

iFocus on Excellence
Core Values: *Committed to Excellence*

Introduction

“Excellence is the password for America [these days]. Advertisers promise it. Politicians pretend to possess it. Educators promote it. Athletes perform it.” So wrote John Johnston, professor at Pepperdine University.

He asks, “What does this excellence blitz imply? That we’re fed up with mediocrity and all of its ‘brothers’ – apathy, complacency, listlessness, half-heartedness. As a nation we’re tired of products breaking and people taking no pride in their work. We realize that this road inevitably leads to personal deterioration, and even national disaster.”

I have a delightfully humorous book in my library titled: *The Book of Failures*, by Stephen Pile. One story in particular, seems apropos to Johnston’s comments.

The Worst Ship

Between 1953, when it was built, and 1976, when it sank, the *Argo Merchant* suffered every known form of maritime disaster. In 1967 the ship took eight months to sail from Japan to America. It collided with a Japanese ship, caught fire three times, and had to stop for repairs five times.

In 1968, there was a mutiny and in 1969 she went aground off Borneo for thirty-six hours. In the next five years, she was laid up in Cucaco, grounded off Sicily and towed to New York.

In 1976, her boilers broke down six times and she once had to travel with two red lights displayed, indicating that the crew could no longer control the ship’s movements because steering and engine had failed. She was banned from Philadelphia, Boston, and the Panama Canal.

To round off a perfect year, she ran aground and sank off Cape Cod, depositing the country’s largest oil slick to date on the doorstep of Massachusetts.

At the time of the final grounding, the ship had been “lost” for fifteen hours. The crew was eighteen miles off course and navigating by the stars, because modern

equipment had broken down. What is more, the West Indian helmsman could not read the Greek handwriting showing the course to be steered.

A naval expert afterwards described the ship as “a disaster looking for somewhere to happen.”

It is no surprise that over the past few decades there has been a rediscovery and resurgence of the theme of excellence. Countless books have been written, spawned by the popularity of Peters and Waterman’s book *In Search of Excellence*.

So, is excellence just the back door to success? Become excellent to become successful? Or is there something more, something far more significant for you and me, and for Knollwood Community Church.

We are in a message series focusing on who Knollwood is, where we are going, and how we are going to get there. I don’t mind a little review to remind us of where we’ve been.

Vision: To see lives changed by Jesus Christ

Mission: Helping people grow into disciples of Jesus Christ

Core Values: last week – Passionate about Truth; this morning – Pursuit of Excellence.

We need to begin by reminding ourselves that God’s pattern is excellence. In the very first book of the Bible, the first record of God’s creative acts, we find these words: “And God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good.”

Take a look at some other descriptions we have in Scripture:

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name above is excellent. His glory is above the earth and heaven. – *Psalms 148:13*

How excellent is your lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of your wings. – *Psalms 36:7*

As for God, his way is complete, excellent, full of integrity; the Word of the Lord is tested. He is a shield to all who take refuge in him. – *II Samuel 22:31*

Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is excellent. – *Isaiah 12:4*

A spirit of excellence in the life of a Christian, in the life of a church, is a reflection of one of God's attributes. What is this spirit of excellence? I think we can find it tucked away in Paul's letter to the Colossians. Please turn in your Bible to Colossians, chapter 3.

Follow along as I read, beginning at verse 22 – **Colossians 3:22-24**

The context of this passage is slaves and masters or, if you will, employee and employer. For some of you, it feels the same 😊 But let's broaden the application to the whole of our lives and the life of our church.

I. Whatever You Do – *The Right Thing*

Perhaps you have heard it said, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well." Maybe it should be, "If it's not worth doing well, we shouldn't do it." Problem is, the whole country might shut down!

It seems to me there are two problems or dangers we face in this regard:

A. Distinction between secular and sacred

There's a story told back when Khrushchev was the leader of the Soviet Union during part of the Cold War. He was visiting a factory and he asked one of the workers, "Do you believe in God?"

The worker responded, "At the factory, no; but at home, yes." Khrushchev actually praised the worker for his honest inconsistency.

The potential problem is spiritual schizophrenia. There is a great need for a holistic approach – excellence needs to be applied in all things. What would be different if you pursued your relationship with God with the same intensity, excellence and care as you do your business or recreation or hobby? Or maybe you can turn the question around the other way.

B. Distinction between the big things and the little things

Do you apply the same commitment of excellence in the things that go unnoticed by others as you do in those things that will be observed by others?

Is excellence reserved for the big tasks, while “close enough” will do for the small tasks? When we set out in the planning and building of our new Worship Center, we committed to doing everything with excellence.

Excellence doesn't mean opulence. There are no gold-plated faucets in the bathrooms. But when we were planning with the architect the design, particularly of the women's restroom, the model was the restrooms at Nordstrom's. We pursued excellence in all that we did. That meant, at times, some pointed meetings with the project manager from the general contractor, especially when it came to the punch list.

