of Glory*,
pp. 78-82)

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Live Large, Dream Small

God calls us to dream small—to live within limits, instead of destroying creation so we can have more. At the same time, we are called to live large—to live with courage and passion as we give ourselves to the greatest quest of serving God in peace, justice, and harmony.

Prayer

O God, we are grateful for the gift of friendship, and for the grace it confers and the grace it inspires.

We thank you especially for the friendship of the Inklings, who relied on your creative impulses to fashion images of grace that still turn our hearts and heads toward you and your kingdom.

In that gratitude there stirs up within us the great desire that we, too, might offer ourselves as vessels for your grace. Grant to us your divine prompting we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 22:24-27

Reflection

Let's be honest about our deformed motives, Luke is saying, and about the divine cure we desperately need, when he places the disciple's cloying plea for recognition at the conclusion of Jesus' last meal with his disciples (22:24-27). "Which of us should be regarded as the greatest?" becomes their self-absorbed response to Jesus' words of institution, "Do this in remembrance of me."

A host's placement of friends who lingered after a banquet for conversation signaled their rank in the "symposium." So the disciples ask, "What's the pecking order here?" Jesus reverses their expectations: the greatest among you will become like the youngest (rather than an honored elder), and will not even be at the table. The greatest will be like a slave who serves the meal. "I am among you," Jesus reminds them, "as one who serves."

"In *The Lord of the Rings* we hear echoes of the old, old story—the gospel story," suggests Kyle Childress. "Nine walkers, a fellowship of unlikely friends, are chosen—not to use the Ring of Great Power, but to destroy it. They are not even to use it in defense of the good, however tempting that may be; they are to give up this great power, rather than use it. This small fellowship of friends, bound together in their hatred of evil and their increasing self-surrendering regard for one another, set out upon a great Quest to give up and to destroy the Ring of Great Power. They are a distant foretaste of the fellowship we Christians call the church." In their fellowship we're reminded of:

- ▶ a calling to "live large." They are called to carry the Ring of Mordor to its destruction, to undo that powerful lure for mastery in Middle-earth. So does God call the church to live large, says Childress, "to be about the large things of shalom—the peace, harmony, justice known in Jesus Christ."
- ▶ the virtue of "dreaming small." Hobbits, the diminutive "farmers and gardeners who love good land, good food, . . . and good conversation" and enjoy "the world around them as they go," are



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chosen to lead. "Because their life-aims are modest, the hobbits are not easily swayed to try to do great things with the Ring of Power," Childress observes. "Therefore they are the only ones who can be trusted to give up the Ring." Likewise in our journey, God calls us to dream small, "to be content in who we are as human beings and with what God has given us; we are to live within limits, instead of destroying creation so we can have more."

▶ *the "power" of simple goodness.* The hobbit Sam "owns the power — both plain for all to see and unknown to himself — that is most powerful," John Hamilton says. In his simple goodness "he is a servant and friend who loves without limit." Not focused on himself, he can glimpse in the beauty of a star twinkling among the clouds the sustaining hope of a "light and high beauty forever beyond [evil's] reach."

Study Questions

1. Philippians 2:5-11 is very likely one of the earliest hymns of the church memorized by those preparing for their baptism. How does it describe Jesus' servanthood?
2. The wizard Gandalf advises that "having the Ring we may seek to destroy it" would not enter the Dark Lord's mind. Nor often ours, warns John Hamilton. What evidence do you see that we rarely refuse to employ any power available to us?
3. How is the church in North America being tempted to employ coercive power to promote God's shalom?
4. What sort of congregation would earn Kyle Childress' commendation as a "hobbit church"?
5. "How sweet and awesome" is the church, writes Isaac Watts in the departing hymn. How does his description of its fellowship reflect the ambition to "live large, dream small"?

Departing Hymn: "How Sweet and Awesome is This Place," verses 1, 3, 6, and 7

How sweet and awesome is this place
with Christ within the doors,
while everlasting love displays
the choicest of her stores!

While all our hearts and all our songs
join to admire the feast,
each of us cry, with thankful tongues,
"Lord, why was I a guest?"

Pity the nations, O our God!
constrain the earth to come;
send Thy victorious Word abroad,
and bring the strangers home.

We long to see Thy churches full,
that all the chosen race
may with one voice, and heart and soul,
sing Thy redeeming grace.

