



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 The Value of Caring Work  
(*Work*, pp. 26-32)

### 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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# The Value of Caring Work

We undervalue work that cares for the weak, young, and old. And when we do value it, we prize it in the wrong way — as a display of our strength and virtues in caregiving. This reflects the individualism and consumerism of our culture, not the Christian Trinitarian perspective.

### Prayer

Creator God, may we be responsible and faithful to do what has been entrusted to us to do.

May we work with joy and with love.

May the work that we do and the fruit of our labor contribute to the good of your creation and benefit your people.

Amen.

### Scripture Reading: John 13:12-16

### Reflection

Before the industrial revolution “women and men worked side by side, working for their sustenance, training up their children, and caring for their sick and their elders,” Christian Fletcher notes. But with the rise of industrial labor, this changed dramatically. Men went to work for wages to sustain the family, but women stayed home to provide “love’s labor” — care for the young, sick, and elderly. Soon, she notes, “money became the defining standard of worth [and] women’s unpaid labor of caregiving was not treated as ‘real’ work.”

The distortion in this situation is hard to describe in (what Fletcher calls) “the ethics of modern capitalism” that defines what’s right and good in terms of promises between those who are equal and autonomous. The highest good is freedom from restraint, and relationships should begin and end by free choices. In this view, caring for dependents is almost morally invisible because they are limited and their care may severely limit others.

The care of dependents becomes more visible in an “ethics of care,” which allows that “persons are often neither equal nor autonomous,” moral obligations can arise “from human need as well as human choices,” and true liberty “is not freedom from restraint but a freedom for the excellence of human flourishing.”

Christians can endorse this, but say even more, for “we start our ethical reasoning from a conception of the person as the image of God, a brother or sister to all other persons who are also children of our loving heavenly Father. Our actions are guided by the actions and teachings of Jesus who made our duty to care explicit at the Last Supper.” As he washes his disciples’ feet (John 13:12-16), “Jesus does not cease being Lord, though he undertakes lowly service; and he commands us to do the same.”

Fletcher continues, “We are called to use our gifts and talents, whatever they may be, to serve those around us. This means of course, that some specific kinds of caregiving, such as nursing a baby, are inherently gendered. But it would be a mistake to draw from that example the conclusion that men are not responsible for hands-on care of the young, the sick, or the elderly. All of us are called to be caregivers, men and women alike.”

Fletcher finds support for this counter-cultural view in God’s triune nature where “we see equality in difference, and difference within equality.” This suggests that since we are created in God’s image,



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“we are made for relationship [and] that difference, such as gender, does not mean inequality. When we say God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are not listing beings in order of importance.” She concludes, “From our Trinitarian understanding of equality in difference, we can see men and women as equals in the work of God’s kingdom, and equally called to care for others. We also see equality between the caregiver and the care recipient as human beings in relationship with each other.”

### Study Questions

1. What evidence do you see that, as Christine Fletcher says, “Our society claims that those who are dependent lead lives of less worth”? How does this affect the value society places on the work of caring for dependents?
2. Consider the theological basis that Fletcher provides for a Christian ethic of caregiving. For a Christian, what makes caring work so valuable?
3. How is caring work valued in W. G. Tarrant’s hymn, “Our Master Was a Worker”?
4. Fletcher says Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-543) “can show us how the virtues of care—giving and receiving— are not gendered but human.” What concrete guidance does she glean from Benedict’s Rule for his monastic communities?
5. “Caregiving has its own spiritual dangers,” Fletcher notes. What dangers does she identify? Can you think of others?

### Departing Hymn: “Our Master Was a Worker” (vv. 1, 3)

Our Master was a worker,  
with daily work to do,  
and one who would be like him  
must be a worker, too.  
Then welcome honest labor,  
and honest labor’s fare,  
for where there is a worker,  
the Master’s friend is there.

Our Master was a helper,  
the woes of life he knew,  
and one who would be like him  
must be a helper, too.  
The burden will grow lighter,  
if each will take a share,  
and where there is a helper,  
the Master’s friend is there.

*W. G. Tarrant (1853-1928), alt.*

*Suggested Tunes: NYLAND or WHITFIELD*

# The Value of Caring Work

## Lesson Plans

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

## Teaching Goals

1. To discuss how our society devalues those who are dependent and, therefore, undervalues the work of those who care for them.
2. To understand how both the doctrine of the Trinity and the specific teachings and actions of Jesus undergird the value of caregiving work by men and women.
3. To glean specific guidance for caregiving from the Rule of Benedict.

## 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 *Work (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Our Master Was a Worker" locate one of the familiar tunes NYLAND or WHITFIELD in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)) or Hymnary.org ([www.hymnary.org](http://www.hymnary.org)).

