

Work as Spiritual Discipline:

Example, Frank Laubach

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Abstract

What if we viewed our work as a spiritual discipline, a means of spiritual growth? The Church encourages the use of spiritual disciplines, like prayer, fasting, study, serving, and gathered worship, for the development of Christian character. Can we learn to understand our work as a similar means of growth? This project argues that our work serves as a potential spiritual discipline in the formation of our Christian life. This project also offers five practical approaches for rethinking our work in light of our pursuit of Christian maturity. It invites us to explore these five attitudes as a way to consider work as spiritual discipline. As we re-assess aspects of our working life, such as our work relationships, our work environment, our work challenges and temptations, we can approach our work with renewed purpose.

This project will utilize the life and writings of educator and missionary Frank Laubach to mentor us on our journey. This twentieth century “mystic” offers an example of a working life surrendered to the process of Christian growth. Laubach viewed his working hours as opportunities for spiritual transformation. His personal journals and unique spiritual exercises invite us to consider creative approaches to apply our work to Christian formation.

Can a laboring man successfully attain this continuous surrender to God?
Can a man working at a machine pray for people all day long, talk God all day long, and at the same time do his task efficiently?
Can a merchant do business, can an accountant keep books, ceaselessly surrendered to God?
Can a mother wash dishes, care for the babies, continuously talking to God?
Can a politician keep in a state of continuous contact with God, and not lose the following of the crowds?¹

--Frank Laubach, *Letters by a Modern Mystic*

1. Frank C. Laubach, “Letters by a Modern Mystic,” in *Man of Prayer: Selected Writings of a World Missionary*, The Heritage Collection (Syracuse: Laubach Literacy International, 1990), 26-27.

Introduction

Praying, fasting, studying, serving, worshiping, and working. Which of these does not belong? We may accept that the first five of these name spiritual disciplines pursued for the purpose of Christian maturity. But working? We often consider our work in a different realm of life. Most of us do not recognize the potential for our work to become a means of spiritual formation. We rarely consider our work as an opportunity for spiritual growth. When we do consider integrating our work and our faith, our approach is usually an attempt to answer: How can I apply my faith to my work? A worthy pursuit! But what if we reverse the order? What if our approach attempted to answer: How can I apply my work to my faith? The change in perspective offers some interesting insights and new ideas. Do we integrate our faith into our work, or our work into our faith? This second approach is the focus of this project. How can we understand our work as a spiritual discipline, an integral component of our spiritual formation?

After defining terms and highlighting the challenge Christians face to find congruence between their work and their pursuit of spiritual growth, this project will offer five attitudes to apply our work to our spiritual formation. In re-imagining our approach to our work, we will highlight the life and spiritual journey of twentieth-century educator, missionary, and “mystic” Frank Laubach. His life and writings offer a testimony to the practical ways work may function as a useful spiritual discipline. Following the explanation of each of the five attitudes, some practical questions and exercises are offered to help us begin the journey of making work a spiritual discipline.

Defining Spiritual Discipline

Richard Foster defines a spiritual discipline as an activity we engage in “to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us.”² It represents an intentional decision to create space in our lives for God to speak to us or work in us. A spiritual discipline is a practice of offering something of our choice—our time, our body, our attention, our resources—so that God can do in us and for us what we cannot do for ourselves. God alone transforms us.

Transformation is a supernatural gift. However, we cooperate with God in the growth process by acting in ways that give God space to work. We surrender to God’s miraculous process of change. Familiar spiritual disciplines include prayer, study, meditation, fasting, confession, and worship. In recent decades, interest and understanding of these classic spiritual disciplines has been aided by the work of Foster, Dallas Willard, Adele Calhoun, and others. However, if we limit our understanding of spiritual disciplines to ‘religious’ activities, we perpetuate an incomplete and fragmented view of the Christian life. Foster supports this thought:

We must not be led to believe that the Disciplines are only for spiritual giants and hence beyond our reach, or only for contemplatives who devote all their time to prayer and meditation. Far from it. God intends the Disciplines of the spiritual life to be for ordinary human beings: people who have jobs, who care for children, who wash dishes and mow lawns. In fact, the Disciplines are best exercised in the midst of our relationships with our husband or wife, our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbors.³

It is true that work is not usually included in a list of the spiritual disciplines. By applying what we know about the classical spiritual disciplines to our work, we can learn how work can be an activity which helps bring about spiritual growth. Work can become a spiritual discipline.

2. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 7.

3. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 1.

Throughout church history, some Christians have recognized the spiritual value of work. Luther uplifted the spiritual virtue of work. St. Benedict understood the disciplinary value of work. Moreover, the idea of work as a spiritual discipline appears compatible with a broader understanding of spiritual discipline presented by scholars like St. Augustine and Foster. For the most part, however, work has not been considered one of the spiritual disciplines, traditionally speaking. This project invites further reflection on this concept, encouraging us to consider the benefits of work in matters of spiritual formation.

Defining Work

It is important to clarify what we mean when we talk about work. Work is a broad term and can be defined from various perspectives. Paul Minear identifies five different modern meanings associated with the word work.⁴ First, work is defined as what a person is hired to do and for what that person gets paid. It includes one's source of income or one's job. Second, work can be associated with one's particular craft, skill, industry, or profession. This view often indicates a particular cultural classification, or place in society, alongside other professions. This second view considers the profession, or industry, in relationship to what it offers a collective society. Minear's third definition of work includes the entire economic society of a collective people. It represents the efforts of the total labor force in a given economy. The fourth meaning of the word 'work' is the broadest. This definition includes any expenditure of energy, even toward activities of leisure or play. Finally, Minear gives his preferred definition of work. He

4. Paul S. Minear, "Work and Vocation in Scripture" in *Work and Vocation: A Christian Discussion*, ed. John Oliver Nelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), 35-37.

says work is that activity by which one seeks to sustain, vindicate, or realize life. This definition includes finding fulfillment or realizing one's dreams.⁵

In evaluating these differing views of work, we recognize that work is much broader than simply one's job. A job certainly entails work. However, work exists apart from jobs. The term 'job' may not adequately reflect the way a homemaker, a volunteer, or a retired person expends his or her time and energies. A good definition of work must take into consideration the necessary household tasks and rewarding acts of service for which no payment is received. Thus, work needs a broader definition than Minear's first. On the other end of the spectrum of the Minear's definitions, work needs to be defined more narrowly than "any expenditure of energy."⁶ Activities of leisure and recreation do expend energy. Many people work hard at their play. However, defining work this broadly is not commonly accepted. Most people do not consider every expenditure of energy as work.