Isaac Watts

Suggested Tune: ST. AGNES



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Focus Articles:

📖 The Mystery of Vocation
(*Inklings of Glory*,
pp. 59-67)

📖 Showing the Truth
(*Inklings of Glory*,
pp. 68-71)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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The Mystery of Vocation

Our creative work can be a source of fulfillment and blessing, and a celebration of God's creativity through the material world. Indeed, we are most like our Creator when we create.

Prayer

O God, open our eyes to the pervasiveness of economic envy and avarice that shapes our world of work, that the church might reclaim the "absolute values" of the Kingdom of God.

Give us hearts for craftsmanship and hands for creating things worthy of our talents. Teach us the divine understanding of work, that the church might show the truth of your ways. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Galatians 1:1-12

Responsive Reading: John 1:1-3

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through him,
and without him not one thing came into being.

What has come into being in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness did not overcome it.

Reflection

Dorothy Sayers investigates a deep Mystery: the God who has called us into being in his own image, and is calling us to live in his marvelous light, is the Creator of the cosmos. We must look beyond economics to understand how this call should be expressed through our work.

To begin, we should encourage one another to do work worthy of our best efforts, Sayers observes, whether we do "church embroidery, or sewage farming."

In her debut mystery novel *Whose Body?*, Sayers's gallant detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, troubles over his professional calling. Turning for counsel to his friend Detective Inspector Charles Parker, Peter asks, "D'you like your job?" Parker puts aside the Galatians commentary he has been reading, mulls over Peter's question, and replies, "Yes—yes, I do. I know it to be useful, and I am fitted to it. I do it quite well—not with inspiration, perhaps, but sufficiently well to take pride in it. It is full of variety and it forces one to keep up to the mark and not get slack. And there's a future to it."

Sayers here suggests that meaningful work must be:

- ▶ *useful*. It's not just a matter of employment. Work should improve our lives, serve the welfare of other people, and protect and celebrate the creation.
- ▶ *appropriate to our abilities*. Lord Peter Wimsey's detective-novelist wife Harriet Vane observes, "A ploughshare is a nobler object than a razor. But if your natural talent is for barbering, wouldn't it be better to be a barber, and a good barber...? However grand



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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the job may be, is it your job?" Rather than measuring jobs for their prestige or power, we should enjoy work for which we are well-suited. Good work makes use of our giftedness.

- ▶ *varied*. Overly mechanistic, assembly-line work dampens our creativity and imagination. The Christian's "task is not to run away from the machines, but to learn to use them so that they work in harmony with human nature instead of injuring or oppressing it," Sayers writes.
- ▶ *endlessly challenging*. As we hone skills and develop our giftedness over time and through trials, our creativity grows.

Study Questions

1. Is your work meaningful when measured by Sayers's criteria? If not, how can it become more meaningful?
2. We ask a new acquaintance, "What do you do?" Should we also ask "Why do you do it?" and "How do you do it?"
3. "In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing" celebrates artists' work as creative and prophetic contributions to God's kingdom. Can other kinds of meaningful work be prophetic as well? How can our work reveal "truth we need to know" in both "life's dirges and life's dances"?

Departing Hymn: "In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing"

In their speaking, art, and writing,
in their music, hear God's voice.

Why composer, painter, poet,
why the note and color choice?
God has whispered, granted glances,
to the prophets, who, then, show
that life's dirges and life's dances
harbor truth we need to know.

In their speaking, art, and writing,
in their music, prophets know
that their gifting has a calling;
through their living it must flow.

Ev'ry morning, in their waking,
prophets hear, as being taught,
words to bolster weak and weary;
often, words they have not sought.

Back to old days for the new days,
to the path from which we've strayed.
With the truth before them always,
preaching, painting, lest it fade.
Call us forward, to the morning,
lead us to God's promised day.
Through the darkness, from our wand' ring,
write and paint and sing the way.

Terry W. York

Suggested Tunes: EIGHTH AND SPEIGHT or BEECH SPRING

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

The Baptized Imagination

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 4 or 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how some stories can “baptize the imagination” and enrich our moral vision.
2. To appreciate how important a sense of transcendence, significance, and community are in the moral life.
3. To reflect on our personal reading and viewing habits, and the moral formation that occurs as we read or view stories.

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 *Inklings of Glory (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Share the story, recounted in the first two paragraphs of Dearborn’s article, about C. S. Lewis reading a fantasy by George MacDonald. It begins: “As a young atheist, C. S. Lewis purchased a book in a train station book-stall...” (*Inklings of Glory*, pp. 11-12).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 14:15-24 from a modern translation.

