

THE DISCIPLINED LIFE

Getting in shape to seek the Kingdom of God.

PART 5: VOCATIONAL DISCIPLINES



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The Fellowship of Ailbe

Vocational Disciplines
A *ReVision* Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe
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Contents

Welcome to <i>Spiritual Disciplines</i>	4
1 The Meaning of Vocation	5
2 Embrace Your Calling	7
3 Plan for the “Yes” Path	9
4 Get Organized!	11
5 Always Preparing	13
6 Execute Excellence	15
7 Strive for Improvement	17

Welcome to *Vocational Disciplines*

Welcome to *Vocational Disciplines*, part 5 of a 7-part series on the disciplined life. Seeking the Kingdom of God is full-time work, and we need to be in shape if we're going to make progress in this effort. Living a disciplined life is crucial to realizing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God

Vocational Disciplines define the ways we take up our calling from the Lord and seek to fulfill the work we've been given to do. In the Kingdom of God, the work we've been given to do is greater than the job at which we work, and we need to master the disciplines that can help us use all our time for the glory of the Lord.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on and discuss the questions provided. Don't be in a hurry. Be willing to take more than one session on a lesson if it will allow you to delve more deeply into the subject matter.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Meaning of Vocation

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Philippians 2.12, 13

Work out your salvation

I get the feeling that some Christians are of the opinion that coming to salvation by grace through faith is the *end* of Christian life, rather than the *beginning*.

All I have to do is mention the Law of God or the importance of maintaining a disciplined life and, sooner or later, someone's going to object that we're not saved by works, but by grace. All this talk about works is tedious, Pharisaical, judgmental, unloving, and worse. We don't work for our salvation, I'm reminded.

No, we don't work *for* our salvation. But we are commanded to *work out* our salvation, and it is within this context that every believer is responsible to discern and pursue his or her unique calling from the Lord.

We have been redeemed, saved, and recreated in Christ Jesus *unto* good works, Paul insisted (Eph. 2.8-10). We are called to be a people *zealous* for good works, *ready for every* good work, and *careful to maintain* good works (Titus 2.14; 3.1, 8). We need to understand what those good works are, with particular reference to our daily lives and what we need to *do* in order to make sure those works are as *good* as they can be before the Lord and men.

The work we've been given to do

What we're talking about here is *vocation*. Normally when that word is in view we're thinking about the work we do to earn a living and provide for those we love. But in the Kingdom of God the work we've been given to do is greater than the job at which we work. We have been *called* by God to His Kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2.12), and within that rather large framework, a wide range of *good works* is required of all who follow Jesus Christ. Let me mention three.

First, we're called to work at being saints of the Lord (1 Cor. 1.2, 9). This "fellowship with Christ" requires that we apply ourselves to spiritual disciplines in order to shape our souls for loving God and our neighbors. We're called to be holy, as our Father in heaven is holy; and becoming holy in all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities requires that we work out the salvation given to us, seeking to bring holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7.1).

Second, as followers of Christ we are members of His Body, the Church. Each of us has been given gifts and opportunities to do works of service that contribute to building-up our local church in unity and maturity in the Lord (1 Cor. 12.7-11; Eph. 4.11-16). We need to discover and improve those gifts and make the most of the opportunities for service so that our labors in the local church can bear much fruit (Jn. 15.8, 16).

Finally, each of us is called to a particular condition or calling, a station of service in the larger world by which the Lord provides our daily bread (1 Cor. 7.17-24). The Apostle Paul says that each believer must take up his or her daily calling in such a way as to make the most of every opportunity for glorifying God (Eph. 5.15-17; 1 Cor. 10.31). So it doesn't matter whether you're a butcher or baker or candlestick maker, homemaker, shop keeper, welder, farmer, or any other legitimate occupation, this work is part of your calling from the Lord.

Part, but not all. We must always remember: The work we've been given to do in working out our salvation and fulfilling our calling to God's Kingdom and glory is greater than the job at which we work.

The voice in the confluence

This has the potential to be confusing, you'll agree. Get a job, find a niche in the church, grow in Christ and His salvation – and all things for the Kingdom and glory of God? How can we identify our *calling* so as to realize our fullest potential for contributing to the progress of the divine economy?

