

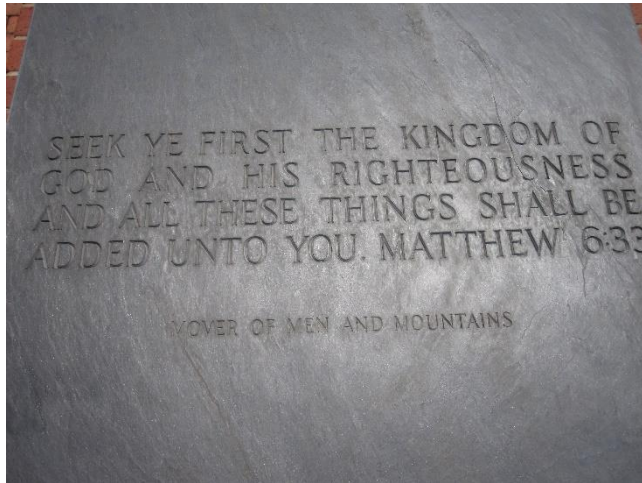
Watch this [one minute video](#).

Last month I introduced you to this man, R.G. LeTourneau by showing you the specs on just one of the machines he built, the world's largest earth mover. This morning LeTourneau is the focus of my annual biography. Here are the past biographies.

William Tyndale, b. 1536
Ulrich Zwingli, b. 1484
David Brainerd, b. 1718
George Whitefield, b. 1714
Amy Carmichael, b. 1867
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, b. 1906
Benjamin Rush, b. 1746
Fanny Crosby, b. 1820
Richard Baxter, b. 1615
J. Gresham Machen, b. 1881
Elizabeth Elliot, b. 1926
Richard Wurmbrand, b. 1909
Martin Luther, b. 1483
R.G. LeTourneau, b. 1888

All of the previous biographies focused on missionaries and pastors except for Benjamin Rush. While it's great to learn about these men and women, this year I wanted the focus to be on a "regular guy," someone who was not in ministry as their vocation. I believe that Bob LeTourneau is one of the best examples we could ever learn from. Let me start with my favorite quote.

“Two things I like most to do: one is to design machines, turn on the power and see them work. The other is to help turn on the power of the gospel and see it work in the lives of people.”



His life theme was Matthew 6:33. This is the verse that he repeated to audiences thousands of times around the world, and the verse that is on his tombstone: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6: 33).

From all that I read about LeTourneau, he truly did seek the kingdom of God first by using his intellect, his money and his passion to simultaneously build giant machines and spread the gospel.

1. He constantly learned humility and trust through suffering.

Bob suffered many trials in his life but most of the trials in his young life were of his own making. Bob was raised in a Christian family, but his faith did not become his own when he was young. “I attended [church regularly]—I had no escape—and heard a lot about god without learning a thing.”¹



He was always bristling at his dad's authority. One day thirteen year old Bob got so made he ran away for several days. He must have been desperate to get out of the house because they lived in Duluth and it was already November. But by the time he returned home, he had learned one of his first lessons in humility.

"I saw my running away from home and rebellious stand in all its pettiness. And I was one repentant boy. I started to say so, but dad stopped me. Don't say a word, he said I know what you've been going through. I've been going through it myself, so we're both wrong."

What a lesson that has been to me all my life. Discovering my father's love changed my whole attitude, and chores that I had hated and fought against resentfully, I now did cheerfully because I wanted to serve him. It's like that, only more so, when you discover the Lord. And you don't grow up and move away from your Father in heaven. He is with you always and everywhere. If you aren't serving him now, it's because you don't know him. But when you do know him, you'll love him and when you love him, you'll serve him, and find the greatest happiness in doing so that you'll ever know."²

Despite his mostly repaired relationship with his father, Bob did not like school. He was over six foot tall in the eight grade and felt awkward in every way, so he dropped out of school at age 13. "During those years, he worked as an ironmonger, lead burner, bricklayer, carpenter, gold miner, stump puller, ditch digger, wood chopper, farmer, battery refurbisher, construction worker, tractor repairman, and field leveler, with demoralizing intervals of unemployment in between. He also experienced firsthand the great San Francisco earthquake, survived a broken neck, barely escaped death during the Spanish Influenza Pandemic, and faced financial ruin caused by an unreliable business partner."³ He quit formal school but he was clearly living in the school of hard knocks.

