

What Does
God Do
from
9 to 5?

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Author of *Customer Service and the
Imitation of Christ*

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DEDICATION

Just after I graduated from college, I traveled America's Pacific Northwest sharing stories about how I had found God in daily secular life. I told my listeners that what I had experienced in school settings, they could discover in their places of employment.

Audiences in a number of congregations paid me the supreme compliment of challenging me. "Is it true?" they asked. "Can we really find God in the workplace?" They posed earnest, detailed questions that I couldn't answer, because I lacked both work experience and theological depth. But those people became my people, and for over thirty years I've sought answers on their behalf.

This volume is dedicated to them.

CONTENTS

	Acknowledgments	i
1	Simon Says	1
2	The Bottom Line	11
3	A.P.B.	17
4	'Grizzled' Is an Understatement	29
5	No KISSing in the Parlor	37
6	Nature? Nurture? Neither?	49
7	How We Go Wrong	55
8	What God Does	66
9	Trouble 'Round the Water Cooler	79
10	Starting Over	93
11	Phantoms	102
12	The Complex Story of 'Us'	114
13	Destination, Please	126
14	Power Transfers	138
15	The End of the World as We Know It	147
16	Does God Micromanage Our Lives?	158
17	Where the Rubber Meets the Road	171
	<i>Index</i>	187

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My wife Nancy and daughter Emily have been a constant source of encouragement, as have Senior Pastor Barry T. Petrucci and the members of Portage Chapel Hill United Methodist Church in Portage, Michigan (USA). Our congregation's bibliographical wonder, Kathy Willhite, was the inspiration for the character NB, in spirit but not in appearance.

1 SIMON SAYS

“The trouble with you Christians is—”

I’m reading the news online and my best friend, Savannah, pokes me with her elbow. “Dayton, listen to this!”

All around the bus, heads turn.

It’s Simon, the British guy who shares trenchant observations of American life during our morning bus ride downtown. He usually sits in one of the front seats that face inward toward the aisle so that everybody can see and hear him. He’s always provocative, but it’s unlike him to start a religious argument. Glancing in his direction, I realize what has happened: Sammy the Soul Saver strikes again.

Sammy has a heart for evangelism. I respect him for that. He fearlessly sits beside commuters and asks them if they know the Lord. The problem is, he focuses entirely on death. It’s all about snatching souls from the

fires of hell. If you say the magic words, you're set for eternity. He says nothing about spiritual growth. It's all a legal transaction for him, and it's over in a jiffy if you cooperate.

But Simon is not the cooperative sort.

"The trouble with you Christians," he says, "is that you don't see the relevance of Christianity to your own lives, so you don't know how to get a religious conversation started." He stares at Sammy and waits for comprehension. It's a long wait.

Sammy shakes his head. "I don't—I, uh—"

"Casual conversations don't furnish you with opportunities, because God doesn't have anything to do with real life. So you change the subject. You don't know how to carry on a proper conversation about your religion."

"Well, excuse me for not following etiquette," says Sammy.

"Breaches in etiquette I can tolerate, but there's a larger point at issue here. You want to witness to people about your faith? Fine! But you're unable to do it from the subject at hand, and that fact should trouble you, because it means that your faith has no bearing on the things that people are already thinking and talking about. Look, if you can't tell me about God without changing the subject, then God must not have any meaningful connection to my daily life. And if that's the case, then shove off, my friend! Away with you!"

Sammy won't admit defeat. "Everybody needs the Lord," he says.

"Maybe so, but you haven't shown me why."

"You're going to die someday, aren't you?"

Simon shrugs. "I don't care."

Sammy turns to the rest of us. "He doesn't care that he's going to die!"

"It's not like it's going to happen this afternoon," Simon says wearily.

"You don't know that."

"Granted, but we can't live as if the Grim Reaper were staring over our shoulders, can we? We'd never get anything done that way. When I say I don't care about dying, I mean it's not high on my list of priorities right now."

A chuckle ripples throughout the bus.

Simon continues. "Now if there's someone on board who's dying of something, they might care about the product you're peddling. But I'm not, so I don't. And I really don't think I'm unique in that respect. Heaven and hell just aren't the urgent topics they used to be in this society. Therefore, you Christians have to change the subject just to get a conversation started about your religion."

Sammy stares off into space, unsure how to regain control of the discussion.

Someone else tries to help. "Are you saying you don't see the relevance of Christianity today?"

Simon points at Sammy. "I'm saying *he* doesn't see

it. And neither do any of the other Christians I've ever talked to. And because *they* don't see it, they can't get *me* to see it. Let me show you what I'm talking about."

He turns to all of us and raises his voice. "How many of you are Christians?"

All around the bus, people hesitate. For one thing, we aren't like Sammy; we don't wear our religion on our sleeves. We're also reluctant to argue with Simon about our faith. Still, quite a number of us raise our hands.

I turn to Savannah and whisper, "More than I would've guessed."