Scripture does not provide much help in developing a definition of work. Scripture, like modern culture, uses the word broadly. Alan Richardson identifies three primary uses of the word 'work' in scripture. First, scripture speaks of God's work in creation. Second, scripture speaks of human work. Third, the New Testament often uses the word 'work' to describe the activity of Jesus and his followers in working for the cause of the spread of the gospel.⁷

Stephen Dempster, in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, offers a very helpful definition of 'work'. His definition will be used in this project. Work is "the expenditure

5. Minear, 37

6. Minear, 47.

7. Alan Richardson, *The Biblical Doctrine of Work* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 11.

of physical and mental energy to produce sustenance and culture.”⁸ This is similar to Minear’s fifth and favorite definition. Dempster defines work narrowly enough to separate it from leisure activities. He defines work broadly enough to include activities for which one may not receive a salary. Leland Ryken offers a similar definition when he speaks of work as the expenditure of energy, either physical or mental or both, towards purposes which the worker considers to be necessary or desirable to maintain life, health, and an ordered society.⁹ Work may or may not always bring home a paycheck, provide personal fulfillment, or qualify as a culturally appreciated industry, but it sustains life and culture. Work is any expenditure of energy, either physical or mental, which produces sustenance and culture. It includes household chores and volunteer commitments alongside those activities for which we receive paychecks. It includes the mundane and the meaningful. And while work serves to sustain life and culture, it can also serve as a means of spiritual growth.

The Frustration of Christian Incongruity

Christian attempts to integrate faith and work demonstrate the need. Perusing a few of the books targeting Christian audiences, one finds the challenge clearly articulated. The quotations below were taken from the first page of text in each of these books:

When asked how the experiences of 11:00 a.m. on Monday connect with what they experienced at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday, in church, most Christians are at a total loss for words. (William Diehl in *The Monday Connection*)¹⁰

8. Stephen G. Dempster, *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 831.

9. Leland Ryken, *Work and Leisure in Christian Perspective* (Portland: Multnomah, 1987), 22.

10. William E. Diehl, *The Monday Connection: On Being an Authentic Christian in a Weekday World* (n.p.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 1.

Every day, millions of workers go to work without seeing the slightest connection between what they do all day and what they think God wants done in the world. (Doug Sherman and William Hendricks in *Your Work Matters to God*)¹¹

Which is the real world? The world of banks, mortgages, pension funds, time clocks, credit cards, taxes, and computers? Or the world of prayer, ancient scriptures, clerical vestments, the Eucharist, small group studies, theological position papers, and hymns? (Steve Jacobson in *Hearts to God, Hands to Work*)¹²

Does what you hear at church really matter when it comes to real life in the places where you live it? (Stanley Menking and Barbara Wendland in *God's Partners: Lay Christians at Work*)¹³

For many people there is a greater reality and community in their place of work than in their church. Only a serious attempt by the churches to bridge the Sunday-Monday gap can alleviate this situation. (Robert Banks in *Faith Goes to Work*)¹⁴

Sherman and Hendricks describe the tension between work and the spiritual life somewhat humorously, yet all too real, in the following paragraphs:

It helps if you set up an unspoken, unholy contract with your pastor—something I've observed all too frequently among Christians. In this arrangement, the pastor is encouraged to preach to his utmost the great doctrines of the faith. He is even encouraged to grow prophetic and inveigh against the evils of society, against the sins of the government, against the injustices of the multinational corporations—just as long as he avoids applying the Word to the work life of the businessperson. That's off-limits.

In exchange, the businessperson agrees to support the pastor and the programs of the church politically, financially, and by participation. This arrangement works well because it enables many to do as they please in the workplace and yet still feel square with God. Work need not hinder religion; and religion certainly need not matter at work.¹⁵

11. Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1987), 7.

12. Steve Jacobsen, *Hearts to God, Hands to Work: Connecting Spirituality and Work* (n.p.: The Alban Institute, 1997), v.

13. Stanley J. Menking and Barbara Wendland, *God's Partners: Lay Christians at Work* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1993), 1.

14. Robert J. Banks, *Faith Goes to Work: Reflections from the Marketplace* (n.p.: The Alban Institute, 1993), v.

15. Sherman and Hendricks, 20-21.

Why this incongruence? Why do so many Christians experience a division between our work life and our faith growth experiences? Christians potentially experience more incongruence because of our new birth into spiritual life and sacred pursuits. What once was ignored is now central. We have been made alive in our awareness of the holy. But work may seem to remain secular activity in the unholy realm of life. It seems to have little connection with the sacred activities of church and devotional life. Sherman and Hendricks list four assumptions Christians frequently hold which perpetuate this incongruity.

1. The Soul-Body Hierarchy: God is more interested in the soul than in the body.
2. The Eternal-Temporal Hierarchy: The things of eternity are more important than the things of temporal time.
3. The Sacred-Secular Hierarchy: Life is divided into sacred and secular categories.
4. The Clergy-Laity Hierarchy: The nature of the work of clergy is more important to God's purposes than that of the laity.¹⁶

A similar assumption highlights the struggle to find balance between the contemplative and active lifestyles.¹⁷ Christians assume that prayer serves a more spiritually significant purpose than active service or work. These assumptions too often lead Christians to believe that their work does not really connect with the activity and the grace of God working in and through them.