When he was sixteen his family lived in Portland. Portland was an ungodly place to live but the Lord brought the largest revival to town the city had ever seen. His conversion has a parent's prayer written all over it.

"No bolts of lightning hit me. No great flash of awareness. I just prayed to the Lord to save me, and then I was aware of another presence. No words were spoken. I received no messages. It was just that all of my bitterness was drained away, and I was filled with such a vast relief that I could not contain it all. I ran to my mother. 'I'm saved,' I cried. 'It happened. You don't have to worry about me any more. I have felt the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.' There was a long silence, followed by a deep sigh. A sigh of vast relief. Then, 'Robert, we knew it had to happen. Two years ago, when we discovered we couldn't guide you, we knew God would. We have left it in His hands ever since, praying every night that He would help you.'"⁴



Bob would need that faith as his suffering would only get worse. During World War 1 the Spanish Flu killed approximately 50 million people worldwide. It was one of the most devastating epidemics in human history. Bob almost died from it but sadly, their infant son Caleb was taken by the disease. Here is how Bob and his wife processed that grief.



“I held Evelyn, but when I could find words, it was to God that I addressed them. ‘What’s wrong? What have we done that we should be so punished? We’ve worked hard. We’ve tried our best to be Christians. Oh, where have we gone wrong?’ That night, while we were still numb with sorrow, the answer came to me. ‘

“‘My child,’ the Voice said, ‘you have been working hard, but for the wrong things. You have been working for material things when you should have been working for spiritual things.’ The words were few, but the meaning ran deep. All that long night I reviewed my past, and saw where I had been paying only token tribute to God, going through the motions of acting like a Christian, but really serving myself and my conscience instead of serving Him. Instead of being a humble servant, I was taking pride in the way I was working to pay my material debts at the garage, while doing scarcely a thing to pay my

spiritual debt to God. From my lesson that night I can now say that when a man realizes that spiritual things are worth more—and certainly they will last when material things are gone—he will work harder for spiritual things. I discovered then that God loves us so much that He wants us to love Him in return. He wants us to cooperate with His program. Matthew 6: 33 says, ‘But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.’ That I had not been doing. I had been seeking first my own way of life, and I firmly believe God had to send those difficulties into our lives to get us to look up into His face and call upon Him for His help and guidance.”⁵



Severe grief visited Bob and Evelyn twenty years later when their oldest son Don was killed in a plane crash. Bob and his wife knew their share of grief and sorrow but they began to shape Bob into a faithful man of God.

2. His vast accomplishments made him more humble, not less.

And this humility would be necessary because he was about to become very rich and famous. As you may have imagined, his business was big earth moving equipment, but he didn't start out that way. Remember, he only had a seventh grade education. He was poor and uneducated but he ended his life as a very wealthy man with 300 patents⁶ for machines and heavy equipment. He taught himself auto and diesel mechanics and then he taught himself drafting and engineering. He was without a doubt a multi-talented genius.

Let's put things into historical perspective. When LeTourneau was born in 1888, excavation was still being done by hand. The combustion engine was invented in 1872 so by the time LeTourneau was in his early twenties, tractors were running in the field but what we know as heavy equipment did not exist. LeTourneau singlehandedly invented or improved the excavation business.

The biggest growth in his business came during World War 2. In his book he recounts that thousands of heavy machines used by the Army in World War II were built by his company, including those that filled the bomb craters in Hawaii after the attack on Pearl Harbor, created runways out of nothing in North Africa, cleared beaches in Normandy, and island-hopped with the Marines in the Pacific.⁷ The LeTourneau equipment enabled the Allied forces to build roads and airstrips rapidly, giving Allied forces an advantage that shortened the war.⁸ During the height of the war, from 1942 to 1945, his fertile mind pumped out 78 inventions, many of which were instrumental in helping to win the war.⁹ He revolutionized earth moving. One bulldozer did the work that 1,000 men did with shovels in World War I. His equipment represented 70% of heavy equipment used in WW2.



