

On Excellence

Badness you can get easily, in quantity: the road is smooth and lies close by. But in front of excellence the immortal gods have put sweat, and long and steep is the way to it, and rough at first. But when you come to the top, then it is easy, even though it is hard. (Hesiod, ancient Greek poet)

Excellence, in the world's estimation, is a comparative term and conveys the sense of surpassing or outdoing others. In the contemporary slang, it is being "da man". Others hold the door for you. In God's economy, excellence is that attachment to the highest that he has for me and the drive that demands that I strive for that level. It is not fundamentally comparative at all; indeed, its essential concern is for the divine assessment (1 Cor 4:1-4). It is the determination to work out what God has worked into us; the divinely endowed instinct in the child of God that longs to hear the melodious voice of the Master say "Well done, good and faithful servant". When this spirit is present, it has several common characteristics, regardless of activity.

Aiming high—Often, the bane of Christian work is not failure, but low aim. At times we aim at nothing at all, other than keeping everything going. As one of our contemporaries has said: "It is wretched taste to be gratified with mediocrity when the excellent lies before us." Mediocrity is the unwanted but constant companion of low aim.

The writer of Proverbs tells us that without vision people perish. The lack of vision starves excellence in its cradle by making no provision for it at all. What exactly is the excellent thing we see God doing in our midst? Let us think big as befits our God. Let us cultivate a thoughtful, prayerful, hopeful, encouraging atmosphere that wants to "go for it" to the glory of God.

Thinking right—Pursuing excellence involves winning the mind game. The Bible exhorts us to take every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor 10:5). We are to think on what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable—whatever is excellent and praiseworthy (Phil 4:8). We are to be aware that the enemy of our souls is a scheming deceiver and that one of his principal avenues of entree is our minds. The Bible speaks of the "schemes" of the enemy (Eph 6:11), one of which is his mind-distorting tactics, and counsels us to put on the helmet of salvation (Eph 6:17) to protect our thinking.

One of the citadels that God's people need to scale and seize is that of a proper self-concept. The Bible commands us to think of ourselves with sober judgment (Rom 12:3), neither inflated by egotistical boasting or hype nor downtrodden by the negative dirge of a self-deprecating and self-defeating refrain.

On the one hand, spiritual pride is one of the most effective entanglements retarding God's work in and through a person. The "gifted ones" grow haughty, without even seeming to notice it. There is a certain hardness, distance, and loveless judgmentalism, accompanied by an air of superiority, which is repulsive. Jonathan Edwards' assessment is an apt one: "Spiritual pride is the main door by which the devil comes into the hearts of those who are zealous for the advancement of truth. It is the chief inlet of smoke from the bottomless pit to darken the mind and to mislead the judgment."

On the other hand, many of God's people behave like spiritual Eoyores. You remember reading about Winnie the Pooh's negative, if loyal friend, to your children. You could always count on Eoyore to be down in the dumps, finding reasons why this plan would not work, and that good thing could not happen. Spiritual Eoyores allow the enemy to beat them up daily on the line of their self-talk. The enemy reinforces this distorted record by convincing them that this is really humility. The King's kids trudge on, heads and hearts bowed low under a heavy load they were never meant to carry.

We need the courage to try, confidence in the goodness and power of our God to work in and through us, and concentration to develop the capacity He has graciously given. Our God is with us; He is strong on our behalf; and He is abundantly able to do the "greater things" that He promised to do (Jn 14:12) through us. Let us break these old patterns of thinking. Bring these damaged portraits one by one to Christ until slowly, with our faces unveiled by His mighty power, we increasingly reflect the Lord's glory, being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasingly glory that the Father, by the Spirit, graciously gives to His beloved children (2 Cor 3:18).

Focusing our commitment—It does not take a great person to be a good Christian servant, but it does take all there is of him or her. Determine to be simply, unreservedly, and unmistakably his person. We have been purchased at a high cost and no longer belong to ourselves. Focused commitment is about getting out of ourselves and finding our lives in him. In ministry, this involves a review, perhaps a resetting, of our priorities to give Christ our very best in a concentrated way.

Persevering determination—Ours is to be a long obedience in the same direction. There will be difficulties, joys and sorrows, successes and failures along the path. When we are down, we need to get back up. When we are up, our mind's eye must lock on His purpose, not on how well we're doing. A vision implemented is usually the direct result of a long, arduous, and often unappreciated trek. We must always remind ourselves that we are in the Lord's capable hands, and He leads us in His triumph parade as we continue.

Godly ambition, or realizing his high aim, must produce godly grit; a determination that we will not be beaten by anything the world, the flesh, or the enemy can put in the way of our fulfilling God's good purpose. You get this sense in the apostle Paul: "Not that I have already attained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Phil 3:12-14).

Abandoning in devotion—Years ago, I heard a trio of sisters sing on several occasions. They were excellent vocalists, with a tight, conceptually driven message that lifted high the cross of the Lord Jesus. The Spirit had liberty to speak through their music. They prepared thoroughly, sang exquisitely, and the Spirit moved mightily.

Two things impressed me as I observed them over time. First, each of them had suffered significantly in their lives. There was something about the way God brought them through the storms, which honed their eyes to the bullseye of His aim. Second, they had an almost maniacal insistence on "not touching His glory". They just sang with beauty and power and left the results with God.

This second observation is my point here, abandoning our service in devotion. In excellent service, the child of God does everything that he or she can realistically do to prepare, offers everything they are in the serving, and then leaves it on the altar. The results are his and his alone. Your job, at that point, is to stay out of his way.

We glide along the tides of time as a racing river. As time's winged chariot hurries on, let us give ourselves to the better part. Let us determine to be excellent servants of our most excellent God and pray that he would smile upon our offering.