"Good," Simon says. "We might get somewhere. How many of you Christians are going downtown to work this morning?"

Most of us nod or grunt.

"Will Jesus help you?"

We don't know what he means.

"I'll rephrase the question. How many of you can honestly say that God directs your words and actions on the job?"

A few people look like they might be about to make that claim.

"If you answer Yes to that," he adds, "be prepared to give details. Tell us what you have said and done on the job recently that was clearly in response to a divine directive."

Nobody takes him up on it.

"This is precisely my point," Simon concludes. "This bus is full of Christians, yet none of you can claim that

your relationship with God has any direct bearing on the work that you're going to do today. Your religion isn't about real life. If there's some connection between your faith and the activities you're about to engage in this morning, you haven't found it."

A white-haired gentleman near the front speaks up. It's our friend Nate. He's the Chief Financial Officer of his company and a very friendly guy. "Everything you say makes perfect sense when applied to fundamentalism," he says. "But there's a lot more to our religion than right-wingers realize. I don't think very much about heaven, either, but I don't need to. My faith in Christ offers me plenty right here and now."

"Like what?" someone asks.

Nate ponders his answer. "Well, I guess I'd have to say 'fellowship.' You can't follow Jesus all by yourself. When you give your life to Him, you become part of His community. I thank God for the people I've had the privilege of worshiping and working with over the years. They've enriched my life in so many ways, I can't count them all."

Simon grimaces. "I just asked all of you whether Christ guides you in the things you do all day, and the answer I got was not encouraging. And now you're saying that the solution to this problem is...?"

Nate smiles. "The church. God's work is done through the church, not through individuals. I give my time and talents to the church, and the church does God's work in the world."

“Can’t you see that you’re proving my point all over again?” Simon asks. “You’re changing the subject, too.”

“In what way?”

Simon stares at him in disbelief. “What do you mean, ‘In what way’? Apparently none of the Christians on this bus have any idea how their faith applies to their work. I’m asking you what Jesus offers as a solution to this problem, and you tell me it’s the pleasure of going to church. I’m asking about Monday through Friday, and you tell me about Sunday.”

Nate chuckles. “Well, *my* religion isn’t confined to Sunday. I serve on committees that meet on weeknights, and I help out in a number of ways on Saturday. But most importantly, I carry my brothers and sisters in my heart throughout each day and pray for them often. The church is an ever-present reality to me.”

“But does it help you do your work better?”

Nate puckers his lips in thought. “Yes,” he says. “I think it does. The thought of my fellow believers keeps me striving to do my best throughout the day. It inspires me to be more patient, more compassionate.”

Sammy the Soul-Saver has been quiet too long. “Your church sounds like a country club. You hang around with well-to-do people just like you. You all wear fancy clothes, you drive nice cars, and you feel good about yourselves because once in a while you stop to remember those who are less fortunate. When the pastor reads the lesson, you follow along in the pew Bible, and that’s the extent of your scripture study. Then

you and all your other well-to-do friends head down to Fellowship Hall for coffee and polite conversation. You're just the country-club crowd masquerading as Christians. Jesus is the answer, not your church!"

"You two can argue about that later," Simon says. "My point is still the same: Christians can bring religion to bear on their daily lives only by changing the subject. In your case, that means you're changing the subject to 'the fellowship of the church.' You don't have anything to offer that will make people's daily lives an adventure during working hours. You can suggest nothing better than an after-hours alternative—at best, something to look forward to or reflect back on during the day. But you're still changing the subject. You're turning your thoughts away from your daily business, in another direction. Just because you do it only periodically throughout the day doesn't alter that fact; you're still turning your thoughts *away*. And that shows that your religion doesn't really speak to your daily needs down here in the business district."

A scraggly-looking man sighs impatiently. "All of you are missing the point. You're slaves, every one of you—slaves to the system and to your social roles. You're all so committed to the present world order, you can't even see what's happening."

Simon is delighted. "I haven't had a good argument with a Marxist here in America since the Berlin Wall came down! Where have you been? You and your friends wrung your hands and took cover, and I haven't

heard from you since.”

“That’s a lie and you know it. You may wish you had heard the last of us, but you haven’t.”

Some people on the bus seem confused, but their neighbors whisper explanations to them. One man says, a little too loudly, “What—he’s a communist?”

“I’m a Christian,” the scraggly guy says. “I just take my Christianity more seriously than the rest of you do. You *talk* about Christ and his apostles holding their material goods in common. I’m doing something about it.”

“Just exactly what are you doing?” someone asks.

“Hastening the revolution,” he says. “Opening people’s minds. Getting them to see how self-defeating capitalism is.”

“What’s that got to do with Christianity?”

The guy smiles condescendingly. “What’s *capitalism* got to do with Christianity? NOTHING! If you’re a Christian, you ought to see that and work to defeat the system. But until then, we must do all we can to relieve the suffering of the homeless and disenfranchised. Those are the very things Jesus would do if He were here.”