He was the first to use rubber wheels on heavy equipment. He designed and revolutionized factories and assembly lines. His company subcontracted on the Hoover Dam, creating the challenging road that allowed heavy equipment to build one of the modern wonders of the world.¹⁰ He revolutionized earthmoving, manufacturing and engineering of heavy equipment. How did he go from a poor, uneducated boy to a wealthy genius inventor? He always gave the credit to the Lord. He wrote, “No one has ever measured the inventiveness that Christ awakens in



a man’s soul ... because it is beyond measurement.” ... By accepting God as your partner, there is no limit on what can be achieved.”¹¹ But he didn’t stop at earth moving equipment. One of his greatest achievements came through working with the man in the middle of this 1950’s photo. This is Bush 43, George Herbert walker Bush when he was the 32 year old president of the Zapata Oil Company.¹² LeTourneau

designed and built¹³ the first mobile off-shore oil drilling rig.¹⁴

But this technology was so revolutionary that no billion dollar oil company wanted to take the risk for untested technology so Letourneau decided to take 100% of the risk for the massive project. Here were the terms of the agreement in LeTourneau's won words.

The Zapata Off-Shore Co. would test the Scorpion "under actual operating conditions. If it worked as guaranteed, we were all in business. If it didn't stand up to my guarantee, and that's where I had to be pretty sure of myself, well, I'd be the small boy going back to school on a wrong guess."¹⁵

George Bush wrote about LeTourneau in his autobiography. "But what LeTourneau proposed," Bush said, "was a giant leap into the future. Not only was LeTourneau's equipment different, but the man himself was unorthodox. LeTourneau was gruff, eccentric, a kind of George Patton of engineering. He was the man of action with a mystic touch, a dynamo, a creative genius."¹⁶ As a result of this first success, by 1970, the name LeTourneau was affixed to 50 percent of the offshore drilling rigs at work in the world's oceans.¹⁷

But again, his vast achievements helped to draw him closer to the Lord in true humility.

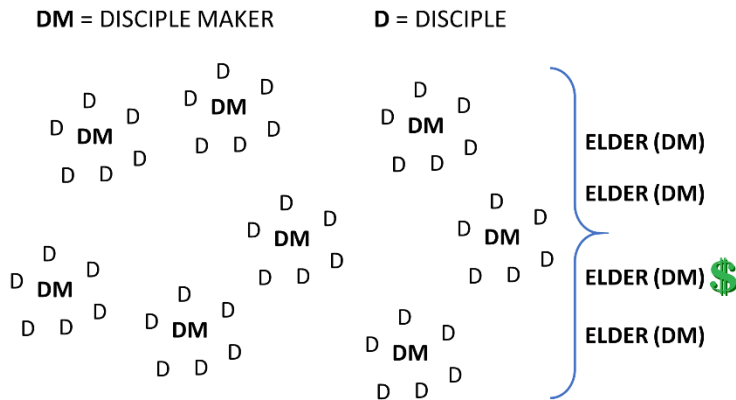
I'll admit that at one time I feared my love of machines was becoming an obsession that was taking me away from my love of God. I went to him for help, and was reassured. I was just a mechanic striving to translate His laws in terms of machinery, and as long as I understood I was just his follower, and didn't get to thinking I was operating under my own head of steam, I was on the right track.¹⁸

3. He did not make a distinction between the secular and the sacred.

Matthew 6:33 is inscribed on his gravestone but more importantly, the Lord engraved it on his heart. He began to wonder if he could effectively serve the Lord as a businessman. He wondered if he should leave the business world and be a pastor or missionary. He sought counsel from his pastor who told him, "You know...God needs businessmen as well as preachers and missionaries." Those were the exact words LeTourneau needed to hear.

Those were the words that have guided my life ever since...Many men have the same mistaken idea I had of what it means to serve the Lord. My idea was that if a man was going all out for God, he would have to be a preacher, or an evangelist, or a missionary, or what we call a full-time Christian worker. I didn't realize that a layman could serve the Lord as well as preacher.¹⁹

Before he talked with his pastor he made the mistake of separating the secular world from the sacred world. In other words, business is business but has little to do with God. But that is always a false dichotomy.



By now you are getting used to seeing this diagram. We have been seeing that everyone is to be engaged in making disciples. The only difference between an elder and non-elders is that elders are responsible for shepherding larger numbers of people. The role and purpose remains the same, only the relative size is different. Then the only difference between an elder and a pastor is that a pastor earns his

living from serving as one of the elders. That's it. so what LeTourneau realized is that he could obey Matthew 6:33 whatever he did. His vocation didn't matter. There was no real difference between the so-called secular world and sacred world. With that in mind, LeTourneau doubled his efforts to be the very best businessman he could be while he served the Lord. One person wrote, "What he did have was a Bible and confidence that God would guide him."²⁰

I hope you see life the same way. It's far too easy to lack purpose in your vocation, especially for men. Your vocation is not your identity. Jesus and making disciples is your identity. Can you serve the Lord and make disciples in your vocation? Is there anything stopping you from doing so. Even in the smallest of ways? You are a disciple maker who happens to work in the profession you do. I am a disciple maker who happens to have the profession of paid elder. We need to redeem our vocations for God's use and his glory.