Reflection

How can stories, even the fantasies favored by Lewis and Tolkien, shape the way that we perceive our responsibilities to one another? Dearborn employs C. S. Lewis’ rich term, “baptizing the imagination,” to describe the connection between stories and moral vision. Stories can “cleanse” our imagination, helping us: (1) to see beyond the suffering and distortion in the world to the underlying goodness and love of God that gives us the hope we need in order to persevere in the moral life; (2) to perceive the value of each individual and the importance of our everyday interactions with them; and (3) to sense the value of community with all human beings, with their diverse gifts and perspectives. Without these insights into “transcendence, significance, and community,” we become discouraged because we fear that the moral life depends only on us as individuals, and that what we accomplish is of little value.

Jesus’ parable of the great dinner illustrates Dearborn’s point. *Transcendence*: In the story are hints that this is not only a mere dinner party, but also an invitation to the joy that we all desire; the host is not God, but in the host’s gracious and undeserved invitation we glimpse God’s attitude toward us. *Significance*: The smallest actions—the slave’s invitations and the cavalier rejections—snowball into immense consequences; the rejection of the host’s hospitality is a sign of deeper ingratitude. *Community*: The invitation extends to everyone, because the goal is a great get-together for which the host will not be denied.

Illustrate the final warning—that some stories ‘muddy’ the imagination—with novels, movies, or television shows that make us afraid of one another, despise the world, or distrust God. George MacDonald’s view that

we are “makers,” not “creators” (or, as Tolkien puts it, we are “sub-creators”), is a theme in the hymn “Imagination’s Stream.”

Study Questions

1. By “bi-focal” moral vision, Dearborn means the ability to keep our eyes on two things at once: the suffering and distortion in the world, but also the deeper reality of God’s love that gives us hope and confidence. About the elves in *The Lord of the Rings* she writes, “They are acutely aware of the anguish and evil in their midst, but they do not live in fear” (p. 14). The “escapist” way is to close our eyes to the suffering in the world; the “disheartened” way is to lose sight of God’s love and coming kingdom. Both the escapist and disheartened person are tempted to neglect the serious and difficult moral engagement to which God calls them.
2. You may start the discussion with the examples that Dearborn presents from Lewis, Tolkien, and George MacDonald. Members may mention other examples of stories from novels, movies, or television programs. If they are fans of the Inklings, members may draw upon many other works by Lewis or Tolkien.
3. Why do they recall the parable? What does it show about human beings, God, or the world? If appropriate, relate their comments to the categories of transcendence, significance, or community. Some memorable parables are:
 - Sower (Mark 4:1-20; Matthew 13:1-23; Luke 8:4-15)
 - Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-12; Matthew 21:33-46; Luke 20:9-19)
 - Lost Sheep (Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:1-7)
 - Faithful and Unfaithful Steward (Matthew 24:45-51; Luke 12:42-46)
 - Talents and Pounds (Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27)
 - Wheat and Tares (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43)
 - Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:23-35)
 - Laborers in Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16)
 - Wise and Foolish Maidens (Matthew 25:1-13)
 - Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31-46)
 - Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)
 - Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21)
 - Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)
 - Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)
 - Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8)
 - Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)
 - Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8)
4. Stories can help us to imagine how people live in other cultures or historical times, to sympathize with their suffering, and to appreciate and share their joys. They can make us more aware of the mysterious complexities in human beings. In some stories we may imaginatively experiment with solutions to personal or social problems.
5. Those who enjoy novels or short stories may mention their favorite authors or genre (mystery, romance, history, science fiction, fantasy, etc.). Some members may prefer movies by particular directors or on certain subjects, and those who watch television may mention a favorite drama series or reality series. Why do members enjoy these fictional works? Are they primarily escapist literature? Do they give insight into moral character or into issues of the day? The point is not to denigrate escapist fiction (for sometimes we may need to relax and escape), but to inventory the roles that reading and viewing stories play in our lives.

Departing Hymn

“Imagination’s Stream” is on pp. 52-53 of *Inklings of Glory*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Irrigating Deserts with Moral Imagination

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	James 3:11-18
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss role of stories in moral education
Questions 1 and 2, or 4	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4, 5, and 6
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To consider how the proper sentiments, which are rich combinations of appropriate emotional reactions and beliefs, are essential to being morally attuned to other people and the world.
2. To understand the complex role of the teacher in moral education, as exemplar as well as instructor.
3. To explore the role that stories play in moral education.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Inklings of Glory (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Comment