“Christian Socialists have been around for over a hundred years,” Simon explains to us. “A lot of ministers are sympathetic to their ideas—or liberal ministers are, at least. But it’s a tough message to preach, especially to wealthy congregations. They squirm too much.”

The scraggily guy interrupts. “God is on the side of the poor. That’s the thing. You asked these people whether they felt God’s direction in their jobs and their lives, and they couldn’t give you a straight answer even though they profess to be Christians. The reason is simple: they’re godless.”

The bus erupts in protest.

“Say what you like, but it’s true! God is on the side of those whom society rejects: the poor and the powerless. He has no interest in what you do all day unless you’re helping the poor. Sharpen your pencils and balance your ledgers, but don’t expect God to care. You’re all living lives that are opposed to the work of God. God’s only concern is to liberate us all—poor, middle class, and wealthy—from bondage. He’s a God of liberation, not of the status quo. As long as you’re working for The Powers That Be, you can’t expect God’s blessing.”

A moment of confusion follows as several people try to yell over each other, but Simon restores order. “Once again,” he says, “we hear testimony from someone who wants to interest us in the Christian message. And what does he do? He changes the subject.”

Turning to the Marxist, Simon continues: “I’m asking how Christ relates to the workplace, and you tell me that the answer is to *eliminate* the workplace as we know it. You don’t have a solution to the problem as it stands; you want to avoid the problem altogether and start fresh. That’s changing the subject. I concede that Karl Marx

recognized what's problematic about the daily lives of working people, but his solution was to change the subject, or rather, to change the structure of society. That kind of answer has always been a tough sell among Americans. Americans want to know what to do here and now to solve their problems. And you have no answer to that question."

Nothing else can be heard after that. Everybody's talking at once. Sammy tries to show the Marxist a Bible passage, but the Marxist shakes his head. Simon gets off the bus, ignoring several people who are fighting for his attention.

Savannah and I look at each other and exhale loudly.

Nate approaches us on his way out. "I've been a Christian all my life," he says, "but I don't know how to respond to something like that." He ponders the matter a moment and finally just shakes his head. "Food for thought," he says, then gets off the bus.

"Maybe so," I tell Savannah. "But right now, I'm choking on it."

2 THE BOTTOM LINE

Savannah and I are not only soul mates; we also work for the same corporation, and we meet for lunch later that day. At the cafeteria, we see D sitting by herself. She invites us to join her.

When Savannah and I started working for the company, D referred to herself as Darla D to distinguish herself from Darla M. Eventually she found this tedious and said, “Just call me DD.” But she soon realized that that was redundant, and now she wants us to call her “D.” At this rate, pretty soon we won’t be calling her anything at all.

Everybody in the building reveres D. She’s the director of our department, but we’ve never met anyone quite so down to earth. She’s been with the company for longer than anybody else and knows it inside and out. She’s survived major systems changes. She’s seen upper level managers come and go. She has implemented

sweeping new departmental policies, then she has had to be just as enthusiastic about scrapping them and implementing new ones. She's a strong leader, but she's also a bit of a cynic. Although she welcomes new ideas, she'll make you argue hard for them first.

But what Savannah and I like best about her is her absolute insistence on finding "the bottom line." No matter how confusing an issue may seem to be, she probes and prods until she finds the point of it all. Once she identifies it, she stays with it and will not let the conversation wander from it. Savannah and I have often laughed at Savannah's imitation of D when we've been perplexed about something. "Yes," Savannah says, adopting D's tone of voice, "but let's not lose sight of the bottom line!"

D clears a place for us at the table and asks us how we're doing today. We give the expected answer at first, but then the real story comes out. We tell her what happened on the bus, not omitting a single detail. D listens attentively and does not interrupt. When we're finished, she leans forward slightly. "Let's clarify something," she says.

"It's obvious that this incident has upset both of you. You're reacting to it emotionally. Stop that! You might benefit from the experience if you're willing to do so, but you won't get far by emoting about it. You heard a number of remarks this morning that you didn't like hearing. That doesn't mean they were false. By the same token, it doesn't mean they were true. Your best bet is to

get your emotions out of the way and think carefully.

“Now... as I listen to you talk, I don’t think you understand why you’re so upset. It was an unusual experience, but it shouldn’t have rattled you so much. You can’t seem to shake it off. Do you know why?”

We shrug, and she continues, “You’re troubled by your inability to answer Simon’s question. You couldn’t accept the answers that other people gave, but you’re unable to provide a suitable one of your own.”

We think about it a moment, and then we nod.

She smiles reminiscently. “I’ve been reading a lot to my three-year-old granddaughter,” she says. “I’ve had more than my fill of Clifford the Big Red Dog.”

We smile.