This decision by LeTourneau created decades of remarkably fruitful ministry of many kinds. He first cared for his own workers. He employed three full-time chaplains and established regular chapel services in his manufacturing plants.²¹ Caleb Mickelsen is a full-time chaplain for several Culver's stores in Chicago area. The owner of the fast food businesses obviously took a page out of LeTourneau's playbook.

But all of that is just the beginning of the ministry that LeTourneau accomplished. The monthly publication NOW begun by him reached 600,000 persons during his lifetime and circled the world with its message. He traveled the world as a witnessing Christian businessman.²² Letourneau wrote:

"For 25 years or more, I've been traveling this land of ours and a few foreign countries trying to teach and preach by word of mouth and example, that a Christian businessman owes as much to God as a preacher does."²³ He flew thousands of miles each week to maintain Christian speaking engagements around the United States and overseas.²⁴

He served terms as President of the Christian Business Men's Committee (CBMC) and President of the Gideons International.²⁵



He founded what eventually became LeTourneau University. It is one of the premier engineering schools in the country while retaining its focus on teaching its graduates to be ambassadors for Jesus Christ to the world. LeTourneau University also has the unique attribute of having expelled, and then given an honorary doctorate to, well-known evangelist Franklin Graham. And that is ironic given that LeTourneau became friends with Billy Graham and supported his worldwide crusades.



4. He used his wealth to benefit those near and far.
Here is the trajectory from business debt to massive profits.

Inflation Adjusted
1927 – DEBT: \$1,500,000

1932 – Net Profit: \$975,000
1934 – Net Profit: \$6,500,000
1938 – Net Profit: \$25,720,000

Anyone who makes this much money would be tempted by it. A turning point came in a wonderful conversation with his wife.

A hick from Duluth and a small-towner from Stockton, and neither one of us with a high school education. And sales zooming toward a figure that would go over the two million mark for 1935 [\$37M in 2019]. She was frightened, and now that she brought the subject up, so was I. ‘You mean if we just give God half the profits of the company, we won’t feel anything personal about it?’ I asked. She nodded. ... ‘Okay, we’ll give half the company profits to the foundation, and then we’ll give half of our own income to keep it personal. How does that sound?’ I thought that sounded fine, but Evelyn, wasn’t through. ‘That still leaves an awful lot.’ ... Since then we’ve been able to increase the holdings of the foundation to 90 per cent of our common stock and 90 per cent of our income.

That one conversation forever changed him and the trajectory of his life. He spoke about business and money so often he became a treasure trove of great quotes. Here are just a few of them.

“I shovel out the money, and God shovels it back—but God has a bigger shovel.”

“I put my own confidence in God. If he wants you to make money to serve his purposes, you’ll make it. If he doesn’t want you to have money, He’ll take it away. He’ll take it no matter how much you might have.”²⁶

“It’s not how much of my money I give to God, but how much of God’s money I keep for myself.”



In 1953, LeTourneau began a development project in the country of Liberia, West Africa, with the diverse goals of colonization, land development, agricultural development, livestock introduction, evangelism and philanthropic activities. In 1954, a colonization project with similar objectives to those in Liberia was established in the country of Peru, South America.²⁷

From a practical point of view, there was no way in the world I could take time out to go to Liberia. But when I got down on

my knees in Washington that night, praying for guidance, there was no question about what my Lord wanted done. That wonderful and familiar voice, like something heard through earphones on a clear night high above the ocean said, Of course you will go. This is the challenge of your life. This is what our partnership is all about.”²⁸

The program I outlined was four-pointed.

One: By supplying the natives with machinery and training them in its use and maintenance, we would help them help themselves.

Two: We would establish a model village to be called Tournata, complete with electric lights, short-wave radio, airport, hospital, school and non-sectarian church, to serve as a guide to higher living standards.