"The educational system of the 1940s, [C. S. Lewis believes] has misread the need of the moment: fearing that young people will be swept away by emotional propaganda, educators have decided the best thing they can do for children is to fortify their minds against imagination and emotion by teaching them to dissect all things by rigorous intellectual analysis. Lewis says in reply, 'My own experience as a teacher tells an opposite tale. For every one pupil who needs to be guarded from a weak excess of sensibility there are three who need to be awakened from the slumber of cold vulgarity. The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts.' Children's and adolescents' imaginations need to be fed, not starved" (*Inklings of Glory*, p. 22). How well do we nurture the imagination of children and young people today?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God will lead members to be wise parents and teachers who nurture the moral imagination of children and young people.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 119:9-16 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Moral education, according to C. S. Lewis, involves not only instructing the intellect in knowledge of objective standards, but also training the heart in the appropriate emotional responses. The next study guide in this series, "Permanent Things," explores the importance of learning objective standards. This study focuses on the importance of shaping the heart, and especially the role of imagination in shaping our sentiments, which Schakel defines as "complex combinations of feelings and opinions which provide a basis for action or judgment."

If members want to extend this study of moral imagination over two sessions, they might discuss the complex role of the teacher in the first session, and the role of stories in the second session.

The biblical passages look at moral education from the perspective of the teacher, and they encourage rigorous self-examination. Notice that Psalm 119:9-16 and Luke 6:39-45 (and in the second session, James 3:11-18) say the teacher must not only know God's precepts, but must have the proper "heart" (or "delight") in regard to them. The good teacher is a model, or exemplar, of the proper moral sentiments, and not merely one who speaks eloquently about moral precepts.

Study Questions

1. We have many moral instructors: parents, church leaders, school teachers, significant adult friends, and peers. Must *all* of these be good exemplars, or can our hearts be properly attuned if *some* of them are poor role models, or even the sort of hypocrites that Jesus derides? Encourage members to reflect on their experience of hypocritical teachers or poor role models who did not delight in the goodness they taught.
2. This is a stern warning to teachers that their students will become like them. Teaching is not merely imparting knowledge, but also sharing one's heart. Can we "survive" a hypocritical moral teacher? If so, how do we escape being like that person?
3. Sentiments are "those complex combinations of feelings and opinions which provide a basis for action or judgment" (p. 24). Schakel presents Lewis' view: "Crucial to such nurturing is the child's internalization of the standards and the appropriate response. Intellectual apprehension of abstract principles is not enough. When a child is tempted to steal a sweater that appeals to him or her greatly, the goal is not to have the child intellectually weigh the moral issues at stake; the child must 'feel' that stealing is not only wrong but repugnant, feel it through trained emotions: 'Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism' (15). A person possessing trained emotions – the equivalent of practical reason – relies not on the abstract reflections of the head, but on the properly nurtured judgments of the heart: 'The Chest – Magnanimity – Sentiment – these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man' (16)" (p. 23). Often we must react before thinking about what to do, and by itself our intellect is no match for our powerful desires for pleasure or self-gratification. Properly trained sentiments are quick and psychologically powerful responses to moral situations: when we "feel" repugnance at the wrongdoing, it's so much easier to diagnose and avoid; when we "experience" the beauty of a good action, we take delight in doing it.
4. If members are familiar with Lewis's fiction, they may mention their favorite passages. One person I know has wonderful memories of reading *Chronicles of Narnia* with her children. Encourage members to share and discuss other stories in literature, movies, or television programs that have shaped their moral imagination.
5. Peter Damian stresses the way that George handles the offer of wealth in the story: "Clearly what he did serves to teach us a valuable lesson: if we are afraid to strip ourselves of our worldly possessions, then we are unfit to make a strong defense of the faith." For Edmund Spenser, George's cruciform courage in defending the innocent is the primary lesson. Bunyan sees George as a model for confronting temptation in all its forms (p. 43). By focusing only on the dragon or princess, modern readers may miss these insights.
6. Many congregations pass along stories about the faithfulness of past leaders, or the inspiring and humble service of a servant in the church. Why is it important that some of our exemplars be "local" folks, who have lived in our community of faith?

Departing Hymn

"Imagination's Stream" is on pp. 52-53 of *Inklings of Glory*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Permanent Things

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1 or 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider to what extent and in what way the moral order to the cosmos is “written on the hearts” of human beings.
2. To explore why it is important for Christians to articulate a transcendent moral order.
3. To examine whether contemporary American culture is receptive and sympathetic to what T. S. Eliot calls “permanent things.”

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 *Inklings of Glory (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the hymn “O God of Earth and Altar,” locate the tune AURELIA in your church’s hymnal.