Like Moses, Samuel, David, Daniel, Esther, Isaiah, and all the great saints of Scripture – as well as those down through the ages who have successfully discerned and pursued the Lord's leading – you will discover that your calling from the Lord comes from the confluence of four areas or aspects of your life.

First, what are your *burdens*? What weighs heavily on you, gets you excited, makes you want to weep or leap with joy? Then, second, what does your *past experience* suggest about where and how you ought to seek the Kingdom and glory of God? Third, what *skills and abilities* do you possess to bring to whatever calling you may pursue? Finally, what *opportunities or needs* are immediately before you, crying out to be met?

The Lord will speak to you in the confluence of these four areas of your life. If you will seek Him there in prayer, waiting on Him, getting wise counsel, searching His Word, and considering all the opportunities and needs before you, you will be able to discern the Lord's vocation for your life.

And what do you do then?

For reflection

1. How do you understand the idea of “calling”? Does every believer have a calling from the Lord?
2. “No, we don't work *for* our salvation. But we are commanded to *work out* our salvation, and it is within this context that every believer is responsible to discern and pursue his or her unique calling from the Lord.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. What are some examples of the kind of “work” that fill up your calling from the Lord?

Next steps – Preparation: How would you describe your vocation from the Lord at this time? Is your vocation as broad and clear as outlined in this article? To whom might you turn to get some help in thinking more clearly about what God is calling you to do?

2 Embrace Your Calling

But he said, "O my Lord, please send by the hand of whomever else You may send." So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses, and He said: "Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he can speak well. And look, he is also coming out to meet you. When he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. Now you shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth. And I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and I will teach you what you shall do. So he shall be your spokesman to the people. And he himself shall be as a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God. And you shall take this rod in your hand, with which you shall do the signs." So Moses went and returned to Jethro his father-in-law, and said to him, "Please let me go and return to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see whether they are still alive." Exodus 4.13-18

It can take a while

We have said that every believer must discern his or her *calling* from the Lord, the *vocation* within which we seek the Kingdom and glory of God in every area of life. This can take a while, as we see in the case of Moses. But even as Moses finally gave up arguing with the Lord and accepted what God had prepared for him, so we too may expect to discern the Lord's unique calling for us.

We have further said that we can expect to discover that vocation within the confluence of our burdens, past experience, skills and abilities, and opportunities and needs. Seeking the Lord with these matters in mind will help us to discern areas of personal growth, church participation, and earning our daily bread that will fill up and improve the time we have each day for seeking the Kingdom and glory of God.

One's calling from the Lord can change, of course, but, even if it does, we still need to be able to discern where the Lord is leading us. Vocation involves how we use our time within that sector of the Lord's vineyard where we have been sent like Him to bring near the Kingdom of God (Jn. 20.21). All our time comes from the Lord. It's *His* time, on loan to us, and He expects us to receive, invest, improve, and return it to Him at the end of each day, radiant with His glory and praise (Eph. 5.15-17; Matt. 25.14-30).

So, having discerned our calling, we need to embrace it.

The Lord our supply

Why would anyone hesitate to fill up the time of his or her life seeking the Kingdom and glory of God? Like Moses, we can all think of "good reasons" why we're not the one for this or that area of service. Or why it's just too much trouble to try to improve our walk with the Lord. Or how we just don't have the time. Or the skills. Or whatever.

But the calling from our Father to seek His Kingdom and glory doesn't go away simply because we choose to ignore or minimize it. One day He will require an accounting on our part, and we want to make sure we will receive the "Well done, good and faithful servant" He desires to pronounce over us. The sooner we embrace the *idea* of God's calling – that He has a unique calling for each of us as citizens and ambassadors in His Kingdom – the easier it will be to accept the *particular* calling God has prepared for us.

At some point, in other words, we're going to have to say "Yes" to God – to the idea of calling and the fact of His unique calling for us. We'll know that we've embraced the idea of God's calling when we're seeking Him in prayer, in His Word, and in the confluence of those four areas previously described. We'll be on the way to discerning our individual calling when we seek the counsel of wise friends, church leaders, co-workers, and those who know us best.