Three: We would engage in a land clearing for the ultimate production of crops and livestock shown by experiment to be the best suited to the locality.

Four: By word and example we would teach the Christian way of life, and through the training of local pastors extend God’s word to the villages of the interior.

If I seem to have put the teaching of the word of God last, it is not because it is not at the top of the program. It is because, as a practical businessman, I wanted the natives to see the power of God. Once they had seen his power in better housing, food. And medical care, the spiritual rewards of knowing Christ would be eagerly sought. If they had the machines to improve living standards, they would have welcomed them. It would have been unchristian to keep their converts starving when there was a better way out, and now that we have the machines, it would be unchristian not to use them for the betterment of humanity.²⁹

5. He passed his love for Jesus on to his children.

Bob and his wife had eight children together, seven boys and one girl. As I mentioned previously, one son died in infancy and one son died in a plane crash. The highest calling for a man is not building world changing businesses or worldwide ministry but rather impacting his own family for the gospel. And this is exactly what LeTourneau did. All of his children have followed in his footsteps. His son Richard became the president of LeTourneau University and built it into a premier Christian university. Roy served as a missionary and church planter in Peru, helped to plant over 70 churches, started the largest John Deere dealership in the world, spoke for CBM all over country. His daughter Louise was a missionary in Liberia.

“Two things I like most to do: one is to design machines, turn on the power and see them work. The other is to help turn on the power of the gospel and see it work in the lives of people.” Can you see why this is my favorite quote and how it embodied the man? Here’s my final question for you. What do you like to do? How has God uniquely gifted? What skills and training do you have? All of these things work toward your vocation and your service to the Lord which should be one and the same.

Rich Maurer
November 10, 2019

¹ Men and mountains, p. 11.

² Men and Mountains, pp. 17-18.

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- ³ <https://centerforfaithandwork.com/article/surprising-things-you-may-not-know-about-rg-letourneau-and-how-god-shaped-his-life-through>
- ⁴ https://www.wayoflife.org/reports/christian_inventor_rg_letourneau.html
- ⁵ <https://abidanshah.com/2014/02/05/if-they-made-it-you-can-too-3/>
- ⁶ https://www.wayoflife.org/reports/christian_inventor_rg_letourneau.html
- ⁷ <http://christianfighterpilot.com/2009/10/01/r-g-letourneau-mover-of-men-and-mountains/>
- ⁸ <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fle36>
- ⁹ <https://www.letu.edu/library/rg-museum.html#ContentBlock-1-3>
- ¹⁰ <http://christianfighterpilot.com/2009/10/01/r-g-letourneau-mover-of-men-and-mountains/>
- ¹¹ Men and Mountains.
- ¹² <https://centerforfaithandwork.com/article/legendary-partnership-between-george-bush-and-rg-letourneau>
- ¹³ <https://www.peoriamagazines.com/ibi/2011/jan/rg-letourneau>
- ¹⁴ <http://www.energyglobalnews.com/scorpion-first-three-legged-jackup/>
- ¹⁵ Men and Mountains
- ¹⁶ https://www.news-journal.com/opinion/columnists/van_craddock/craddock-r-g-letourneau-had-mystic-touch/article_b2088ae9-d334-549a-9d08-d1baa29888a3.html
- ¹⁷ <https://centerforfaithandwork.com/article/legendary-partnership-between-george-bush-and-rg-letourneau>
- ¹⁸ Men and Mountains, p. 79.
- ¹⁹ Men and Mountains.
- ²⁰ <https://centerforfaithandwork.com/article/surprising-things-you-may-not-know-about-rg-letourneau-and-how-god-shaped-his-life-through>
- ²¹ <https://www.epm.org/resources/2011/Feb/17/lesson-priorities-rg-letourneau/>
- ²² <https://www.letu.edu/library/rg-museum.html#ContentBlock-1-2>
- ²³ Men and Mountains.
- ²⁴ <https://www.motivationalmemo.com/the-man-who-moved-men-mountains/>
- ²⁵ <https://abidanshah.com/2014/02/05/if-they-made-it-you-can-too-3/>
- ²⁶ Men and Mountains, p. 165.
- ²⁷ <https://www.thecookieboys.com/blogs/homeschooled-handmade-blog/anointed-in-business-r-g-letourneau>
- ²⁸ Men and Mountains, p. 249.
- ²⁹ Men and Mountains, pp. 250-251.