How can we bridge the Sunday to Monday gap? The solution presented here is to learn new ways of thinking about work so that work becomes a means toward the goal of spiritual

16. Sherman and Hendricks, 46ff.

17. Parker Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).

formation. How can we apply our work to the development of our faith? How can we begin to live an integrated and congruent life, one in which our work is an integral part of our pursuit of Christ-like character?

The concept of work as a spiritual discipline, presented in this project, applies to all workers, whether or not they have a sense of calling with regard to their work. It applies to the dynamic and complex culture in which we live. All workers experience levels of frustration in their work. Christian workers experience some unique frustrations. One of the frustrations that Christians experience is the apparent incongruence between their work and their faith. One resolution is to consider how one might apply one's work to one's faith development. Applying our work to our faith, in this context, means to understand work as a tool for the formation of Christian character. It is my hope that the following insights will encourage and empower individuals in this task.

Attitudes for Applying Work to Spiritual Formation

Five attitudes assist us in applying our work to our spiritual formation. They guide us in approaching work as a spiritual discipline. Each of our experiences living out these attitudes will be unique and will depend upon a variety of factors, including our specific kind of work and the level of our spiritual maturity. New perspectives lead to new practices. What changes in our thinking must take place for us to view and apply work as a means to spiritual formation? How can we practically consider work as a spiritual discipline? What mindsets do we need to carry to work each day to place us before God so that he can continue the transformation process in us? As these five attitudes shape daily practices, they offer help to workers desiring to integrate their work to their spiritual formation.

- A. Continuous Prayer: How can I move through my entire day in continuous prayer?
- B. Relationships: How can I view every relationship as an opportunity to serve?
- C. Environment: How can I reflect God’s presence in my work environment?
- D. Temptations: How can stumbling blocks become stepping stones to spiritual growth?
- E. Spiritual Disciplines at Work: How can I incorporate the spiritual disciplines into my working life?

Frank Laubach (1884-1970)

To provide one example of these attitudes turned practices, we will use the life example of Frank Laubach, hearing from his personal writings how he applied his work to his spiritual formation. Of course, many life examples are available to us. This project will take a look at the life and experiences of one Christian man whose practice of applying his work to his faith stands as a remarkable model for all of us. Laubach’s personal journals and other writings demonstrate success at the topic at hand. He sets a high bar for us in applying the principles discussed here. His vulnerability with his failed attempts at spiritual growth also help make him a winsome example. He honestly offers readers his successes and failures, hoping to encourage those of us on our own journeys.

Frank Laubach was an educator and missionary, best known world-wide for his method of teaching people to read. The Laubach Literacy Method, first introduced as a simple missionary tool serving the Moros people of the Philippines, implemented the approach “Each One Teach One.”¹⁸ Laubach’s commitment to literacy grew as an essential commitment of his mission work. His literacy methods eventually reached dozens of countries and millions of

18. Helen M. Roberts, *Champion of the Silent Billion: The Story of Frank Laubach: Apostle of Literacy* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Macalester Park Publishing, 1961), 21.

people. However, reading Laubach's personal journals and books reveals his deep commitment to prayer and pursuit of a profound life with God. He desired continual attentiveness to God; sometimes referred to as a "modern mystic."¹⁹ Refreshingly, Laubach did not separate his pursuit of God from his pursuit of global literacy or his work as educator and missionary. He modeled deep dedication to both his inner and outer worlds, the integration of his work and prayer life. From his writings, we find testimony to the practical ways he applied the five principles listed in this project. Laubach's most profound commitment was to live each moment of each day in constant awareness of and communion with God. It is presented here as the first of the five guidelines because the other four contribute to this all-encompassing goal. The other four serve as steps on the way, as practices contributing to the over-arching goal of constant communion with God.

A. Continuous Prayer: How can I move through my entire day in continuous prayer?

This attitude should logically be considered last rather than first. The other four build toward it. They provide its foundation. Continuous prayer requires profound commitment and extensive practice. Few attempt it. Fewer experience a measure of success. It is offered here first, however, because Laubach writes of it so often. It is the bulls-eye of his approach to life. Laubach centers his focus on living every moment of every day in continual communion with God. He addresses this goal more often than the other four attitudes listed here. He unashamedly sets a high bar for his life with God, and willingly shares his successes and failures to stretch for that bar.

Laubach believed that a Christian can move into a level of intimacy with God, under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit and the spiritual disciplines, in which he or she experiences an

19. See Laubach, "Letters by a Modern Mystic."

increasing depth and frequency of communion with God. Laubach hoped his writing of his own experiences and experiments would encourage others to try.²⁰ Laubach and other Christians throughout history have experimented with and have experienced a depth of mystical intimacy with God that brings prayer and necessary daily activities into an almost inseparable union. Some may know of Brother Lawrence and his pursuit of the practice of the presence of God. Both Lawrence and Laubach describe a kind of life with God which, if adopted and adapted to our lives, dramatically changes our approach to work. Laubach may represent a more helpful model to those of us living outside of a monastic cloister. His relationship with God included several ‘experiments’ to attempt to remain in continuous communion with God. One such experiment describes an attempt to see how many minutes of each hour he could “bring God to mind at least one second out of every sixty.”²¹ Laubach spent time reflecting on his own experiences of congruency between work and prayer. Note his perspective on his work in the following journal entry:

I feel simply carried along each hour, doing my part in a plan which is far beyond myself. This sense of cooperation with God in little things is what so astonishes me.... I must work, to be sure, but there is God working along with me.... I seem to have to make sure of only one thing now, and every other thing takes care of itself, or I prefer to say what is more true, God takes care of all the rest. My part is to live this hour in continuous inner conversation with God and in perfect responsiveness to His will.²²

Laubach envisioned the possibility of other Christians living more congruent lives than they were living. He believed that experiences of work and prayer could become more integrated:

But how ‘practical’ is this for the average man?... The carpenter could be as full of God as was Christ when he drove nails. The millions at looms and lathes could make the hours

20. Laubach, “Letters by a Modern Mystic,” 26.

21. Frank C. Laubach, “Game with Minutes,” in *Man of Prayer*, The Heritage Collection (Syracuse: Laubach Literacy International, 1990), 195.