Begin with a Comment

Share the paragraph summary of Lewis’s argument in *The Abolition of Man*, which begins “If there is nothing universal in the moral nature of humankind, then what constraints are there, beyond our political decisions, on how we will treat one another and organize our communities? (*Inklings of Glory*, pp. 56-57).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God will help members guide their lives by the permanent norms and values, not by changing political fashion.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 119:89-96 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This study introduces C. S. Lewis’s view of the centrality of natural law in moral education. The basic idea of natural law is this: (1) there is a fundamental moral order to the cosmos; (2) its norms and values are true independently of what we desire or believe; and (3) this order “seems right” to all humans who reflect carefully on their hearts—in other words, these standards commend themselves to their reason.

Significantly, Lewis believes we need well-tuned hearts as well as thoughtful minds in order to discern the natural law. Think of this “law” (despite its name) not as some legislation to be memorized, but as the way everything was supposed to function when God created Eden. The natural law includes the way our desires were supposed to be ordered and our relationships with God, one another, and the wider creation should have developed. Since God created us to love what is good and to flourish in these rightful relationships, living according to the natural law satisfies our deepest longings. No wonder, then, that “reading” carefully what has

been written on our hearts—by attending to those desires and relationships that produce “pure and spontaneous pleasures” and by recognizing when our desires have gone terribly wrong—will illumine for us God’s natural order.

Though many Christians would say that there is much more to Christian morality than living in harmony with the natural law, they might agree with Lewis on its importance as a starting point in moral education for several reasons: (1) it is an avenue to understanding God’s intent for the cosmos; (2) since natural law norms are permanent, they provide a perspective from which to measure the changing cultural and political views; and (3) because the natural law commends itself to all human beings, its norms can be a bridge between Christian and non-Christian moralities.

Study Questions

1. Being in love, giving birth to a child, rapt enjoyment of a great painting, being absorbed in a wondrous landscape, singing a requiem, cuddling with a loved one under a warm blanket, savoring a tasty meal, experiencing a moment of insight, receiving a friend’s encouragement, and so on. Ask members to make their own list of joyful moments. Consider how each moment points toward something human beings need or the relationships we were created to enjoy.
2. Encourage members to discuss, from their study of this brief context, what Eliot means by “conservative,” “liberal,” and “revolutionary.” How does his comment apply to the present temptation to identify Christian discipleship with the social, economic, international, and environmental platform of any single political party? In the same essay, Eliot says that Christianity does not offer a single plan for society—for the best plan is one that is efficient in a specific time and culture; but it does give “fundamental principles” about human beings, God, and the world that tell us what would be *wrong* for every time and in every culture.
3. What trends in American culture encourage us to neglect “permanent things”? For some people, institutions such as family, community, congregation, and government, have little authority; rather, each person has authority over his or her own values. Relationships are reduced to contractual agreements, so that we owe to others only the services we’ve voluntarily promised. Some people believe we can define ourselves by our choices, especially our consumer purchases. Members may reflect on Harold Shapiro’s comments quoted on p. 57.
4. Chesterton decries the political drift (“our earthly rulers falter”) caused by prideful affluence (“the walls of gold entomb us, the swords of scorn divide”). The government’s misuse of power, economic and military, has been disguised for a time by “lies of tongue and pen” and “easy speeches.” Chesterton’s is a society drawn dangerously close to destruction precisely by its success at empire.

Now the hymnist prays that God shall rouse the people from their deceived and damning sleep, and then unite them into a true community that can arise only after the most painful chastening (“smite us and save us all”). This “free” and “living nation” will not be a conquering Christian empire, but a society so smitten down by the wrath and righteousness of God that its single sword will be the Sword of Truth acclaimed in Scripture.

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.

Frodo's Forgiveness

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, and 3 or 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To recognize that “the pity of Bilbo” is the central theme of Tolkien’s epic, *The Lord of the Rings*.
2. To explore the role of forgiveness in human relationships.
3. To consider how Jesus’ command to practice repentance-enabling forgiveness is grounded in the biblical narrative of God’s redemption of the world.