The writer of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes says,

Whatever your hand finds to do, verily do it with all your might. – *Ecclesiastes 9:10*

Hudson Taylor, who was a pioneer missionary to China, said, “A little thing is a little thing. But a little thing done faithfully is a big thing.” May I amplify Taylor's comment a bit? “A little thing done excellently is a big thing.”

This is the stuff that character is made of. Someone once said, “A noble character is the sum of many ordinary days well used.”

Woodrow Wilson, America's 28th President, said, “Character is a by-product; it is produced in the great manufacture of daily duty.”

Whatever you do – no distinction, big or little.

II. Do It Heartily – *The Right Way*

Many of you are familiar with this statement by Teddy Roosevelt; there is much truth to it:

It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again;

Who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause – who, at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high

achievement; and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

There is an application in this, I think, in serving the Lord. How often people sit on the sidelines and critique those who are seeking to serve Christ by serving others. But the credit goes to the one who is in the arena of service, even if they make mistakes, even if they fail in human terms.

I often have said to the staff, “Let’s not be afraid of failure.” If we try something, and do it to the best of our ability, and it fails, so be it. I would rather us try something, even something new and uncertain, and fail, than to do nothing and ensure complete success!

I want you to compare the description of two Hebrew kings, recorded for us in the Old Testament. Turn back to the book of Second Chronicles, chapter 25.

At the age of 25, Amaziah was crowned king over Jerusalem. He was the tenth king of Judah, and reigned approximately from 829-800 B.C. When he was 54 years old, he was killed. For 29 years he did right. That’s correct – he did what was right.

He stuck to all the rules, filled all the right squares, did his job according to his job description. As king, he did right. But God adds this:

II Chronicles 25:1-2

He wasn’t whole-hearted! That’s what Paul is talking about in Colossians, chapter three – wholeheartedness.

Compare Amaziah with another fellow by the name of Hezekiah. Hezekiah reigned from 715 – 690 B.C., some 85 years later. Turn over to chapter 31 of Second Chronicles.

II Chronicles 31:20-21

Paul says it isn’t just the right thing; it is the right way. And the right way means a commitment to excellence. It also often requires persistence and perseverance.

Calvin Coolidge, our 30th President, said:

Press on.
Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.
Talent will not;
Nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent.
Genius will not;
Unrewarded genius is almost a proverb.
Education will not;
The world is full of educated derelicts.
Persistence and determination alone are important.

The Apostle Paul gives a great exhortation at the end of the resurrection chapter – First Corinthians 15. Look what he says:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord... – *I Corinthians 15:58*

To me, this isn't only doing the right thing; it is doing it the right way. If we are committed to excellence, we will keep at it; we won't give up until we have done it right.

Now, it's important to note that excellence is not perfectionism. Perfectionism is usually counter-productive.

Some of you here this morning are either perfectionistic or you have that tendency. I'm convinced there is a hereditary aspect to this inclination. But here's the problem. How many of you are perfect? How many things have you ever done in your life perfectly? Do you see the problem? If perfection is the standard by which you measure success, you will never succeed.

One danger of perfectionism is paralysis. Often times a perfectionist never starts a project or has a great deal of difficulty getting started because of the fear of failure, that is, they might produce a product that does not measure up to a standard of perfection.

I struggle with this in different ways. I am often hesitant to begin something because I have perfection in mind, and I find it difficult to just get started because I fear it won't be perfect.

I'm convinced builders and remodelers can never be perfectionists. A friend of mine came over once to help me put in a double window in my family room. After I put on an addition, we needed more light in the room.

So, I'm standing on the inside, thinking about how to begin, how to get started. All of a sudden I hear a saw start up outside and the blade coming in through the wall. It was Sam who just started! If it had been left up to me, I don't know how long it would have been before there was a hole in the wall.

I often struggle in writing a sermon, because I am afraid it won't be perfect – as if it ever could be!! There are times when I just have to force myself to throw words on paper and then work from there.

Another danger of perfectionism is you forever live with a sense of failure or dissatisfaction because the product – whatever that product might be – is inferior to perfection. And then you feel that you have not been successful in producing something up to your standard, that is, perfection. It is an insidious circle of disappointment.

“But wait,” someone might say, “even the Bible says that we are to be perfect.” Here's one place in the New Testament where it does say, “perfect.” In his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said:

But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect. – *Matthew 5:48*

The Greek word is *telios*, which means complete, whole or finished. When used of believers in Christ it has to do with maturity, not perfection. We know we will never attain perfection – morally or spiritually – in this lifetime, in this body. But we are to strive for wholeness, completeness, maturity.

Now, let me make what I think is an important distinction:

- Perfection is focused primarily on the product;
- Excellence is focused primarily on the process.

In the years of the Reagan administration, I used to meet weekly with a member of his Cabinet for Bible study and prayer. I remember once he asked me, “What difference does it make whether it is a committed Christian like me serving in this capacity or just a good, moral pagan?”

I thought much about that question. When I answered him, it was something like this: “It might not make any difference in the final decision or action taken, but the process might be very different.”