“But I’ve noticed something about Clifford that relates to your problem. In the book, *Clifford’s Best Friend*, there’s a drawing of Emily Elizabeth in her classroom at school, and another of her doing her homework in her bedroom. Now, Emily Elizabeth has important work to do. She’s a student, and it’s her job to learn about the world so she can make a contribution to it in some way. There’s no getting around it: she has to spend time at school and doing her homework. But both of those pictures are pitiful because, in each one, we see Clifford’s eye peering in through the window, waiting. Emily Elizabeth has a job to do, but as long as she’s doing it, there’s nothing Clifford can do but wait for her to finish. When she’s participating in daily life, *Clifford plays no role*. The author, Norman Bridwell, can’t think

of anything constructive for Clifford to do while Emily Elizabeth is doing her school work. All he can do is wait.

“That’s the question you’ve been asked about today. That’s the bottom line.”

I glance at Savannah and we try not to laugh.

“Just like Norman Bridwell with Clifford, you can’t think of anything constructive God could be doing while you’re here in the office. So far as you can see, *God plays no role*. When you’re working, all He can do is wait. And that troubles you, because you believe in a God who is actively involved in your lives all the time, no matter what you’re doing.”

We nod. She’s hit the nail on the head, as always.

She continues. “Some folks on the bus offered you alternative solutions, but none of them satisfied you. You weren’t impressed by Sammy’s assertion that Christ’s kingdom is not of this world. Evidently you think God takes an interest in the human race and its secular business: you just don’t know what sort of interest. Nor did you find it helpful to say that God works through the institutionalized church rather than through individuals, because you believe that God also works through you as you perform your secular roles. The socialist tried to convince you that you can’t be right with God as long as you’re grubbing for money. But since you *are* a couple of money-grubbers—and you can’t help it any more than Emily Elizabeth can help being a student—then that’s no answer at all. Three

strikes; you're out. Everybody gets off the bus, and you're left with a big question and no answers."

We nod. "That's pretty much it."

The three of us clean our trays and head down the hall together.

"Personally," she says, "I can't identify with your problem. I don't think of God like you do. You talk like God is an actual Person—a Big Guy in the Sky."

Our faces redden a little. "Well, I wouldn't call God a guy," Savannah says.

"But you do view God as a Person: a Living Being to whom you can talk. You might talk to your bedroom ceiling, but you don't expect it to listen and care about what you're saying. When you talk to God, on the other hand, you do. You believe that He knows you individually and has plans for you. Sort of a CEO of the whole planet."

I consider how to answer this. "I don't know if God is a Person in the same way that a CEO is a person, but I do think He's personal."

She laughs. "You're being evasive. If God isn't a Person, He can't be personal any more than your bedroom ceiling is personal."

We shrug. "Okay. But it sounds like you don't think God is a Person."

"Definitely not," she says. "Too many things just don't add up. There's far too much pain and suffering on this planet to allow me to believe such a thing. If God is in charge of all this, then He's the biggest flop

imaginable. I have no respect for anyone who would run the world the way He does. No, I prefer to think that there's a principle of goodness in this world; not a Person, but an active principle working within all living things. Or trying to, anyway. When we heed it, we find some measure of satisfaction and we make the world a better place. When we don't, we make ourselves miserable and ruin the game for everybody else. That's all there is to it, I think. I don't see any reason to make it more complicated than that."

Good ol' D. Always trying to simplify problems—even theological ones.

We reach the door of her office and she pauses. "That's what it comes down to, you know. If you insist on believing that God is a Person and you feel you must stay in close contact with this Person all day and all night, then you've got to figure out what role He's playing even when you're busy doing other things."

She shakes her head and walks away humming "The Impossible Dream."

3 A.P.B.

That night, we decide to ask for help online. We post a note to all our friends, telling them what we're trying to do. We describe our experience on the bus and we mention our conversation with D.

“In a nutshell,” we write, “we’re trying to answer the question, ‘What does God do from 9 to 5?’ If you have any ideas or you know someone who does, we’d appreciate your input.”

We get a flood of responses. Some are brief and silly.

“He watches daytime television.”

“He runs the carpenters’ union.”

Others are pious but unhelpful.

“God holds the planets in their courses and keeps everything working the way it’s supposed to. Imagine what chaos there would be if God wasn’t sustaining the universe! The air we breathe, gravity—everything is a gift from God to us, renewed each day.”

Several people email us the “Footprints in the Sand”

poem. Nobody gives a detailed, substantive answer to the question.

Savannah and I shake our heads. “Maybe nobody knows.”

Our friend Harley writes that God is in the business of saving souls. “Our jobs offer opportunities for us to share our testimony of Christ with coworkers or clients. That’s all that really matters from God’s perspective. Don’t make the mistake of turning work into a religion!”

We reply, “Don’t worry, Harley, that’s not our intention. But on your view, most of the things we do all day are of no spiritual concern. We have to work for a living, but the things we do to earn our living are themselves of little value. We must be content knowing that our work provides us with opportunities for sharing our testimony with others—nothing more. Never mind that the largest share of our time therefore goes toward meaningless tasks. We must perform those tasks patiently, always looking for opportunities to do what’s really important: to talk about the Lord.