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 *Inklings of Glory (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. The hymn “Heaviness of Heart and Conscience” was written for *Forgiveness (Christian Reflection)*. Download the tune WEBSTER from the Ethics Library at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

Begin with a Story

Samwise Gamgee, Frodo’s steadfast hobbit friend who is caught up with him in the Quest to destroy the Ring, realizes there are “many competing stories that vie for our loyalty, and Sam tries to distinguish them, to locate the one hope-giving story:

‘...The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if they had, we shouldn’t know, because they’d have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on – and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same – like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren’t always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of tale we’ve fallen into?’ (2.320-321) (quoted in *Inklings of Glory*, p. 32).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that members will receive God’s forgiveness and reflect that costly forgiveness as they forgive others.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 5:43-48 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This is an opportunity for group members who are familiar with J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (or Peter Jackson's film adaptations) to explore its leitmotiv of pity and mercy. They may investigate how Tolkien's epic shapes the moral imagination – by nurturing in us the sentiments (the complex of emotions and thoughts) that are characteristic of a forgiving attitude.

If group members are not familiar with Tolkien's epic, focus the discussion on these features of forgiveness: its centrality in human relationships, the radical nature of Jesus' command to forgive enemies, and the "great story" of redemption in which that command is at home.

Study Questions

1. Enemies are forgiven – e.g., Bilbo Baggins's pity of Gollum, which is remembered by Gandalf as an example for all to follow (p. 33); and Gandalf and Frodo offer mercy to the evil wizard Saruman after the battle of Helms Deep (p. 35) – as well as friends and comrades – e.g., Aragorn pities his terrified troops before the assault on the Black Gate of Mordor (p. 36); and Aragorn pardons Boromir's treacherous betrayal of Frodo (p. 37).
2. In the novel, Frodo is overwhelmed by evil on Mount Doom; he is saved as Gollum bites off Frodo's finger with the Ring, and in a giddy dance topples into the volcano. Jackson changes the scene, having Frodo wrestle Gollum over the volcanic brink, but grasp the edge to save himself at the last moment. Tolkien realistically displays the terrible power of evil and our creaturely weakness of will. Evil finally destroys itself; we do not heroically overcome its thrall. "Tolkien's world is Christian in the precise Pauline sense: in all things, even in the most sinister wickedness, a providential power is at work to bring about the good" (p. 87).
3. In ancient Greece, pity was not a virtue. One should never show mercy to one's equal, but only "to the pathetic, the helpless, those who are able to do little or nothing for themselves." Likewise one should never show mercy to the unjust or undeserving. If one spares a defeated enemy, it should be for self-display of one's power rather than love for the other. That *The Lord of the Rings* subverts this pagan view, even though its events are set in a mythical ancient warrior culture, is a key to grasping the epic's moral and religious center.
4. Jesus alludes to the grand story of the creation, our rebellion, and God's acts of redemption through Israel to bring us into loving union with one another and with God. The Creator, who "makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous," calls us to be his children (Matthew 5:45). God's invitation is not limited to people who have returned his love (5:46), but encompasses the evil and the unrighteous who do not love him. God's love is reflected within Israel (perhaps the meaning of "brothers and sisters" as opposed to Gentiles), but should extend to those outside the community (5:47). The purpose is to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48).
The Father's love extends to his enemies. Indeed, all his children were enemies who have received forgiveness. When Jesus commands us to love our enemies, he is calling us to see ourselves and the world as they really are and to become like the Father. "Love as a theological virtue is not a natural human capacity, not a product of human willing and striving even at their highest," Wood reminds us. "Because charity constitutes the triune God's own essence, it is always a gift and thus also a command. About this matter as about so much else, Christians and Jews are fundamentally agreed" (p. 33).
5. The Free Peoples of Middle-earth unite to resist evil; yet they use restraint, fearing how they will be deformed if they're seduced by the power they possess. To the vanquished they offer generous terms. They seek the redemption, rather than destruction of their enemies. "Tolkien demonstrates that, against the craft and power of the demonic, our one hope lies in refusing the policies of the wicked – in repudiating their terroristic tactics by surrendering all coercive force, so that our weakness might become our strength" (p. 86).

Departing Hymn

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

Live Large, Dream Small

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the form of servant leadership that Jesus models for his disciples.
2. To consider how the fellowship in *The Lord of the Rings*—which pursues its calling with courage and passion, yet with humility—echoes the gospel story of the church’s calling.
3. To recognize how our society, and even the church, has been tempted to exploit coercive power.

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 *Inklings of Glory (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the two focus articles before the group meeting. For the hymn “How Sweet and Awesome is This Place,” locate the tune ST. AGNES in your church’s hymnal.

Begin with a Story

Share Samwise Gamgee’s fantasy that he experiences when he, a modest hobbit gardener, places the Ring of Mordor on a chain around his neck. It begins: “[Sam] felt himself enlarged, as if he were robed in a huge distorted shadow of himself,…” (*Inklings of Glory*, pp. 75-76).