Once you've discovered and embraced the Lord's calling for your life, the next step is to demonstrate that embrace by, well, taking the next step.

Next steps – always

In Moses' case the next step was to gain his father-in-law's blessing. Not a bad idea, that. If we have become aware of God's leading in a particular direction, we can embrace and firm up that calling if our loved ones, colleagues, mentors, and so on extend their blessings. If they do, they may even be around – like Jethro was for Moses – to help us fulfill that calling (Ex. 18).

And fulfilling your calling, whatever it may be, is always a matter of next steps. God does not call us to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Granted, our next steps may be a little scary at times – think of Esther going into the king, or Peter stepping out of that boat. But God has promised to light our path with His Word (Ps. 119.105), to fill and lead us by His Spirit (Eph. 5.18-21), to guide us into all truth (Jn. 16.13), to be with us always (Matt 28.20), and to direct our steps (Prov. 3.5, 6). For our part, we need to keep moving in directions that will find us working out our salvation in the confluence of our burdens, experience, skills, and opportunities, for the glory of God and the progress of His Kingdom.

I recall a “Miss Manners” column that I read some years ago. It's pertinent to our discussion. Miss Manners was asked by a young girl who was getting ready for her first prom how to walk in high heels. Here is Miss Manners' response, in full: “Right foot, left foot; right foot, left foot.”

Embrace the calling God is putting before you, then start looking for the next steps that will get you moving in the direction of His Kingdom and glory. He'll meet you as you do, and will help you every “right foot, left foot” of the way.

For reflection

1. Why are some people reluctant to identify and embrace a calling from the Lord?
2. What does T. M. mean by “embrace” your calling? Is this a “one-time” effort, or do we need to embrace our calling daily? Explain.
3. Why is it important, in pursuing our calling, that we have a clear focus on “next steps”?

Next steps – Conversation: Let's assume you have a sense of God's calling for you in His Kingdom and for His glory. Have you embraced that calling? What “next steps” can help you get moving along in pursuit of that calling? Talk with a trusted Christian friend about these questions.

3 Plan for the “Yes” Path

But as God is faithful, our word to you is not yes and no. For the Son of God, Christ Jesus, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silvanus and Timothy—was not yes and no, but is yes in Him. For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us. 2 Corinthians 1.18-20

Vocation

We’re looking at those *vocational* disciplines with which fill up the time God allots us in an ongoing effort of seeking His Kingdom and glory.

Naturally, our vocation involves certain kinds of work, *good* works, for which Christ has redeemed us. And in the Kingdom of God, the work we’ve been given to do is always greater than the job at which we work. We seek the Kingdom and glory of God at all times, in all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities. Each of us has a unique and individual calling from the Lord, and discerning and embracing that calling is the daily duty of each one of us as followers of Jesus Christ.

For it is in the time of our lives, in the work we’ve been given to do, that we work out our salvation in fear and trembling, willing and doing that which finds us squarely situated in the favor and blessings of the Lord (Phil. 2.12, 13).

And, as we might imagine, such a way of life, this pursuing the Lord’s *calling* for our lives, can be enhanced by careful and prayerful planning.

The “Yes” path

God is at work within us to transform us into the image of Jesus, so that He increases in us as we decrease (Jn. 3.30). This is the work of *spiritual* disciplines. As we are being transformed we serve as conduits of God’s grace and truth to the people around us. This is the work of *relational* disciplines.

Vocational disciplines prepare us for the good works we will do as we travel our journey in the Lord, in all the areas where God has called us to serve Him. When it comes to the direction in which our calling leads us, God’s Word to us is “Yes!” Vocation is a positive, hopeful, even thrilling way of filling up the time of your life. God says “Yes” to your needs, “Yes” to your desires, hopes, longings, and aspirations. The road that marks your journey, as you work to fulfill the Lord’s calling, is “Yes” – positive and affirming and fruitful.

That is, as long as you travel the highway of God’s promises toward communion with, participation in, and witness to Jesus Christ.