“Sorry, but that just sounds like a restatement of the problem, not a solution to it. According to your view, there’s no help for anyone who makes productive contributions to this world and longs to share the experience with God.”

His reply is short and to the point: “What could be more productive than to spread the gospel?”

“We’re surprised we have to spell this out,” we reply. “Just to survive in this world, we’re forced every day to

rely on the competence and vigilance of large numbers of people we've never met. We expect the engineers to pay attention when they install our elevators. We expect the folks at the telephone company to route our calls properly. We expect the people at the water purification plant to give us clean water. And so on. If any of these people don't do their jobs, we're all going to suffer.

"It's not a question of whether the secular roles we play are important. The question is whether they are important *to God*. We find it necessary, for everyone's sake, to engage in such employments today. But is it possible for us to discover spiritual meaning in these activities? Or must we be content to live a divided life, spending only some of our time in religious pursuits and spending much more of it performing the productive work that our society requires of us?"

Harley says he understands what we're saying. "But the hard truth is, God doesn't care about the work we do all day. Work, after all, is a product of our fall from the Garden of Eden. You want something you can't have. God does call us to an adventure in the workplace, but the adventure isn't the work itself. We're called to the adventure of saving souls. Remember what Christ Himself did when He found people working: He called them to leave their fishing nets and their accounting tables and follow Him. We can't improve on His message."

We thank Harley for his input. We agree that saving souls is part of what God does all day. "But we think

there's more to it than that. We believe in a God who is very involved in the details of our daily lives. We just can't quite put our fingers on what it is God is doing about those details."

Among the other responses we've received, Paula's is especially interesting. She suggests that God's influence is most obvious in a well-developed conscience. "The secular details of our daily lives are important to God because they have ethical implications," she writes. "Just when we think we're doing something utterly private, it often has consequences for our coworkers, our clients, our loved ones, or society at large."

We tell Paula that we've been thinking the same thing, but we aren't entirely satisfied with that answer. The problem is, ethics doesn't cover everything we do on the job. In fact, it doesn't even cover the most important things.

"Take engineering, for example. Yes, engineers have immense moral obligations. They're accountable for public safety as well as for maintaining the well-being of our environment. But the substance of what they do all day is mathematical. They solve problems involving abstract concepts like acceleration, absolute zero temperature, and magnetic flux. Is God interested in such problems? If we say No, then that would mean that God overlooks the most important aspects of an engineer's daily life. And it's difficult to see how God could pass judgment on an engineer's ethics without taking these abstract problems into consideration. But if

we concede that God might care about such things, then that would mean that God's interest in our daily lives must extend beyond ethics. And that gets us back to the question we're asking: What else is God doing?

"The same thing goes for teachers. We admit that teachers have heavy moral responsibilities. They must deal fairly and equitably with all students and must exemplify moral behavior, since they work under their students' relentless gaze. But what is it that teachers spend most of their time doing? Teaching. Getting across new ideas to students. And that requires a technical understanding of how kids learn at different age levels, and under different conditions. To complicate matters, there's not just one right way to learn or to teach. There are many learning styles, and teachers must find their own style of teaching that will benefit the widest variety of students.

"Does it matter to God whether teachers discover their own unique style? Is it important in the eternal scheme of things whether they develop the ability to educate young people effectively? Once again, if we say No, then that would mean that God ignores the most important aspects of teachers' day-to-day lives. But if we say Yes, then we tacitly admit that God is interested in more than just ethics.

"Lots of other examples come to mind. People who work in the justice system must routinely resolve technical issues involving more than justice or fairness. Those who devote their lives to the healing arts must

daily consider weighty matters of great technical complexity—questions having to do with physiology and chemistry and a host of other secular subjects—the outcome being a matter of life or death. Does God ignore these aspects of people’s careers, simply because they’re not ethical?”

“Wow,” Paula replies. “You two have been doing a lot of thinking about this. All I know is that God, for me, is the ultimate source of goodness and justice. To paraphrase the Bible (sorry I can’t quote it exactly), ‘What does the Lord require of thee but to live justly and to walk humbly before God?’”

We ponder this a while before replying. “We have to admit that what you say makes a lot of sense to us. We do think that God is deeply interested in our moral behavior. But must we conclude from this that God cares about nothing else?”

“People often talk as if God were like the security cameras at department stores—watching and recording every act with a vacant stare, in order to catch people misbehaving. Or to express the point positively, maybe God is compiling lists of those who are good and those who are bad. But we find it hard to believe that someone with God’s vast intelligence would not be interested in anything else. There’s so much in this world that interests and even excites us humans. God created this world! Are we to suppose that He is uninterested in the widely diverse activities that take place within the world that He created?”

“This brings us back to our original problem. If we concede that God might be interested in our daily lives for more than just their moral content, it’s still not easy to see what God is *doing* in our lives when we’re engaged in secular activities. That’s the question we’re trying to answer.”