22. Laubach, “Letters by a Modern Mystic,” 21.

glorious. Some hour spent by some night watchman might be the most glorious ever lived on earth.²³

His own experiences of working in a sense of continuous prayer provide an instructive model for us:

To know that I find Thee best when I work listening, not when I am still or meditative or even on my knees in prayer, but when I work listening and cooperating. Thank Thee, too, that the habit of constant conversation grows easier each day. I really do believe all thought can be conversations with Thee.²⁴

Laubach did not stumble into this intimate relationship with God by accident or with ease. He experienced and wrote about his failures:

If this record of a soul struggle to find God is to be complete it must not omit the story of difficulty and failure. I have not succeeded very well so far. This week, for example, has not been one of the finest in my life.... But I resolve not to give up the effort.²⁵

In spite of struggle and failure, he committed his entire life to the experiences of finding and loving God in the routine activities of life, and he believed he was sharing this experience with others:

We do not need to forget other things or to stop our work, but we invite Him to share everything we do or say or think. Hundreds of people have experimented until they have found ways to let Him share every minute that they are awake.²⁶

Laubach nurtured a deep relationship with God for many years before writing of these types of experiences. His depth of spiritual experience did not emerge overnight or in just a few days. It will not for us. We do well to remember this. All of us will experience some failures in these types of spiritual activities. Our failures will often feel more significant than our small

23. Laubach, "Letters by a Modern Mystic," 24.

24. Laubach, "Learning the Vocabulary of God," 63.

25. Laubach, "Letters by a Modern Mystic," 28.

26. Laubach, "Game with Minutes," 194.

steps of success toward increasing intimacy with God. After our initial excitement, we will grow weary, and we may face the temptation to become discouraged and quit. We may determine to stop all efforts at learning to practice the presence of God. The successes and failures of people like Laubach can be instructive and encouraging. Every minute spent attending to God is a success. Any activity surrendered to the cooperative relationship with God is evidence of growth. Following are some practical formation exercises to get us started.

Formation Exercises: Continuous Prayer

- Find a copy one of Frank Laubach's books, or Brother Lawrence's book, and read of their experiences. As you read and learn from them, notice their struggles and failures as well as their successes in prayer. Do not simply try to imitate them, but learn from them by using their experiences as examples.
- Experiment with Laubach's "Game with Minutes." He writes, "Try to see how many minutes of the hour you can remember God at least once each minute, that is to say, bring God to mind at least one second out of every sixty.... Your score will be low at first, but keep trying, for it constantly becomes easier, and after a while is almost automatic."²⁷
- Use other creative ways to increase your awareness of and attention to God during the day. Try placing visual reminders around you that will prompt you to refocus your attention on God's ultimate purposes for your work. Talk to God conversationally as you maintain this awareness.
- Practice spending one complete day in conscious awareness of God and, as much as possible, continuous communication with God. Start with a Sabbath, a day at home, or a day of retreat. After some level of success in these environments, try a day at work.

27. Laubach, "Game With Minutes," 195.

- Do not get discouraged by having expectations too high at the start. Look for a few short and opportune moments during your work day to practice the presence of God. Enjoy these few moments and let them grow over time. Celebrate your successes. Recognize that every time you turn your attention to God, you are strengthening your relationship with him.

B. Relationships: How can I view every relationship as an opportunity to serve?

“...I know that every person we ever meet is God’s opportunity...” (Frank Laubach)²⁸

Is there a type of work on earth that does not involve human relationships? One might imagine a worker confined to an out of the way room relating only to a computer screen, or a worker assigned a lonely task in some remote desert. Even then, expanding spheres of activities will eventually lead to human contact. The relationships may involve co-workers, customers, patients, suppliers, employers, supervisors, students, or even our own family. The workers on the assembly line, the homemaker, the truck driver, the person working from a home office, all interact with other people. Some of us never meet or see some of those with whom we relate. We only visualize them from their voices, their typed words, or their signatures. Yet, human relationships represent a normal component of work. One basic attitude for the person who desires to apply their work to spiritual formation is the consideration of how they treat those with whom they relate.

The way we view other people in our working environments involves not only a reflection of our spiritual maturity; it affects our spiritual formation. An appropriate perspective of the people we interact with can actually lead to greater spiritual maturity. A new mindset towards them is an integral part of seeing work as a potential spiritual discipline. Unfortunately,

28. Laubach, “Letters by a Modern Mystic,” 33.

we sometimes view people as means to our ends, pawns in our game, or maybe hurdles in our path to success. The worst scenarios involve abuse, humiliation, marginalization, and dehumanization. At best, viewing people as means to our ends devalues them. Whether or not we become involved in outright manipulation, the viewing of other people as only serving our goals limits our own opportunities for Christian growth. It hinders our spiritual formation. It deprives us of critical opportunities to let God work in us. When we simply utilize people for our purposes rather than serve them, God's transformative power becomes limited in our lives. Our choice to view other people in this way limits the work that God can do in us. It keeps us resistant to the full experience of the growth of Christ's character in us. Laubach wrote that if "important duties" related to work responsibilities keep us from helping others, then these "duties" are not duties but sins.²⁹

A healthier mindset includes viewing others as individuals to be served. Every relationship represents an opportunity to serve. We value people more highly as we look for ways to serve them. For the purpose of our own spiritual formation, we begin to engage the spiritual discipline of service. Serving others opens the way for God to change and deepen us. It becomes a tool God uses to form Christ-like character in us. The Protestant Reformers were correct in teaching that one of the primary purposes of work is to serve others.³⁰ Each act of service puts us before God to be changed by his grace and power. Not only does service represent an imitation of Christ's life, but service develops his character within us. Foster lists service as a spiritual discipline.³¹ It is one means God uses to develop the fruit of humility in us.