God’s precious and very great promises, all of which are fulfilled in Jesus, can guide our every next step, but we must walk in them day by day, moment by moment, in every situation and for every task. Here is where *vocational* disciplines come into play, leading us ever more deeply, joyously, and fruitfully into the “Yes” of our calling in the Kingdom and glory of God.

And to be succinct, the “Yes” of our lives is Jesus, and the way to that “Yes” is the Word and promises of God. As we pursue our calling, God says “Yes” – Jesus! – to us for everything He is leading and equipping us to do.

Planning for Jesus

God has invested His glory in Jesus (Heb. 1.3). He is moving His people into Christ-likeness through His Word of promise (2 Cor. 3.12-18). He leads and draws us forward by affirmation, so that we walk the path

Vocational Disciplines

toward Christ gladly, joyfully, eagerly. If, in any area of our lives, any aspect of our calling, we are seeking any goal or promise other than what God has spoken, we depart the “Yes” path to Jesus and are following the “No” path of self-interest, leading only to more of self and the ways and concerns of the flesh.

But we can make sure the direction of our lives, in all aspects of our calling, continues to line up with God’s “Yes” in Jesus, if we will take the time to pray and plan about how Jesus should come to expression in and through our lives. Here we must always bear in mind that Jesus intends to fill our lives and overflow our lives into our Personal Mission Fields (Eph. 1.19-22; 4.10), so that His light, His love, and His presence and power are the fruit of *all* our works.

So it’s probably a good idea to review the promises of God more frequently (Gen. 12.1-3; cf. 2 Pet. 1.4), and to discern the specific ways in which these promises are fulfilled by and expressive of our Lord Jesus Christ. Use part of your time in prayer each day to seek the Lord’s work *for* that day, and to envision the way His glory in Jesus should come to expression in each aspect and opportunity of your calling (Ps. 90.12, 16, 17). We will be more likely to abide within the will of God for our calling if our plans each day enable us to commune with, participate in, and bear witness to our Lord Jesus Christ in all things (Jms. 4.13-15).

Seek the Lord in all your plans, and He will move you forward in His “Yes.”

For reflection

1. What makes a calling from the Lord positive, affirming, and fruitful?
2. Briefly describe how spiritual disciplines, relational disciplines, and vocational disciplines work together to help us in fulfilling our calling from the Lord.
3. Meditate on Genesis 12.1-3, Romans 4.13-16, and 2 Peter 1.4. What makes the promises of God so great and precious? In what sense or senses is Jesus the “Yes” of our calling?

Next steps – Transformation: What is your approach to planning the work of your day? Are you conscious of Jesus in your planning? Of how He might come to expression through your work? How can you improve your planning? Talk with a friend or church leader about these questions.

4 Get Organized!

But He said to them, "You give them something to eat." And they said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish, unless we go and buy food for all these people." For there were about five thousand men. Then He said to His disciples, "Make them sit down in groups of fifty." And they did so, and made them all sit down. Luke 9.13-15

A God of order

God, the Apostle Paul reminds us, is a God of order, and He commands us, His people, to do all things decently and *in order* (1 Cor. 14.40).

Doing things decently and in order has much to commend it. Roger Scruton points out that order – doing things in an organized way – can be a source of *beauty*, and beauty is admired by almost everyone. He invites us to consider the difference between a neatly set and well-appointed dinner table and one in which the equipage, accoutrements, and condiments are simply thrown together in a pile.

Getting organized and pursuing an orderly approach to our walk with and work for the Lord also helps to make for efficient use of time. Here a word of confession: If I would just take the time to organize the books in my library better, I would not have to spend so much time looking for the *one* book I need for this or that project or course. Time is precious, as Jonathan Edwards reminded us, and the more *efficiently* we use our time in pursuit of our calling to the Kingdom and glory of God, the more time we will seem to have for all the work we've been given to do.

Third, as Jesus demonstrated in feeding the thousands, getting organized is an excellent way to make sure that the blessings of God get distributed fairly and completely, so that the grace of Jesus can overflow from us consistently, refreshingly, and transformingly into every area of our Personal Mission Fields.

Obviously, getting organized – and working in an orderly manner – is an important vocational discipline.