She replies that she’s never heard anyone raise these questions before. She recommends we talk with a member of the clergy. “Let me know how it turns out,” she says.

Meanwhile, other people have responded to us. David writes, “You two know I’m not a Christian, but I do consider myself a deeply spiritual person. For me, spirituality is a mindset, not a relationship. When I’m at work, I always stay in tune with my inner self. It’s a matter of practice. I’ve learned some breathing exercises that might help you. It’s all about regulating your breathing and holding your thoughts still. Are you two interested in meditation?”

“Thanks, David,” we write back, “but what we’re after is fundamentally different. God is very real to us. We recognize His presence with us most of the time. We’re just trying to take our relationship to the next level.”

“Personally, I think you’ve actually just glimpsed your inner selves and you choose to call it ‘God,’” David replies. “But you can get what you’re looking for if you learn the right techniques. Just say the word. I can help.”

When we read Phil’s email, we realize that his answer

differs from David's only slightly; and yet it's an important difference. "What it all comes down to," Phil says, "is practicing the presence. God is with us all the time, even when we're in the office. We just forget. The key is to get into the practice of meditating on God, no matter what we're doing."

"We agree," we tell him. "We've been practicing the presence for quite a while now. (You've probably read Brother Lawrence's classic book about this?) And that's exactly why this issue is so important to us. Now that we've been practicing the presence of God even while we're at work, we have to admit that there isn't any real *content* to our interactions with God. Yes, we keep remembering God while we're in the office, but what that means is that we're operating on two wavelengths at once: we're doing our jobs and we're aware of the presence of God. But we don't want to operate on two wavelengths; we want to bring the two together. Somehow we sense this must be possible. We just can't see how."

Phil writes back that he doesn't understand what we mean. After all, he reminds us, Brother Lawrence's practice of the presence helped him improve his work as a cook. Even with people calling out meal orders right and left, he kept his mind on God and maintained his composure. Isn't that a case of integrating our work and our spiritual life?

"We agree that some overlap can be seen between Brother Lawrence's work and his faith," we say, "but we

can't agree that it's a full integration. Brother Lawrence doesn't seem to have discussed recipes with God, for example! He just kept his mind on God while he was cooking. Yes, this helped him maintain his composure, which in turn aided him in order-taking. But we're striving for something more substantial than this."

We tell him about D's example of Clifford the Big Red Dog peering in at Emily Elizabeth while she's in school. "In our experience, practicing the presence amounts to looking up at the window constantly throughout the day and seeing God smiling upon us. We derive a certain amount of inner peace from this exercise, but we sense that we could be getting so much more from the interaction than this. It all comes down to the question D posed: Does God play any role when we're in the office, or is He just observing? What, in other words, does God *do* from 9 to 5?"

"Hm," Phil says. "Don't know. But I'll ask Him for you."

"Let us know what He says," we reply.

Not everyone is as good-natured as Phil. Joan writes that she didn't appreciate getting our email. "What in the world are you talking about?" she asks. She says our question is deeply offensive.

"I work hard and I earn a decent wage. I live a good Christian life. I'm an ethical person. With the money I earn, I give a lot to the church and to charitable organizations. What more do you want from me? I resent your implication that I'm not a good Christian just

because I don't turn it all over to God."

"I guess we'll have to talk to her in person," Savannah says.

Carl isn't insulted, but he, too, considers the question ridiculous. "You seem to think that God micromanages," he writes. "Like He wants us to consult Him before we do anything, all day long. I could never accept a religion like that. God put a good head on my shoulders and He trusts me to make my own decisions."

I turn to Savannah and sigh. "I'm starting to regret that we sent out this message. Nobody seems to understand what we're trying to do."

Then Cameron, one of our coworkers, texts us. "Have you ever heard of Grizzled Mane?"

We think a minute. "Is it a hair salon?"

She sends us a laughing emoticon. "Dr. Grizzled Mane is Philosopher-in-Residence at the Cathedral of Our Lord, downtown."

"C.O.O.L.," we reply.

"Exactly! What you two are talking about is the very thing he specializes in. I visit the Cathedral every now and then when I need a fresh perspective. I'm never disappointed."

We ask her several questions at once. Who is he? What's his approach?

"Well, he's an ordained minister, although he's not one of the pastors. He's got a doctorate in philosophy. He's funny and entertaining, but he also makes you think."

“About what?” we ask. “What kinds of things does he say?”

“Well, for example, he says that anybody who believes in the Argument from Design must believe that God is interested in secular subjects.”

I answer her. “The Argument from Design says that the universe is too well-ordered not to have been created by an Intelligent Designer. So he’s saying...?”

“That if you accept that argument then it’s inconsistent to treat God as if He were only interested in religion. If God is a Grand Designer, then He must care an awful lot about chemistry, physics, biology, geoscience, and lots of other subjects.”

“Does Dr. Mane only talk about science?” Savannah asks.

“No. He says the main spiritual problem these days is the fact that we have trouble finding God in the things we do all day. That’s his favorite subject.”

