

Called to Excellence

by Didi Marañon

“Type this again,” my dad nonchalantly ordered as he handed back the letter to me. I was in high school and he had hired me to be his weekend secretary. I accepted because he offered to pay me P200 a month. Twenty-five years ago, that was a lot for a teenager. With that money I could buy myself a new dress every month. And all I needed to do was clip and file newspaper articles and do occasional typing.

Eventually, I discovered the job was not that simple, especially if you worked for a boss who had very high standards. He wouldn’t accept white-inked errors, extra folds in a three-fold letter, and roughly cut newspaper clippings. But, tedious though the job was, it introduced me to what would later on be an invaluable character trait: strive for excellence.

I have discovered that not many people strive for excellence in all areas of their lives. Some are excellent in one particular skill and careless in others. Others give their best at work, but are sloppy at home.

One way I strive for excellence at home is the way I prepare meals for my husband. I lovingly cook his favorite dishes, serve him his choice beverages and whip up delectable desserts. Then I tie it all up by lighting a candle at dinner, as if to say, “The day has come to an end and I continue to bless you with the warmth of God’s love.”

Excellence is a multifaceted quality that is manifested in various ways. Whatever your gifts are, that’s where you should strive to excel. Whether they be intellectual, physical or creative, you can be excellent in that field. “There are different gifts but the same Spirit...[and] to each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:4,7).

Excellence is simply being the best that you can be. That’s attainable. And it seems to be a fair criterion for personal fulfillment and success. Just do your best and be your best. Excellence is straining upward towards the ceiling that God has set for you.

An Enemy Called Average

But, as simple as all this sounds, the fact remains that not everyone is excellent or striving to be excellent. At times, it seems there are more mediocre persons than excellent ones around. Ordinary and average are everywhere, Lukewarmness can’t be any closer than right at our very homes.

Writer John Mason puts his finger on it by declaring that “there is an enemy called average.” He sounds a clarion call to all of us who have, wittingly or unwittingly, been condoning this enemy. He tells us to recognize that mediocrity is not of God. It is a corruption of God’s purpose for us to become as He has intended. Above all, lukewarmness is totally detestable to God. In Revelation 3:15-16 we read, “I know you well — you are neither hot nor cold; I wish you were one or the other! But since you are merely lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth!”

Lukewarmness is deadly because it has the power to kill excitement and a once fired-up faith. Eventually, it causes hardness of heart. It's also a sure formula for failure. Therefore, we should shun mediocrity at all costs. Our battle cry should be: "Run so as to win!" (1 Corinthians 9:24). The Lord deserves nothing less.

How to Achieve Excellence

Allow me to outline four basic principles that will help us in our pursuit of excellence.

1. Desire Excellence

The first thing is, you must want to be excellent. You must desire excellence in your heart and soul. Then let this desire lead you to ask God for the gift of excellence. Pray for it daily.

Sad to say, some people shun excellence. They are scared that it may demand too much from them. Others are intimidated by it. What I say to you is, don't give in to this kind of wrong thinking. Excellence can only bring you good. Seek it, and ask God to give you the grace to be excellent.

It always delights me to assign a new project to our design team headed by my sister, PY. You can always sense her excitement in embarking on a new creative venture. This, to me, signals an honest desire for excellence. Their excitement is definitely fueled by a passion to do their best, and to seek God's best in the project. If you start with a desire for excellence, you get the assurance that the work will end on the same note.

2. Set Your Standard

The next principle is: establish your ceiling. Set your standard. Set a goal for yourself. Author George Sweeting explains that "a major problem in the pursuit of excellence is a lack of standards or confusion about what the standards are and where they originate." If you don't know what you want to become, how can you improve towards a certain direction? Someone once said, "If you don't have dreams, how can your dreams come true?"

To help you in establishing your standard, here are some questions you can ask yourself: How good do I want to be? Am I content with my present ability? Do I want to improve? Who are my role models?

Your reach must always exceed your grasp. And when we talk about the ultimate standard, our eyes turn upward towards God. He is the ultimate standard. His works are excellent (Psalm 19:1), His ways are excellent (2 Samuel 22:31) and His will is excellent (Romans 12:2). God calls us to climb higher to His standard and to reach for the very finest.

3. Aspire to Be a Disciple

Excellence starts with the basics. If we are not excellent in our inner, spiritual life, we cannot be authentically excellent as an individual. There can be no dichotomy. You are an individual made up of spirit, soul and body. Excellence has to do with a unified character.

These basics have to do with inner spiritual disciplines. Jesus said, “Whoever wishes to be my follower must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow in my steps,” (Luke 9:33). We have to take the call of Christ seriously and try to live out His ways. We need to have a sincere desire to aspire for the character of Christ. If we are not excellent in this respect, it is doubtful whether we can acquire the purest form of excellence.

A start would be to adopt a lifestyle that incorporates regular and daily prayer, Bible study, involvement in community life and service to society. These will ensure growth in Christian living.

Especially for those involved in ministry, excellence means employing spiritual success. That means faithfulness and devotion to God above all else.

In our ministries, the spiritual training far exceeds the technical training insofar as time and effort are concerned. All servants (volunteers) pray at least one hour a day; attend weekly prayer meetings, Bible study and community sharing groups; regularly read devotionals and other spiritual books; listen to audio teachings; and attend vigils and recollections. We believe that our work is anchored on our devotion to Jesus because He is the One who accomplishes the work of salvation of souls.

4. Sweat the Small Stuff

“The difference between something good and something great is attention to detail.” I read that once and never forgot it. Excellence means diligence, craftsmanship and attention to detail. In other words, “Sweat the small stuff.”

The final principle in the pursuit of excellence is being meticulous about your work. Be concerned about the details. Don’t gloss over the finer points of your area of responsibility. Give more than what is required. Don’t be a “what-is-the-least-I-can-give” type of person. Instead, be a “what-else-can-I-do” type of servant.

I am very fortunate to work with people who know how to sweat the small stuff. Ask for a reference and they hand to you several pages, printed and bound in a neat folder. Organize an eating event, and the buffet table comes complete with centerpiece and specialty food prepared with love and enjoyment. Plan an informal variety show and amateur performers appear in costume with choreographed numbers. These people know how to sweat the small stuff because they know the secret: “You know that your toil is not in vain when it is done in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

A Way of Life

God is calling us to raise our standard. In spiritual terms, we must have a burning desire to give Him our best. In practical terms, we must be meticulous about our work, and give time for study and training to improve our craft. Like St Paul, let us “make it our ambition to please him” (2 Corinthians 5:9, JB). We can only fulfill this if we make excellence a way of life.

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