29. Laubach, "Letters by a Modern Mystic," 36.

30. Ryken, *Work and Leisure*, 97-98.

31. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 126.

The ways we can serve others may not, at first, be obvious to us. We can imagine how the work of a nurse or a teacher can be of service. However, what about the work of the salesperson, the painter, or the computer programmer? In these jobs, and in many others, we may need to think creatively to become servants. It will take effort and discipline. Service requires a mind-set leading to action. Cultivating a servant's attitude will naturally lead to opportunities to act as a servant. We can almost always find ways to serve. We can look for ways to perform little unexpected acts of love for another. The CEO can serve employees by being generous with benefits, can serve customers by producing necessary products or services at a premium quality and a reasonable price, and can serve those in the office by being courteous and caring. The type of work we do has no bearing on our attitude of service. Nurses and teachers may be in positions of service, but if they do not have the attitude of servants, they will fail to reap fully the benefits of spiritual growth. Waitresses and farm laborers also must nurture the hearts of servants, even though their jobs require them to serve. The key to being a servant involves the way we view people and the way we treat people. Do we treat all people with respect and dignity? Do we view each person as one for whom God has an intention? Do we rejoice in the gifts and the strengths of others? Do we love each person as God loves each one? Laubach reflected on his relationship with others, whether friends or strangers:

I choose to look at people through God, using God as my glasses, colored with His love for them.... The hours of the day are spent in the presence of others.... I must learn a continuous silent conversation of heart to heart with God while looking into other eyes and listening to other voices.³²

One practice Laubach modeled is that of attempting to pray silently for each person he met, whether friend or stranger, and also each person God brought to his mind throughout the

32. Laubach, "Letters by a Modern Mystic," 45.

day. This practice, he believed, formed his own spiritual life and affected those for whom he prayed:

Just to pray inwardly for everybody one meets, and to keep on all day without stopping, even when doing other work of every kind.... Today I have noticed that when I forget other people I become fatigued rather quickly. When I am reminded of my purpose and start again holding people, seen and unseen, before God, a new exhilaration comes to me...³³

Formation Exercises: Relationships

- Reflect on the people in your work environment. Ask God to bring to your mind some individual that you may have previously ignored or considered insignificant to your goals, and to change your attitude toward them.
- Write down the name of or imagine the face of an individual with whom you work. Ask yourself the questions: In what ways, if any, do I view this person as a means to my goals? Do I, in any way, try to use this person for my own advancement? In what way or ways can I begin to serve this person?
- Reflect on the work that God might be doing in the lives of those with whom you work. Ask God to teach you what you can do to further God's work in their lives.
- Identify one person in your working environment whom you find difficult to serve. Ask God to show you a way to serve that person. Consider ways of serving that will not be recognized or draw attention to you.
- Check your heart. Does your service lead to feelings of sinful pride? Or does your service elicit feelings of appreciation for the other person and feelings of joy at the prospect of being an instrument for God's purposes?

33. Laubach, "Letters by a Modern Mystic," 46.

C. Environment: How can I reflect God's presence in my work environment?

Relationships are inescapable components of work. So is the environment in which we work. Whether we work at home or leave home and enter another setting, our perspective of our work environment serves as another helpful attitude in integrating work with spiritual formation. What is our work environment like? Do we dread or enjoy it? What efforts do we make to affect our environment? Often our feelings about the places we work affect our attitudes about our own Christian lives. If our work environment seems to reflect opposition to God's presence and standards, we too easily give in to a victim's mentality and accept that we feel helpless to make much of a difference. Even if our work environment does not appear detrimental to our Christian life, we too often fail to take advantage of the opportunities to affect our environment with the sense of the presence of God.

People naturally tend to associate particular places with a sense of God's presence. Church buildings take on a sacred aura for many of us. Our places of private worship become comfortably familiar. If we have made commitments to God at a Christian camp, we often feel a sense of joy when we return there. We attach emotions to certain places based upon our direct experiences with God there. These emotions are not wrong. We need emotions. God grants them to us by his grace. However, we must guard against the danger of believing that God's presence is confined to particular places based upon our subjective experiences. In reality, God is no less present in the coal mines and the boardrooms than in the most elegant cathedrals and among the most majestic mountains.

Laubach considered place and God's presence in his efforts to integrate his work and faith. In writing of those with whom he served, he prayed, "I want them to know my discovery!

That any minute can be paradise, that any place can be heaven.”³⁴ This sense of place was important to Laubach. “The most important discovery of my whole life is that one can take a little rough cabin and transform it into a palace just by flooding it with the thoughts of God.”³⁵ In one of his journal entries, he wrote, “Today God seems to me to be just behind everything. I feel Him there. He is just under my hand, just under the typewriter, just behind this desk, just inside the file, just inside the camera.”³⁶

God invades the places we work. His presence fills the environment whether we sense him or not. When the workplace does not seem particularly spiritual, or if the activities that go on there represent those things we believe displease him, God’s presence remains. We understand this truth theologically, even if we do not sense it emotionally. When we type a paper, vacuum the house, dig a ditch, conduct a music lesson, or close a deal, God is always present. Not only do we believe in God’s omnipresence, but we acknowledge that God actively works in the lives and situations around us. Whether a private conversation or in a crowd, we can begin to grow in our sense of God’s presence. Laubach worked toward this attitude:

The hours of the day from dawn to bedtime are spent in the presence of others. Either this new situation will crowd God out or I must take Him into it all.... Yet if this experiment is to have any value for busy people it must be worked under exactly these conditions of high pressure and throngs of people.³⁷