I’m excited. “We’d like to talk to him.”

“No problem. He leads an informal discussion in the cathedral parlor on Wednesday evenings. Everybody’s welcome. He doesn’t come with a script. He asks you what’s on your mind and he discusses it with you.”

“Perfect!” I say. “Can’t wait.”

“I wish I could go,” Cameron says, “but I’ll be busy tomorrow night. One word of advice: don’t be shocked. He may have a PhD, but that parlor group is a tough crowd. They often disagree with him, and they can be pretty vocal about it sometimes. I call him the Rodney

Dangerfield of religious philosophers.”

I look at Savannah and smirk. “Sounds like every church I’ve ever been in. It’s always open season when it comes to criticizing the minister!”

“Hm,” says Savannah. “But to his face? Sounds scary. Still... I really want to hear what he’s got to say.”

4 ‘GRIZZLED’ IS AN UNDERSTATEMENT

There are no gargoyles on the roof of the Cathedral of Our Lord. It’s such a huge, forbidding structure, I always assumed the little monsters were there. I distinctly remember making jokes about them with my friends, asking why anybody would put such fiends on the roof of a church. We all laughed. Now it turns out there aren’t any. Oops.

As Savannah and I enter the huge lobby doors, I wonder if we really will be welcome like Cameron says.

We're not rich or famous, and lots of rich and famous people go to this church. Joe Fiske, owner of the Fiske supermarket chain, is a member here. So is Katie Carruthers of Channel 7 news. I could go on, but Savannah's already rolling her eyes, so I decide to shut up.

Crossing the spacious lobby, we catch a glimpse of the softly-lit sanctuary, so we step in to take a better look. Our mouths drop open. It's more than just huge and beautiful. There's a feeling here that we can't quite describe. It's like we've stepped into a larger world.

"Wow!" Savannah whispers.

"Yeah..."

A young lady greets us companionably. We tell her why we've come, and she escorts us down the hall to The Parlor: a room full of comfortable furniture and a large fireplace. A varied assortment of people are already gathered and busily chatting. Some look like they have a lot of money, but most of them are young and unassuming like us. They welcome us and show us where the coffee and tea are, but nobody asks us if we're members or if we're interested in becoming members. Apparently many of them are newcomers, too. We meet an aerospace engineer and a marketing analyst.

"Be sure to log onto the Water Cooler Club tomorrow," somebody tells us. "It's a chat room. It gives us all a chance to continue the discussion we started tonight."

A friendly lady with a shock of silver hair shakes our

hands. "I'm Noreen Butler, but people around here call me NB."

"She's our in-house reference librarian," a man tells us. "A walking bibliographical miracle. Just wait—you'll see!"

In all our conversations, people keep mentioning GM and I can't figure out why. Finally I whisper to Savannah, "Why is everybody talking about General Motors?"

"Are they?"

"Yes. They keep saying GM this, GM that."

She looks at me and pauses a moment for effect, then says, very slowly, "Dr. *Grrrizzled Mmmmane*."

"Ohhhhh."

As if on cue, GM enters the room. He's slightly overweight with wire rim glasses, white hair, and a beard. He's squeezing shoulders and shaking hands.

"He reminds me of somebody," I tell Savannah.

She grins. "Someone rich and famous?"

"That depends. Do you consider Santa Claus rich or just famous?"

She looks horrified. "Please don't embarrass me."

But it's true. And her suppressed laugh proves it.

Everybody finds a seat. After briefly seeking a divine blessing upon our conversation, Santa—GM, that is—asks us what we want to talk about tonight. There's a moment's hesitation, so I raise my hand. Savannah looks like she doesn't quite trust me, but it's too late. GM invites me to speak.

“A friend of ours recently posed a problem to us in the form of a homey analogy. She’s been reading a lot of Clifford books to her grandchild and she’s noticed that Clifford has nothing to do while Emily Elizabeth is in school.” I pause a moment and turn to the rest of the group. “Sorry... is everyone familiar with Clifford?”

Apparently they are. So is Santa.

I continue. “Our friend compared Clifford to God, because there are often times in which Clifford’s giant eye stares in at Emily Elizabeth while she’s studying. This seemed to our friend to be analogous to the idea of an omniscient God watching us all as we do our daily work. Our friend pointed out that, in both cases, there doesn’t seem to be anything left for the observing party to do except to observe.” I turn back to GM. “We’d like to hear what you think.”

Heads nod in interest, and people whisper to each other all around the room.

GM is delighted. “Wonderful!” he says. “Fascinating analogy! And what a challenge!”

Savannah adds, “We were thinking of phrasing the question this way: What does God do from 9 to 5?”

“9 to 5!” someone protests. “What if you work the night shift?”

“Or weekends?” says another.

“Or part-time?”

“Or around the clock?”

But GM laughs. “Now, now! We all know what ‘9 to 5’ means. Of course, nobody has ever actually worked

an 8-hour day from 9 to 5, unless they skipped lunch.”