Begin here

If you have identified your particular calling from the Lord, and if you daily commit yourself to embracing that calling, you'll be in a position to get better organized for the work you've been given to do in seeking the Kingdom and glory of God.

Planning is an important part of getting organized, and we've already said perhaps enough about that. But for planning to issue in fruitful work we have to make sure we've established the right *priorities* for our lives. This can be a bit challenging, because every day so many voices call out to us for attention, time, interest, and action. I read an article some years ago by economist Robert Heilbroner, in which he noted the many scores of messages that come at us each day from advertising alone. Something like 18 of those messages stick in our brains and influence our decisions and actions. Every day!

And what about the demands of our job, the conversations we have with friends, upcoming events and activities, the suggestions of pop culture and the media, and on and on? All these threaten to pull us this way and that, and we can end up being tools in someone else's agenda, someone else's priorities, rather than our own. We need to make certain that we're prepared each day to face the barrage of wooing voices with the firm resolve to hold fast and organize our lives around the right priorities.

And what are those "right priorities"? First, seek the Kingdom, at all times, in every situation. Fix in your mind to let every choice or decision be filtered by the question, "How will this conduce to the increase of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit?" (Rom. 14.17, 18). A corollary to this question is, "Will this decision or action enable me to love God and my neighbor?"

Second, always try to do things in the right order. Jesus suggests as much by instructing us, before we start criticizing others, to make sure our own moral or spiritual house is in order (Matt. 7.1-5). When it comes to assignments, projects, activities, and the like, it's helpful to fix in your mind the whole effort, in completed form, then to work backwards from that vision to arrange the details of things to do and to decide the best order in which to do them. If you've ever assembled a piece of furniture or a child's toy, following a manual, you'll know what I mean.

Finally, always strive to identify and turn the smallest gears. In all our work we're connected to other people, whose own work, together with ours, combines to make for an efficient workplace, a clean and happy home, or a well-run and fruitful ministry activity at church. Lots of "gears" have to "mesh" in order for such good works to result, and we can make the best use of our time and efforts if we understand which are the smallest "gears" available to us. Plan to turn those, and they'll engage and turn others, which will engage and turn others still, thus helping to keep all the parts moving toward successful completion of the work you've been given to do.

Think back to our text for today: Consider Jesus as He, first, considered what the Kingdom and love required in order to bring "Good News" to thousands of hungry people. Then, He envisioned the whole project coming to completion, and all the details that would need to be satisfied – How much food do we have? How will we make sure that's enough? What's the best way to get everybody fed in as little time as possible? Who should be assigned to do what? Then, finally, Jesus turned the smallest gears available to Him. I suppose He could have gone to each person individually and given them some bread and fish. That would have been a very big gear. But He didn't. He blessed the food, made sure enough was available, then gave it to the disciples – small gears – to distribute. The rest is history.

Jesus was – and is – a God of order, and we can refract His orderly ways by getting organized for all the work He's given us to do.

For reflection

1. What are the greatest hindrances to your becoming a more organized person?
2. How can becoming more organized bring more beauty, efficiency, and blessing into our callings?
3. Describe the role of prayerful planning in becoming more organized. Suggest some ways of becoming more effective in planning.

Next steps – Transformation: In what areas of getting organized could you use some help? Ask a believing friend, church leader, or pastor to advise you on the best ways to improve your organizational skills.

5 Always Preparing

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ... 2 Corinthians 10.3-5

It's war out there!

The work we've been given to do in seeking the Kingdom and glory of God must be accomplished within a hostile environment. That is, as we are pursuing those good works, in all areas of our life, that bring near the Kingdom of God to the people around us, forces are at work opposing and resisting us. The Apostle John identified himself as one with us in the Kingdom of God, but also in the "tribulation" which is in the world (Rev. 1.9). If we're going to succeed at our particular calling in life, John suggested, we're going to need patient endurance.

And patient endurance issues from *readiness*, from *always being prepared* to overcome for Christ and His Kingdom, no matter what.

Readiness or being *always prepared* is an important vocational discipline. It applies to all aspects of our calling in the Kingdom because, as we shall see, everything in our lives matters to King Jesus, and He intends to use us to put everything in proper order for His praise and glory.