Once we have established the theological truths of God’s presence and activity, we can begin to view ourselves as serving to bring a sense of God’s presence into our workplaces. Of

34. Laubach, “Letters by a Modern Mystic,” 31.

35. Laubach, “Letters by a Modern Mystic,” 32.

36. Laubach, “Letters by a Modern Mystic,” 38.

37. Laubach, “Letters by a Modern Mystic,” 45.

course, we know we do not actually bring God's presence into our workplaces. However, we trust that God works in and through us. If we carry the processes of transformation that God has been affecting in our lives into our places of work, we can affect our environments. We do not need to consider ourselves mere victims of our environments. We can view ourselves as ambassadors of God's kingdom and agents of change within our environments. Laubach made this a profound commitment of his daily life, to "flash" prayers at strangers and friends, to become an instrument of God's presence.³⁸ This, he believed, changed the environment:

We whisper 'God' or 'Jesus' or 'Christ' constantly as we glance at every person near us.... The atmosphere of a room changes.... Perhaps there is no finer ministry than just to be in meetings or crowds, whispering 'Jesus,' and then helping people whenever you see an opportunity.³⁹

How do we, figuratively speaking, take God's presence to work with us? We can pray for God's Spirit to fill us, direct us, and minister through and around us as we work. Our attitude, our relationships, our availability, and our service all may reflect God's presence. Author Jan Wood tells of a transformative experience in her life in which she decided to imagine God standing in a market checkout line with her. She began to view other people differently. She began to pray for and minister to those around her. As a result, the employee working behind the checkout counter saw compassion in Jan's eyes, burst into tears, and shared the pain and frustrations of the day with her.⁴⁰ We may not often experience something as dramatic as that, but a Christian's presence should lead to more compassionate, more graceful, more respectful,

38. Frank C. Laubach, "Prayer: The Mightiest Force in the World," in *Man of Prayer: Selected Writings of a World Missionary*, The Heritage Collection (Syracuse: Laubach Literacy International, 1990), 233.

39. Laubach, "Game with Minutes," 197.

40. Jan Wood, *Christians at Work: Not Business as Usual* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 15-16.

more joyful, more hopeful, more just, and more truthful environments. An unlimited variety of creative ways exist for us to pray for our work environments and for those with whom we interact.⁴¹ The bottom line remains that our goal is to make more of an influence upon our environments than our environments make upon us. This is possible when we acknowledge that God is already working there and we then submit to his work in and through us. God is active in our work environment and in us. As we invite God's transforming process to continue in us as, we allow God to develop us as we embrace the responsibility to bring a greater sense of God's presence into our work environments. Our work environments will be changed, and we will experience change.

Formation Exercises: Work Environment

- Reflect: Do I acknowledge the truth that God is present and active everywhere, even in my work environment? Ask God to help you become more aware of his presence where you work. Ask God to show you little ways he is active in your work environment.
- Consider how God might be working in every circumstance and in every person's life around you. What can you do to release the power of God into these circumstances? How can you encourage openness to God's presence and activity around you? Consider how you can be a more open conduit for his power, love, and justice.
- In your imagination, see yourself in your work environment, and imagine God's radiant light shining from within you out into your environment. What would it illuminate? What effect would it have on others? What effect would it have on yourself and on your work? Use the mental image of lighthouse: you hold the light for the benefit of others. Use this picture as you go to your work.

9. Wood, 120.

- Attempt the practice of sending flash prayer to everyone with which you interact.

Whether on a busy street or in a meeting or an office, try to imagine God speaking or reaching toward every person. Speak God's name or a brief blessing toward each person.

D. Temptations: How can stumbling blocks become stepping stones to spiritual growth?

I began to realize how we need temptation, loneliness, disappointment, pain, failure or some tragedy to draw out these latent powers which otherwise lie dormant. Then, when these conditions are around, we need to know how to harness them for Thee and for our fellow men. Perhaps this year is telling me how to capitalize my difficulties. 'Count it all joy... when ye fall into manifold temptations... that ye may be perfect and entire, lacking in nothing.'⁴²

How counterintuitive! Laubach evidenced an approach to temptation and difficulties that seems odd to many. We understand that the process of becoming more like Christ includes learning to resist temptations. As we mature in our faith, we learn how to watch alertly for temptations and how to overcome them. For many of us, work involves an environment that includes numerous temptations. Work may challenge our convictions by tempting our attitudes or actions. Laubach models an attitude toward temptations that serves the process of discipleship in a proactive way.

Temptations may serve as either stumbling blocks or stepping stones. Every temptation includes a choice—a fork in the road—and an opportunity to grow. Whenever we surrender to temptation, we grow weaker in our ability to resist the next wave of temptation. When we resist temptation, we grow stronger in our ability to resist future challenges. Following Laubach's example, we should view each temptation as the potential first step toward victory:

God, it is very difficult to keep out thoughts which cannot stay in the same mind with Thee. Perhaps that fight, too, is very good for me.... Sex fancies surge up from the depths of our nature. That is how the morning begins. But I welcome it as a challenge to

42. Frank C. Laubach, "Learning the Vocabulary of God," in *Man of Prayer: Selected Writings of a World Missionary*, The Heritage Collection (Syracuse: Laubach Literacy International, 1990), 100.

overcome these enemies of fellowship. I must, I can, I shall overwhelm them today. Here is my will, God, make it triumphant within.⁴³

Many of us view temptation like the germs that get passed around an office during winter flu season: ‘Everyone is infected, I’m sure I’ll catch it soon.’ We view ourselves as defenseless against its power. Scripture teaches that we must be very alert to temptation.⁴⁴ It also teaches that temptation can be resisted. 1 Corinthians 10:13 encourages us by stating, “But when you are tempted, he [God] will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” One of the metaphors used by the Bible to describe the Christian life is a battle.⁴⁵ We are not victims, but combatants.