## Begin with a Story

Christine Fletcher writes, "In December 2014, I was flat on my back after a cardiac ablation, forbidden to move until the bleeding from the incision stopped. After six hours, I had seen every nurse on the cardiac floor and most from the cardiac ICU. None of them could stop the bleeding. They substituted a ten-pound sandbag for a nurse's hands applying pressure and left me to sleep as I could. Instead of being in charge of my life and able to move at will, I was helpless and dependent. I found myself in the hidden world of dependency, a place I didn't want to be. I am one of the active ones, I am in control of my life, or so I think. Suddenly I was part of the world of those who are not capable of being active and self-sufficient. I needed the care of others for my basic needs."

Though she very much welcomed the nurses' life-preserving care when she needed it, she notes that "society now segregates the dependent and devalues their lives and the work of those who care for them," and wonders, "How did we get to this situation?"

## 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 together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read John 13:12-16 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

The previous study, "Working for Dignity," shows the serious consequences of society undervaluing certain jobs: workers may internalize these negative perceptions, which can prevent them from being dignified by their work, cause them to leave those jobs, and thereby harm themselves and others whom they would be helping if they stayed. In this study, society's undervaluing of caring work is a case in point. Christine Fletcher questions our ability to notice and articulate this problem from the perspective of "the ethics of capitalism." While "the ethics of care" does much better, Fletcher commends the rich Christian resources in the doctrine of the Trinity, the teachings and example of Jesus, and the communities formed by Benedict of Nursia.

### *Study Questions*

1. Christine Fletcher mentions “we have legalized abortion and face increasing pressure to legalize assisted suicide.” Members might note other evidence like inadequate health care for the mentally ill, limited healthcare options for people in poverty, pressure to use prenatal testing for “baby selection,” and so on. Fletcher notes how many people, in order to be free to enter the work-for-pay economy, choose to “out-source” caregiving of the young, old, and sick in their families. Consider the salaries and status of workers who care for children, the poor, the sick (who are poor), and the aging.
2. Fletcher emphasizes two theological bases for caregiving: Jesus’ example and teachings (she cites his washing the disciples’ feet and notes Benedict’s references to Matthew 25:36, 40), and the doctrine of the Trinity. She writes, “The Trinity, the central doctrine of our faith, tells us not only that we are made for relationship, but also that difference, such as gender, does not mean inequality. . . . [I]n the Trinity we see equality in difference, and difference within equality. Applying that to our lives, we no longer see Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, but equal children of God (Galatians 3:28).” Each theological foundation suggests men as well as women should be involved in the work of caregiving. In both cases, caring work is valuable because it participates in the life of God.
3. W. G. Tarrant’s “Our Master Was a Worker” calls on us to emulate Jesus in caring for those who endure “the woes of life.” In this manner, then, caregiving participates in the life of God. The original text has a pronounced masculine focus: it says “the Master’s man” rather than “the Master’s friend,” and the concluding verse calls on “brothers, brave and manly” to be like Jesus, “the Man of men.” How should we understand that focus – as limiting the Master’s “helping” in the third verse to stereotypically masculine activities, or as breaking through that cultural mold by calling on manly men to join with Jesus in helping the weak?
4. Fletcher observes, “The Rule [of Benedict], written originally for men in the patriarchal Roman society, asks them to give up their privileged position and voluntarily cultivate the virtues of the oppressed. These virtues – humility, patience, and love – are cultivated in the work of care within the monastic community.” There are detailed instructions about everyone sharing in kitchen duties and about compassionate care of dependents – for example, the sick and elderly monks, and children who are sent to the monastery for schooling or to be raised. Fletcher concludes, “Benedict’s reversal of his society’s gender norms stands as a way to expand our notions of care. Our tradition is not wrong in stating that women are called to the vocation of virginity or motherhood; but it is incomplete without reminding us that equally all men are called to the vocation of virginity or fatherhood. Motherhood and fatherhood can be lived both physically and spiritually.”
5. Fletcher notes two spiritual dangers related to caregiving. First, “We can become blind to how giving care to someone and being needed by that person feeds our own ego.” C. S. Lewis’s character “Mrs. Fidget” is an example of how we can selfishly enslave others to our caregiving. Instead, Lewis says, we should aim “to put the recipient in a state where he no longer needs our gift.” Another danger is for caregivers to become “brusque and dismissive” of those who require their long-term care in order to “protect themselves from the pain and suffering of disability and aging.” Fletcher says, “This is pride and not the love we are meant to have toward one another; the only way to purify our love is to be humble.”

Members may think of other spiritual dangers, such as burnout in caregiving, the varieties of behaviors called “codependency,” resentment and anger toward the person in need, coming to believe that we are the only ones who can really help, and so on. Many of these dangers suggest that we need help (from God and others) in order to be helpers.

### *Departing Hymn*

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