Sam fantasizes about what he would accomplish in the world with the Ring’s power. If we possessed such power, what fantasy would tempt us?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 22:24-27 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This is an opportunity for group members who are familiar with J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (or Peter Jackson’s film adaptations) to explore how the fellowship of nine walkers resists the temptation to employ the terrible power of the Ring. Members may investigate how Tolkien’s epic shapes the moral imagination—by nurturing in us the sentiments (the complex of emotions and thoughts) that are characteristic of “hobbit-sense” and humility.

If group members are not familiar with Tolkien’s epic, focus the discussion on these features of Jesus’ call to his disciples: to be caring servants to one another, to resist the lure of domineering power, and to model their attitudes on Jesus’ posture of service.

Luke places the disciples’ disagreement about who will be regarded as the leader into the context of the Last Supper. (By contrast, Matthew 20:24-28 and Mark 10:41-45 place the dispute earlier in Jesus’ ministry, when he tells the disciples about his forthcoming passion and resurrection in Jerusalem.) Luke shocks us by sandwiching it between Jesus’ announcement of his betrayal by a disciple (Judas) and prediction of Peter’s denial. In this context, our striving to have power over others in the church is interpreted as a betrayal of Jesus and rejection

of his servanthood. Luke's readers would recognize this context as a "symposium," the conversation of friends after their banquet. Perhaps he is recommending that we can begin by serving one another in simple ways, such as who we host for meals and how we treat other disciples.

Drawing from Tolkien's epic, Kyle Childress describes the sentiments of "living large" – "to live with courage and passion as we give ourselves to the greatest quest of serving God in peace, justice, and harmony in this old dark world," and "dreaming small" – "to live within humble boundaries of who we are, instead of invading and imposing, even if we think it is in service to a good cause" (p. 76). John Hamilton delineates the "simple goodness" of Samwise Gamgee, the faithful hobbit friend of Frodo.

Encourage members to compare these three sentiments imaginatively represented in *The Lord of the Rings* to those that Jesus is calling his disciples to develop. Do we embody these sentiments? How well do our congregations measure up to the fellowship Jesus has in mind?

Study Questions

1. Jesus "emptied" and "humbled" himself and "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited." (Through Christian history the latter phrase has been given two interpretations: that Jesus relinquished or did not rely upon the equality with the Father that he possessed; or that he did not try to grab his crowning prematurely – as Adam did – but willingly endured suffering first. The second reading emphasizes Jesus' obedience as the reversal of Adam's disobedience.) The action that most clearly reveals Christ's servanthood is his obedience "to the point of death – even death on a cross." How would memorizing this particular hymn shape the sentiments of a new Christian preparing for baptism?
2. Hamilton mentions that often (1) we fail to restrain development of new technologies despite their likely dangerous and immoral use – e.g., when we make "armaments for Armageddon," or try to clone human beings, and (2) we ignore other values in our pursuit of mere economic gain – e.g., when we destroy unique ecosystems to build parking lots (p. 78). Members might mention other examples like these. We also display hubris in using power when (3) industries fund technologies that benefit a privileged few; (4) governments distribute foreign aid to promote political goals rather than meet human need – e.g., when the bulk of aid, humanitarian as well as military, goes to political allies; or (5) individuals spend their income and borrow more money for personal display and extravagant luxuries.
3. Discuss Childress's concerns that the church is tempted to use "tanks and guns, laws passed by Congress, and prayers imposed by the state" to advance God's kingdom. "Too many Christians today cannot see the inconsistency in wanting to talk about Jesus Christ and having the state help them do the talking. Many see no inconsistency in evangelizing people for Christ and having the Pentagon pave the way" (p. 75).
4. Childress praises congregations that do not seek "power, success, wealth, and bigness," but rather fosters a community of "people who love to eat together and raise children, to serve one another with passion, joy, and courage; people whose church is snuggled down in the woods, close to the earth" (p. 77). Let members flesh out these metaphors with examples of some attitudes, approaches, and programs that a "hobbit church" should avoid, or embrace.
5. The church is "sweet and awesome" because Christ moves it to action with "everlasting love." It *lives large* by being taken up into God's forgiveness for people in all the nations. With eager anticipation and gracious hospitality, the church prepares for God to "bring all strangers home," so that all "may with one voice, and heart and soul, sing Thy redeeming grace." Yet the church *dreams small* because only God's invitation, and not the use of coercive force, can include all strangers into one banquet. Each member continually sings a humble and grateful chorus: "Lord, why was I a guest?"

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.