So what does readiness involve, and how can we make sure we're always prepared for whatever the enemies of Christ and His Kingdom might throw our way?

Ready for what?

First, we should make sure we understand what we're preparing for at any moment, in any situation, or with respect to any of our work. What we want to achieve is Kingdom progress, the glory of God, staking out every part of our lives as belonging to the Lord and under construction according the promises and power of His loving rule.

The Apostle Paul explains that the world, in many ways, has fallen under the pervasive influence of what he refers to as "the lie" (Rom. 1.18-32). The lie is the work of the father of lies, who leads people to believe that they can live their lives without the need of God or His Word (cf. Prov. 14.12). Nothing escapes the discoloration and distortion the lie causes, as people suppress the truth about Christ and His Kingdom by their unrighteousness ideas, words, and deeds.

Because all things are thus garbed in a cloud of untruth, none of them can realize their full potential of beauty, goodness, truth, and the glory of God and blessing of His Word. This is true of everything – relationships, communications, work, study, art, science, and all disciplines and vocations. Only Christ can redeem all things, reconcile them to God, and renew them in His Kingdom power. And He does this through His people, who possess the mind, Word, Spirit, and power of Christ for making all things new. This is part of every believer's calling from the Lord.

We must learn to identify the lie in all areas of life, whether its presence be great or small, and to expose and dismantle it, replacing it with the teaching of Christ for all things. For this we must be well trained in the use of all the weapons of our warfare, and skilled in directing them at every dark redoubt of the lie in every area of human life and interest.

Vocational Disciplines

Always prepared

The Apostle Peter said we should be always prepared to explain our way of life to people who, because of what they see in us, realize we live differently than they do (1 Pet. 3.15). In order to be “always ready” for such opportunities, and for taking everything in our lives captive to obey King Jesus, we need to keep a few things in mind.

First, Jesus Christ *is* Lord – now, and over everything. The world and everything in it belong to Him (Ps. 24.1), and He intends that the knowledge of His glory should cover the earth as the water covers the seas (Hab. 2.14). We can set our minds on this fact as we come before the Lord in prayer each day, and as prayer, meditation, singing, and other spiritual disciplines provide the envelope in which we go about everything in our lives.

Second, always make love your aim. Paul says we must owe no one anything but genuine love (Rom. 12.9, 13.8). Whatever we do or whatever we must say in any situation, love for God and neighbors must guide all our work (Matt. 22.34-40).

Third, maintain a servant mindset (Jn. 13.1-15; Mk. 10.42-45). Servants seek to help others succeed in their work, even if they themselves are overlooked or, perhaps, even abused at times.

Finally, keep working to master all the weapons of spiritual warfare (Eph. 6.10-20). You won’t need every one of these every day, but you’ll need to be ready with them as situations arise that threaten to block, undermine, or derail your work and calling from the Lord.

Always be ready for whatever the enemies of the faith might try, and you’ll have greater joy and success in fulfilling your calling from the Lord.

For reflection

1. How do you experience spiritual warfare? In what ways does the “hostile environment” of the world challenge you in fulfilling your calling from the Lord?
2. Are we really supposed to be taking things “captive” to the obedience of Christ? What things? To what extent?
3. What is “the lie” and what are the implications of the lie for our callings?

Next steps – Conversation: What does it mean for you to “be ready” to take everything in your calling captive for King Jesus? In what ways do you need to improve in this vocational discipline? Talk with a friend or church leader about your answers.

6 Execute Excellence

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. 1 Corinthians 15:58

Always working

As Paul sees it, every act or deed, every exertion of energy in any activity whatsoever, is a form of work, and all work should be done “in the Lord.” Our calling to the Kingdom and glory of God is a matter of work, *good* works, and works that are greater and more varied than whatever may be our job.

When all our work, all our exertions in every area of our lives, are done “in the Lord,” we can have the assurance they will not be done in vain, but will disseminate His grace and redound to the glory of God in Whom and for Whose glory they are done.