Work can serve, in a sense, as a type of laboratory for spiritual formation. It can serve as a place in which God tests and refines us. It can act as an environment in which we exercise what we have been learning as we mature. Jesus’ experience in the desert appears to have served this purpose for him.⁴⁶ He was challenged to cling to the truth about himself and his Father’s will. He depended upon his knowledge of and experience with the scriptures to resist temptation. The result for Jesus appeared to be greater clarity and strength to live the life his Father intended. When we view temptation in this way—as a laboratory in which God refines us—we may approach temptations with the assurance that victory leads to strength and greater victory. We may eagerly expect to be a little stronger at the end of a day than we were at the start because of the display of God’s grace in our lives to resist temptations. The workplace can become the

43. Laubach, “Learning the Vocabulary of God,” 61.

44. 1 Peter 5:8-9.

45. Ephesians 6:10-18.

46. Matthew 4:1-11.

testing ground for the development of our character. We will be bombarded with choices each day. If we adequately prepare ourselves for battle against the “spiritual forces of evil”⁴⁷ we can develop the spiritual strength to become men and women of integrity.

One of Laubach’s helpful attitudes toward overcoming temptation was to be proactive rather than only reactive. A proactive posture includes being aware of one’s weaknesses, increasing one’s spiritual discernment and strength through prayer, heightened sensitivity to temptations, and an almost aggressive approach to dealing with temptations. By aggressiveness, we do not mean that we seek out or embrace temptation. Instead, we confront it in order to diffuse it of its power. Jesus gave us an example of confronting temptation and diffusing its power when he was tempted in the desert.⁴⁸ Once temptation is diffused, we must remain on heightened alert for future temptations. For even after Jesus overcame the temptations in the early days of his ministry, he remained alert, knowing that temptation would return at “an opportune time.”⁴⁹

Challenges will come to us at our workplaces that are not necessarily temptations to sin. We may simply face discouragement. Discouragement, according to Laubach, may also be an opportunity for growth. On one discouraging occasion, he writes, “This is the evening of a lonely, discouraging day.”⁵⁰ We can all relate! But then he offers a helpful attitude:

This lonely, discouraging day will but help me to sympathize with the millions upon millions upon millions who are discouraged, and will help me to long harder to help and help and help. Some new step has always come out of this kind of discouragement. It will

47. Ephesians 6:12.

48. Matthew 4:1-11.

49. Mark 4:13.

50. Laubach, “Learning the Vocabulary of God,” 67.

again.⁵¹

Challenges and difficulties, whether temptations or simply discouragement, offer the opportunity for growth. Christ is our ultimate example: the suffering servant who submitted, obeyed, persevered, and emerged victoriously. As he was strengthened, so we can be strengthened in our progress toward spiritual maturity.

Formation Exercises: Temptations

- Write down one or two areas of weakness in which you experience temptation at work. Ask God to show you blind spots in your own character. Ask him to show you specific areas in which you need to grow.
- Where you have yielded to temptation, confess your sins to God and experience his forgiveness.
- Identify the character quality that is the opposite of the temptation with which you are being confronted. For example, if you are tempted to lie, then the character quality is honesty. If you are tempted to be mean-spirited, then the character quality is kindness. The lists of virtues given in scriptures can help you with this. Look over the lists of virtues found in 2 Corinthians 6:6, Galatians 5:22-23, and Ephesians 5:5. As you look over these lists, ask God to show you which specific character qualities you need from him to replace the character weakness with which you are struggling. List it next to your weakness. In prayer, ask God to fill you with this positive character quality, also called the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23). Admit that this character quality is not inherent in you but in God as he works in you. Ask God for his help in resisting temptation. Ask God to replace his character quality with the character weakness with

51. Laubach, “Learning the Vocabulary of God,” 67.

which you are struggling.

- Identify another person or two who share your Christian values, whether at work or not.

Ask them to pray for you and hold you accountable in the specific areas that you have listed. Offer to do the same for them.

E. Spiritual Disciplines at Work: How can I incorporate the spiritual disciplines into my working life?

We absolutely cannot understand work as a spiritual discipline if we have no other experience with the classical spiritual disciplines. The development of a life of spiritual discipline must begin by practicing the basics, such as prayer, meditation, and study. Once we have begun the transformation process in the quietness of our own private worship times and in the environment of a Christian community, then we are ready to begin using our work as another spiritual discipline. Only some level of success with the basic disciplines empowers us to live in continuous attention toward God. Laubach's journals reflect intimate experiences of personal devotions and prayer. One of his most cherished places of private prayer was a location called Signal Hill.⁵² He experienced God there in ways that he was unable to describe. However, he realized that these profound prayer experiences served to propel him into his work. On one occasion, after "two hours of wonderful thinking with God" he writes:

And now on this 'mount of transfiguration' I do not want ever to leave. I want to keep this lovely aching heart forever. But that would not be Christlike. I must now carry all I can of Him across the river to the Moro school. There are figures and there are salaries to be considered, for it is the end of the month. How much of this glory can one carry into business?"⁵³

Foster defines a spiritual discipline as any activity that we engage in "to place ourselves

52. Laubach, "Letters by a Modern Mystic," 30.

53. Laubach, "Letters by a Modern Mystic," 43.

before God so that he can transform us.”⁵⁴ Foster lists twelve classical spiritual disciplines divided into three categories. The inward disciplines he includes as meditation, prayer, fasting, and study. The outward disciplines include simplicity, solitude, submission, and service. The corporate disciplines he lists are confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.⁵⁵ Dallas Willard offers a different categorization of the classical spiritual disciplines. He breaks them into disciplines of abstinence and disciplines of engagement. Disciplines of abstinence include solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice. Disciplines of engagement include study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission.⁵⁶ Both lists, and their arrangements, are helpful. Neither is exhaustive. The spiritual disciplines listed by Foster and Willard can be considered the classics. Foster calls them classical because they represent centuries of Christian experience in spiritual formation and because they are central to Christian spiritual formation.⁵⁷

The Christian formation process is a cooperative process between God’s grace and our activities. Our activities—in this case, the spiritual disciplines—move us under the influence of God’s power. God’s grace and power miraculously transform our character, but God has sovereignly chosen to give us the choice to move under his influence. It is possible for us to resist being transformed by God’s grace and power. We resist God by avoiding the kinds of activities that move us under God’s influence. It is also possible for us to place ourselves, by way

54. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 7.

55. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, v.

56. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 158.

57. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 1.

of the disciplines, under God's influence so that his grace and power are released more freely into our lives. We may restrict the flow of God's power or grace into our lives by our resistance to him. However, we may release the flow of God's power and grace into our lives by surrendering to him. A spiritual discipline is not an end in itself, but a means to a greater end: that of being transformed by God. The purpose of praying is not to become a person who prays better, but to learn how to hear from and speak to God so that God transforms us and uses us for his glory. The purpose of studying is not simply to know more, but to let that knowledge transform us resulting in greater love toward God and others. The purpose of going to church is not to set an attendance record, but to immerse oneself in a loving Christian community in which growth will be the result. Exercising the classic spiritual disciplines in private or in community with other Christians prepares us, then, for taking them to work.

Work and the spiritual disciplines are not always viewed as compatible. A religious zealot once complained to Puritan Thomas Shepard that spiritual thoughts distracted him while he worked. Shepard's counsel was that it is a sin to be "distracted by spiritual thoughts when God sets you on work in civil employments."⁵⁸ Aquinas viewed work as detrimental to us because "it is impossible for one to be busy with external action and at the same time give oneself to Divine contemplation."⁵⁹ Laubach would challenge these assumptions. As difficult as it may be to incorporate spiritual disciplines at work, they may be more necessary there than at church or home. Finding ways to work spiritual disciplines into our daily working lives provides the foundation for considering how every moment of every day can be surrendered to God. It is also a fundamental attitude to experiencing the formative side of work.

58. Ryken, *Work and Leisure*, 95.

59. Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit* (New York: Oxford, 1991), 70.

How can we begin this practice? We can creatively find ways to practice the spiritual disciplines at work. The most practical way for us to do this involves identifying regular predictable activities throughout our day and attaching a spiritual discipline to them. A surgeon can practice the discipline of confession each time she scrubs for surgery. A teacher may intercede for his students while watching them in the classroom or at play. A person who spends time in her car can listen to the scriptures. A lunch hour may function as time spent in meditation or fasting. Waiting on hold on the phone, or standing in a line, may draw us into communion with God. As Laubach demonstrated, we can learn the art of sending ‘flash prayers’ toward every person we meet or those God brings to mind.⁶⁰ He imagined various possibilities of connecting work with spiritual practices, and he was optimistic many others were doing so:

Countless thousands of men keep God in mind while engaged in all types of work, mental or manual, and find they are happier and get better results.... The carpenter can do better work if he talks quietly to God about each task, as Jesus certainly did when He was a carpenter. Many of us have found that we can compose a letter or write a book better when we say: ‘God, think Thy thoughts in my mind. What does Thou desire written?’.... A merchant who waits on his customers and pray for them at the same time, wins their affection and their business. A salesman who prays for those with whom he is dealing has far more likelihood of making a sale. A bookkeeper or banker can whisper to God about every column of figures and be certain that God is even more interested in the figures than he is.... Many women cultivate Christ’s companionship while cooking, washing dishes, sweeping, sewing, and caring for children.⁶¹

Formation Exercises: Spiritual Disciplines at Work

- Identify one or more spiritual disciplines that you currently utilize in your spiritual life and that you are fairly comfortable exercising. Now consider other environments—like work—in which this discipline could be creatively incorporated. Try incorporating a basic spiritual discipline, like prayer or scripture reading, into one of your daily routines

60. Laubach, “Prayer: The Mightiest Force in the World,” 215.

61. Laubach, “Game with Minutes,” 200-201.

at work.

- Consider the routine activities that are common to many of your working days. Think of ways to incorporate spiritual disciplines into these activities. Be creative. Ask for help from other Christians who understand the spiritual disciplines. Begin to experiment with one or two spiritual disciplines at work.
- Look over the lists of classic spiritual disciplines listed above or study them from the books by Foster or Willard. Identify a spiritual discipline that you do not presently utilize and begin to experiment with it in simple ways. Begin at home or in a safe Christian environment, and then move your experiment into your work environment. Some examples: Fast during your lunch break and spend the time in meditation. Set your phone or watch to send an alert every hour and spend one minute celebrating God. If you normally listen to the radio during your commute, turn it off and experience silence. During breaks or a lunch, find a place to be alone with your prayers. There are many creative ways to incorporate spiritual disciplines at work. Ask God to help you think of others.

Conclusion

The concept of applying one's work to the process of spiritual formation will be easier to grasp for some than others. Some of our jobs lend themselves to this task much more readily than others. Some of us will be able to readjust more quickly our mental patterns. The five attitudes presented here are applicable to nearly everyone. Each of us works with other people, works in an environment of some sort, and experiences temptations while we work. Each of us can incorporate some spiritual disciplines into our daily routines and can develop an even greater attention to God during our working activities. The attitudes listed here are only starting points.

Many more ideas can be cultivated by listening to God and from relationships with other Christians devoted to the same purposes. Learning from others on the journey, like Frank Laubach, is one of God's gifts to us in the community of faith. Offering our experiences to others is also an essential component of Christian community. Scripture teaches that the renewal of our minds is a key component of transformation.⁶² Our work very seldom adjusts to our needs. Most often, we must adjust our mindset to align our work with what God desires to work in us. The goal of applying our work to our spiritual formation, using attitudes like those listed above, advances the work of God in and through our lives.

62. Romans 12:2

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