The Mystery of Vocation

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how our work can be a source of fulfillment and blessing, such that we celebrate God's creativity through our craftsmanship.
2. To recognize that work becomes meaningful when it is useful, appropriate to our abilities, varied, and endlessly challenging.
3. To critique the mechanistic nature of much contemporary work.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Inklings of Glory (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting. Download "In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing" set to the tune EIGHTH AND SPEIGHT from the Center's ethics library, www.ChristianEthics.ws. Or locate the familiar tune BEECH SPRING in your church hymnal.

Begin with a Quote

In reply to a reviewer, Sayers once wrote: "[Some today assume that] mankind's normal way of working approximates to that of the conveyor-belt, to which each operative contributes his small, standardized operation with as little variation as may be. Now this may be usual, but it is not the normal, in the sense of the natural function of an artist, or of a craftsman—or indeed of a human being at all; it is the function of a machine; and we cannot subdue either art or man to the rhythm of the machine without destroying their proper nature as man and art" (quoted in *Inklings of Glory*, p. 63).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group, especially those related to work. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Galatians 1:1-12 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Dorothy Sayers believes that when our work is performed with creativity and imagination, we are laboring along the grain of divine intention. Too often the mechanistic world of work dampens human creativity and imagination. Our task "is not to run away from the machines but to learn to use them so that they work in harmony with human nature instead of injuring or oppressing it." Only when we serve God in our work lives, and cease aiming merely to please bosses or meet corporate quotas, can the assembly-line sickness of our work be cured.

Sayers critiques the spiritually hazardous patterns of work, especially defined as simple employment and the production of goods. She also urges us to develop a sacramental attitude toward work—that in

and through our labor, God also is working to bring God's kingdom. This attitude brings not only a proper understanding of an employer's duty to the workforce, but also a profound sense of the laborer's duty to the work. By contrast, work and worker both suffer in the modern economics-based culture: "The worker becomes bored with work he finds meaningless, and the work is often shoddy." Only when we can say with the apostle Paul that "If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10), will we measure our work by the "absolute values" of God's kingdom.

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to use Sayers's four criteria to evaluate their work lives. Perhaps they will suggest additional standards for meaningfulness in their labor. Must our work satisfy all of these criteria in order to be meaningful before God?

What should we do if our work is useless, inappropriate to our talents, monotonous, or mundane. Sayers was fortunate to change her career: she left behind her less-fulfilling writing of advertisements and mystery novels in order to pursue theological reflection and understanding of Dante's great poetry. Most people do not have the financial flexibility to make such a total change, but we can encourage one another to do work worthy of our best efforts, whether we do "church embroidery, or sewage farming." Meaningful work is not only defined by *what* we do, but *how* and *why* we do it. If our work seems meaningless, a sacramental understanding of work can help us see it in a new light. If change of career or employment is called for, the congregation can help us learn a true sense of usefulness, discern our talents and interests, and forge a meaningful and creative work life.

2. Sayers encourages us to see work not merely as employment, but a celebration of the material world as the expression of God's creativity. This is what she means by a "sacramental view" of work — our participation with God in creative projects worthy of our efforts. We answer the question "*What* do you do?" by describing our title or position in the company. The questions of *why* and *how* we work would encourage us to mention the richer meaning of our work: "I work to serve God's kingdom by..." and "I do my best and grow in my work because..." would be appropriate answers. Going beyond *what* to *why* and *how* we work would allow us to reflect the joy in our work and the creativity with which we do it. "If I were still trying to please men," scolds Paul, "I would not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10). We serve Christ best in our jobs when our work is a testimony to God's good creating.
3. Perhaps all meaningful human work to some degree images for the world the creative activity of God: as useful and caring beyond measure, as endlessly varied, and as patient and persistent to accomplish its good purpose. Interestingly, our work's meaning rests neither on its ability to stave off discontent nor to foster happiness. Our work prophetically reveals that both "life's dirges and life's dances harbor truth we need to know."

If our work truly has a future to it, as Detective Inspector Parker assumes, then we might endure the "dirges" and appreciate the "dances" that arise within our work lives. Dirges are necessary trials in the endlessly challenging world of meaningful work. It is the hardest of tasks to find the goodness and truth in a "dead-end" job. We must always ask who defines a particular job as "dead-end" and dirgeful? If such definition relies upon commitments to power, prestige, and excessive wages, then the truth to be found is that these are pillars of a deformed view of work that the gospel rejects. When we can find the truth by enduring the "dirges," then we have appreciation all the more for the "dances."

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.