All your conscious activities are exertions of energy – work. They must all be done “in the Lord,” that is, consciously before Him and for His glory, in His strength, according to His Word, as an expression or extension of His rule, for the demonstration of His living presence and love. This is what it means to follow the “Yes” path that is Jesus. Paul says we must be “always abounding” in such work. Every moment, and everything that fills those moments, can be done in the Lord and thus bear fruit for Him.

But we must be steadfast about this – set, fixed, determined, unwavering, conscious – so that we engage and perform all our work in the Lord. Prayer can help us to sustain such an outlook. Planning and prioritizing is where realizing this outlook begins. Organizing the time of our lives and being prepared in all things to bring about the obedience which is due to King Jesus – this is what our vocation requires. And we must be immovable, always in all things remaining on task for the Lord, so that our work may demonstrate His presence, purpose, power, and promise.

And besides all that...

And as if that weren’t challenge enough, we must be careful to strive for excellence in all we do.

Paul commands us to approve things that are excellent (Phil. 1:10), to excel still more in our labors of love (1 Thess. 4:10 NASB), and that to do all things, whatever takes up the time in which we pursue our calling from the Lord, to the glory and honor and praise of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

What does this entail?

Recall Jesus at the wedding in Cana of Galilee (Jn. 2). When He turned the water into wine it wasn’t just your off-the-shelf-everyday wine; it was the best and rarest wine. Or when He instructed the disciples to cast their nets for a catch, how they didn’t just pull in a fish or two, but their nets were bursting with the sea’s bounty (Lk. 5:1-8; Jn. 21:1-6). Remember what He said about everyday encounters with people we might meet in the course of carrying out our vocation from the Lord: the extra mile, the tunic and the shirt, whatever you have that others need, the other cheek. And how the people admired the clarity, vividness, authority, and loftiness of Jesus’ teaching!

Excellence thus seems to involve going well beyond what is normally experienced or expected. In everything we’re called to do in the work appointed to us, we must try to envision that work as it would be most excellently accomplished, then go all out to make that precisely the case. Where there are clear standards – as in job descriptions or quality control guidelines – believers must strive to exceed them. Wherever we can go a little further, produce a little more, do a bit better work, acquire better understanding, improve our skills, or

push ourselves just a little harder, there we will be in pursuit of excellence, the excellence that comes from the power of our risen and reigning Lord Jesus Christ.

Put another way, for the Christian, “good enough” must never be good enough. Excellence in all things, and all things to the glory of God: Whatever it takes to achieve this standard, we must pursue it, in all aspects of our calling.

No grumbling or complaining

We must neither boast in nor bemoan this call for excellence. We do not boast because, in striving for excellence we are only serving the Lord and loving our neighbors according to what is required of us. And we do not bemoan such a demanding commission because grumbling, complaining, blame-laying, and excusing ourselves do not fit into anyone’s definition of excellence.

In our calling to the Kingdom and glory of God we have much work to do, work which makes the best use of God’s time for demonstrating His love and advancing His rule on earth as it is in heaven. The work we’ve been given to do is greater than the job at which we work, and the standard to which we aspire, in every area of life, leads us to draw on the inward strength of the Lord, Who is able to do exceeding abundantly more than we could ever ask or think – in all things excellence, all for the praise and honor and glory of God!

For reflection

1. What does T. M. when he says “the work we’ve been given to do is greater than the job at which we work”?
2. What makes something excellent? Do you agree that Christians should be characterized by excellence in all things? Why or why not?
3. How can we discover what “excellence” would look like for the work we’ve been given to do?

Next steps – Preparation: How do you feel about the level of excellence with which you are presently pursuing your calling from the Lord?

7 Strive for Improvement

But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. Galatians 6.4

Examine your work

Paul's instruction is clear enough: We are to examine our work, all aspects of our calling in the Kingdom, in order to discover its worth, whether it is expressing Kingdom convictions and producing Kingdom fruit.

After all, the good work to which we have been called, in all areas of our lives, is a calling from the Lord, a vocation whereby He intends to advance His Kingdom, bless the world, and bring honor and glory to His name. Surely we ought to pay careful attention to our work, to discover where we are and where we are not living up to this high and holy standard?