The motive might be different. How you go about your decision-making might be different. How you interact with others might be quite different. Who gets the credit might be different. There are a host of factors in the process that might be different.

The pursuit of excellence will produce a good product, but more importantly, it will be done in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. More and more I am convinced that God places more emphasis on the process than on the product. This leads to motive.

III. For the Lord – *The Right Reason*

Colossians 3:23

Now, compare this with **Verse 22**. “Eye-service.” Another translation reads, “external service.” Kenneth Wuest writes, “This is service performed under the master’s eye, service which is most zealous when the eyes of the master or overseer is upon them.”

Paul says we should work with “sincerity of heart.” The word means “singleness.” It is the idea of *focus*.

Who is our audience? Who do we ultimately need to please? What about your situation at work when it seems unbearable? Focus on the Lord and his approval. Or how about the mundane things of life? Do it for the Lord.

In the end, you will not be judged by a jury of your peers. Only God knows our motive. Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Corinthians:

Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted.

It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in

darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. – *I Corinthians 4:2-5*

Paul says in Colossians 3, “Do it for the Lord, out of fear of the Lord.” Turn back to John’s Gospel, chapter 12.

John 12:42-43

“Glory” also means “opinion, approval, or praise” Challenging question: Do you love the praise of men more than the praise of God? Are you more concerned about what others think or say than what God thinks or says?

You see, it is possible to do the right thing for the wrong reason. Years ago, then Senator Mark Hatfield took a trip to visit Mother Theresa and the Sisters of Charity in Calcutta. Following his return, he received this note:

Dear Senator,

Please pray that I might not lose my grip on the hand of Jesus, even under the guise of ministering to the poor.

Paul says that it is from the Lord we will receive our reward. Our work done in the right way, for the right reason, will be rewarded. It will not go unnoticed. Let me finish a verse I quoted earlier from First Corinthians:

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

Paul says that when we pursue excellence, when we work heartily, with sincerity, seeking to please the Lord, the Lord will give his reward. Isn’t that the Parable of the Talents? Use what God has given you, do it with the motive of serving and pleasing the Master. And the Master will reward those who have served him well.

IV. It is the Lord Christ We Serve – *The Right Master*

A man walked into a pet store and told the manager he wanted to buy a canary. The store owner took him over to two cages. One was marked \$50; the other \$150. The man asked, “What’s the difference?”

“Oh,” the manager said, “the \$150 canary talks.” So the man paid for the expensive canary and took him home.

Two days later, the man returned and said, “The canary doesn’t talk.”

- Climb his little ladder? (\$12.95)
- Peck his little bell? (\$13.95)
- Look in the little mirror? (\$17.95)
- Jump on his little swing? (\$28.95)

Two weeks had now passed since the man bought the canary. He came into the store and the store manager asked, “How’s your canary?” “He’s dead?” “Oh, did he say anything before he died?” “Yeah, ‘Don’t they sell birdseed at that store?’”

Don’t miss the most fundamental point, the most foundational thing about the pursuit of excellence: Who is your master?

P.T. Forsythe wrote:

The purpose in life is not to find your freedom; it is to find your master. For when you find your master, then you will find your freedom.

Who or what is the master of your soul? Jesus said:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one or love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (or things). – *Matthew 6:24*

All of man’s rewards are for this life only; they tarnish, rust and perish. But what we do for Christ will last. And it matters how we do it.

Excellence: reflecting God’s character in our lives and in our church. Excellence means doing the right thing, doing it the right way, doing it for the right reason, and doing it for the right master.

I want to close with the words of Chuck Swindoll from his book, *Living Above the Level of Mediocrity*.

“Excellence is a difficult concept to communicate because it can easily be misread as neurotic perfectionism or snooty sophistication. On the contrary, it is the stuff of which greatness is made. It is the difference between just getting by and soaring

– that which sets apart the significant from the superficial, the lasting from the temporary. Those who pursue it do so because of what pulsates within them, not because of what others think or say or do. Authentic excellence is not a performance. It is there whether anyone ever notices or tries to find out.

“A commitment to excellence is neither popular nor easy. But it is essential. Excellence in integrity and morality as well as ethics and scholarship. Excellence in physical fitness and spiritual fervor just as much as excellence in relationships and craftsmanship. A commitment to excellence touches the externals of appearance, communication, and products just as much as the internals of attitude, vision, taste, humor, compassion, determination, and zest for life. It means not being different for difference sake but for God’s sake. After all, He is the One in whose Book we read, “If there be any excellence...set your mind on these things” (Phil. 4:8).

“That’s it in a nutshell: a setting of our minds on these things – even if no one else on earth cares or dares. It matters not, I repeat, what others may think or say or do. We must seek our own “outermost limits” – not merely drift along with the tide or half-heartedly catch a wave and wash ashore. No, *we must soar*. Since it is the living Lord in the final analysis who appraises our excellence, it is He whom we must please and serve, honor and adore. For His eyes only we commit ourselves to living above the level of mediocrity. He deserves our very best; nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.

“That alone is excellence.”