Savannah turns to me and raises an eyebrow warily.

“Tough crowd,” I remind her. “But I like it.”

GM’s wheels are turning. “Our challenge is to express in words what it is that God does while we’re busily engaged in secular pursuits. But let’s not be so hasty about dismissing the image of God as an observer. It would be a marvelous thing to be able to see ‘The Big Picture.’ I’ve often wished that I could catch just a glimpse of the activity that takes place in a single day in this city.

“Think of it! What if there were a magical observation booth somewhere in the heart of town where you could see everybody all at once?”

“Like a giant ant farm?” somebody asks.

“Somewhat. Except you don’t just see the mass of people—like so many ants—but you can pick out each one individually. You can also tell what they’re thinking and feeling. You know what they want and what they fear. You’re aware of their stresses and strains.”

“Sounds a little like Reality TV,” someone says.

“I’m not so sure” he replies. “Reality TV is greatly edited and served up to us in a digestible form. In this magical observation booth, on the other hand, we have intimate, inside knowledge of all that’s happening in all its complexity, all at once, and in a single glance. When we step into this observation booth, we can see people everywhere, doing what they do all day. Wouldn’t it be an awesome thing to have such depth and scope of

vision?”

Nobody says anything. We’re all thinking.

“Join me in trying to visualize this for a minute. What kinds of work environments would we be able to see from this magical observation booth?”

The room is quiet a moment, then people speak up.

“Factories.”

“High-rise office buildings.”

“Department stores.”

“Gas stations.”

“The halls of justice—and jails and prisons.”

“Schools,” a teenager adds. “Well, you know. Speaking of prisons.”

Everybody laughs.

GM chuckles but is thoughtful. “Any place of employment can become a prison easily enough. But you’re right to include schools in this list. You students are working people, too. The school is your workplace.”

“Maybe I should ask for a raise,” the kid says.

GM turns to the rest of us. “Where else do people work?”

“Outside,” someone says. “I’m thinking of highway construction crews.”

“Speaking of highways,” someone else adds, “there are professional drivers like truckers. Their cabs form their actual work environment.”

“Taxi cabs!” says another. “And police cars. And buses, trains, and subways.”

The list keeps growing. We mention hospitals,

airplanes and airline terminals, fishing boats, barges, ocean liners, mine shafts, barber shops and boutiques, restaurants, theaters, call centers, fitness clubs.

“Fine!” GM says. “Now... we step into our magical observation booth and we watch all this activity going on. What a sight! Imagine perceiving all the connections, all the interrelationships.” He points to imaginary spots all around him. “Here are factory workers building parts. Those parts are shipped by *this* trucker over *that* stretch of highway that was just recently repaired by *this* construction crew. The supervisor of the crew has a question, so he’s talking on a cell phone to someone in *this* call center over here. The lady he’s talking to puts him on hold and calls an engineer at *that* office building.

“Remember, we’re not only able to see all this but also to tell what all these people are thinking and feeling. So besides the vast machinery of all these professional relationships, we catch the drama and pathos of the scene in all its complexity. We mortals are not able to view life from such an exalted vantage point, but imagine if we could!”

“That would be interesting to see,” someone admits, “but I’m not getting your point.”

“Just this,” he says, and he gestures to me. “There’s a crucial disanalogy between God’s observation of us and Clifford’s observation of Emily Elizabeth. While she’s in school, Clifford can do nothing but sit and wait—and whine. But God’s observation of us is active; it’s full of understanding. It makes connections, recognizes

problems and their causes, sees possibilities. Even if God were doing nothing more than observing us, that would still be a lot more than Clifford is doing. Clifford is just waiting for Emily Elizabeth to get out of school so he can interact with her again. God is *doing* something.”

I nod. “I can see that, and I admit that the analogy isn’t as close as it seemed to me when our friend presented it to us. But what you describe God as doing still falls short of a lively interaction with us. And the end result is that, while we’re at work, God seems to play no role.”

“Yes,” he agrees, “that *is* how it seems so far. I realize I haven’t answered your question yet. And I’m afraid it’s going to take me all night to do so!”

Everybody who knows him laughs. “Ain’t *that* the truth!”

“But before I get started, I want us to realize that God’s observation of us is not as passive as it may seem. And that’s an important point—a crucial one, I think. I’ll be coming back to it before we’re finished.”

He turns back to the group. “So... what does God do all day? That’s the question we’ve set out to answer.”

“Should we consult the scriptures?” someone suggests.

“Definitely! But first, let’s get a better focus on the question. The problem begins on the secular side. We don’t have an adequate understanding of what *we* are doing from 9 to 5. We think we do, but we’re too close to it and don’t often take time to analyze what’s

Ronald R. Johnson

happening. I invite you now to look at secular life with new eyes. In doing so, I believe you'll see that there's much more to it than you've ever realized."

=====~~End of Excerpt~~=====