We want to be able to rejoice and even boast in our work, but only in the Lord and not in anything of our own. An examination, as any student knows, involves questions. What kind of questions might we ask in examining our work? Here are a few: Does my work express excellence in line with the excellence of the Lord? Is the fruit of my work consistent with the righteousness, peace, and joy of the Kingdom? Is my work a help or hindrance to others in doing their work? Are the fruits of my work what they should be in terms of quantity and quality? Are there yet any hindrances in my life, causing my labors for the Lord to be in vain?

One reason for examining our work is so that we can improve in any areas where deficiencies are in evidence. The final vocational discipline that we will consider is that of *improvement* – examining our work and taking steps to improve in all areas of our work unto the Lord.

What does this require of us?

The self-watch

First, we need to put in place some disciplines involving a regular self-watch, so that we review the work we've done and are able, before the Lord, to evaluate it carefully. Scripture contains many such exhortations to this self-watch, including Proverbs 4.20-27, Matthew 12.33-37, and 1 Timothy 4.16. In some aspects of our calling, reviewing and improving our work will be built in to the work itself, as in our jobs, when supervisors or bosses or boards examine the work we do. But we need to carry this practice into *all* aspects of our work, so that we are consistently and continuously making sure our work is as it should be unto the Lord.

The best place to do this, of course, is in prayer, waiting on the Lord to search through your work and how you've used your time, to affirm the good works you've done, point out any areas where you missed an opportunity or might have done something differently or better, and showing you steps to take in order the better to serve the Lord in all aspects of your calling (Ps. 139.23, 24). Spending time each day in silence before the Lord, reviewing your work and looking ahead to what's next, can provide a healthy and fruitful self-watch component for all your vocational disciplines.

Life-long learning

Besides a healthy self-watch every believer needs to develop a regimen of study, beyond the Word of God, that can help you to improve in aspects of your calling. The word "disciple" actually means "learner." Disciples are those who are committed to learning as much as they can in order to improve themselves in all facets and phases of their callings from the Lord.

Here all the familiar means of learning can be brought to bear: reading, taking a course, keeping up with websites, journals, periodicals, and so forth which may have a bearing on your calling. The enemy of

improvement is not difficulty, but indifference. While each of us needs “down time” or time to rest and recreate, too much of this good thing can actually hinder our ability to fulfill our calling. If we are indifferent to the need for improvement, we’ll simply give in to the temptation to fritter away the time God entrusts to us in frivolous activities. Not only will this *not* improve our calling, but such indifference to improvement can actually cause us to pull back from our calling, or to fulfill it in ways that do not honor the Lord.

We recall that Paul commands us to make good use of the Lord’s time, as Jonathan Edwards wrote, to *improve* our time with activities focused on seeking Christ and His Kingdom. Moses taught us to seek the Lord for wisdom so that the time of our lives might be used for the work we’ve been given to do as we faithfully serve the Lord in our particular callings in life.

We will heed either heed this counsel, embrace our callings, and give ourselves wholeheartedly to the good works for which Christ has redeemed us, or we will conduct our lives on this earth like fools, who are heedless of the good purposes, promises, and blessings of God (Eph. 5.15-17). We can be wise, fruitful, and abundantly blessed in all the work we’ve been given to do if we will take up the vocational disciplines recommended in the Word of God and use them to run our race with zeal and joy unto the Lord.

For reflection

1. Do you agree that we should be rather more diligent about exercising a “self-watch”? Why or why not?
2. What is your approach to working for improvement in your calling?
3. How can our spiritual disciplines contribute to improving our vocational disciplines?

Next steps – Transformation: Do you have someone to help you review your work, encourage you in it, and hold you accountable for specific goals and objectives? Ask a Christian friend to become an accountability partner with you as you work to improve your vocational disciplines.

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. What do we mean by *vocation*? Do Christians have a common vocation? What does that vocation involve?
2. Why do we say that the work we've been given to do in our vocation is greater than the job at which we work?
3. What is the "Yes" path? How can you know when you're on it as you work at your vocation?
4. What role do preparation, planning, and excellence have in carrying out your vocation?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you working to implement that lesson in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Additional thoughts, comments, questions, or items for prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.