

When Good Isn't Good Enough

The good can be the enemy of the best. I first used this title when I was teaching seminars and workshops with the Integrity Music worship teams as we traveled the world training church and worship leaders. One time there was a typographical error in the program and the title was listed “Excellence: When God Isn't Good Enough.” One woman came to the seminar just to see what I would have to say about that!

That humorous story highlights how difficult it is to achieve excellence. We're only human and we make mistakes. It's often hard to translate our best intentions into a finished product that matches how good we want it to be. It's therefore important to define excellence so that we know what we're pursuing.

Achieving excellence is hard work. It's important to understand why you are working so hard to do what it is that you're trying to do. Is it to get rich? Win the favor of the crowds? Build the biggest and best to leave a name for yourself? Your motivation for achieving excellence is important, for it will determine what you do, how you do it, and how you treat people in the process.

The American so-called robber barons of the 19th century – Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., Cornelius Vanderbilt, J.P.Morgan – became fabulously wealthy through controversial business practices. They amassed great wealth and many of them gave most of it away to good causes (good causes from their perspective). Yet they were ruthless in business and ruined their futures and those of their offspring by their business tactics. They achieved business excellence, but at what price? And knowing what we know now, can we justify what they did and how they did it? I think not.

But I begin with excellence because it is a basic motivation that is in all people. They may have limited talent or opportunity, but no one wakes up in the morning and says, “How badly can I function and perform my duties today?” We all want to achieve some level of competence and respect in certain area of our lives.

William Temple, the archbishop of Canterbury around the time of World War II, wrote these words: “At the root of your being, your intellectual studies, the games you play, whatever it is, the impulse to do them well is and ought to be understood as being an impulse towards God, the source of all that is excellent.”

Because God is a God of excellence and we are made in His image, the desire for excellence is in us and it’s a desire to please Him, to produce something worthy of serving Him. I’ve traveled the world and I’ve seen that people are the same no matter where I go. Their culture and customs differ, but at the core of their being, people are the same. And at that “core” is a desire for excellence, either to behold or to accomplish it.

Martin Luther King wrote,

If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, “Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.”

But how can anyone determine excellence? What does it mean to be an excellent street sweeper, manager, mother, or student? That’s an important question, for to achieve excellence, you must determine in your heart what you’re after.

From my own experience, I set out to achieve excellence by equating excellence with perfection. I tried to make everything just right and assumed that would be the standard by which excellence was achieved. There was only one problem: I never seemed to get everything just the way I thought it would be, and it was frustrating.

I read every book on excellence that I could find and there was a growing body of material on the subject. It seemed that those books confirmed my interpretation of excellence being perfection so I continued to pursue that standard. But I almost always fell short. While I was in this pursuit, I was planning a conference for which I had full responsibility. I planned the program, designed the brochure, set the budget, and coordinated all the details. Since this was a one-man operation, I even proofed the brochure when it came back from the printer by myself.

When I received the finished product back, I found a typographical error right on the front cover, and it was in the name of the sponsoring organization no less! What was I to do? The brochure was already late getting out and the rest of the information was correct. Would the reader overlook the mistake? I thought they would, yet I was pursuing and defining excellence, so could I overlook it?

The answer was no. I got a quote from the printer for new, corrected brochures. When the bill came, I paid it myself. It was my mistake and I needed to make it right. There was no money in the conference budget for a second brochure, so I paid the price for excellence.

Then was another instance where I was helping a man who was starting a small, construction business. One of his first jobs was a concrete deck around a man's swimming pool. We set the forms, and then measured, ordered and poured the concrete. To our chagrin, we found that we were two yards short of concrete to finish the job. When the additional two yards came, the color didn't match what had originally been poured. Now what?

Well, mistakes do happen we thought and we had good intentions, so we met with the pool owner and sincerely asked his forgiveness, hoping that his forgiveness would be the end of the problem. He graciously forgave us, saying, “To the extent you need forgiveness, you have it.” But then he added, “How are you going to rectify this problem?” Sincerity in our hearts was not going to cause him to overlook our poor execution; he wanted the job done correctly.

Our solution was to lay indoor-outdoor carpet over the concrete to provide a uniform look. Besides donating my time, that correction cost me about \$400, my share of the additional expense that all involved in the project agreed to cover. I said, “Lord, this pursuit of excellence is getting to be expensive!” That prayer, however, caused me to turn to the Bible to see what it had to say about excellence and its pursuit. I found some answers there that helped me define excellence and determine what exactly I was pursuing.

One verse in particular caught my attention as I studied the issue of excellence. It is found in Mark 7:37 and it states, “And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, ‘He [Jesus] has done all things well.’” The people were surprised to find someone not just talking about God’s love but showing it. They beheld a level of excellence in Jesus’ ministry that they had not seen in their other religious leaders.

The word in Mark 7:37 for “well” is the Greek word “kalos.” That word means “well, excellently, no room for blame.” There is another New Testament word for excellence in Greek and that word is “arete.” It is translated to be any particular moral excellence or virtue. Now it seemed to me that kalos pertained to outward excellence and arête applied to moral or internal excellence. Then I came across one more verse that

allowed me to finalize my definition of excellence. It's found in 3 John 6 where John wrote, "You will do well to send them [visiting ministers] on their way in a manner worthy of God." That did it. I had my definition.

So from that point on, my pursuit of excellence was "doing all you do from a right heart and in a manner worthy of God." I could pursue excellence for the right reasons, not wanting attention, money or fame. Yet I could pursue excellence without excusing the less than perfect or expecting the perfect. I could humbly admit mistakes, make them right where possible and do it all because I loved and served God. That did it for me.

This definition has served me well for the last 15 years. I've written my books and proofed them many times, only to still find a spelling error every now and then. I did my best, so there is no need to fret. But at the same time, I make sure that the errors are corrected in the next printing, because I am serving God. And I want my books to reflect His excellence in the midst of my human imperfections.

Can you live with that definition? Can you decide here and now to pursue excellence in all that you are and do? That means not being discouraged when mistakes happen, but it also means not excusing or ignoring them either. It means in your every day life, whether at work, school or home, you'll do all you do with a humble servant's heart, ready to take responsibility for and to correct your errors in execution and judgment. It means that you won't settle for good, for you know that the good can be the enemy of the best.

Determine now to be a person of excellence and then pay the price to achieve your objective. You will be glad you did and you will surely impact many lives along the way.