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Excellence in the Ministry, Part 2

Bob Ross had a long running television show, *The Joy of Painting*. Mr. Ross gained his inspiration from watching the television show, *The Magic of Oil Painting* with Bill Alexander. In a half hour program Alexander would transform a white canvass into a mountain range, a rose, a beautiful valley with a log cabin, a meadow with a bubbling stream, etc. Bill made painting look easy, and Bob Ross learned the techniques of painting; for example, he always painted the sky before anything else. Generally, he painted from light to dark. Then he would paint from distance to close and then the highlights would be last. Bob Ross in fact copied Alexander and taught many more to enjoy painting.

Just as there is a specific order to great painting, there are prerequisites when it comes to a ministry of excellence. The word “excel” (περισσεύω [*perisseuō*]) is used twice in this

pericope (vv. 1, 10). The word itself denotes that which is left over after everything needed has been taken or consumed.

The idea behind Paul's exhortation here is that when it comes to the Christian's service, we must go beyond the needful. We must excel in our:

- Love and service to the Lord!
- Love and service to the brethren!
- Moral purity!
- Devotion to Christ and His church!

Excellence in ministry rests upon a three-fold foundation; first being saved and so living in light of that salvation (v. 1a). The threat of condemnation is enough for us to play it safe and so never attempt to serve God in any capacity. Yet you must see that in Christ, there is "no condemnation" for the child of God... EVER! Therefore, no matter how many times we fall, we get back up on account of the grace and mercy of Christ (Proverbs 24:16)! This is crucial as we transition into the heart of this exhortation regarding moral purity!

The second foundation is understanding and so enjoying union with Christ (v. 1b). Salvation, sanctification, growth in grace, and many other Kingdom benefits rest upon our being united to Christ in a literal, non-corporal way- that is what Union means. Because we are so connected, His resources are always available to us! That is why, on account of our Union with Christ, we are never defeated nor ought we ever to accept defeat!

As Christians we struggle when it comes to holiness, purity, and devotion to Christ.

Galatians 5:17, "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please."

In light of this struggle, it doesn't take long before we begin to entertain the notion that we are doomed to failure. Excellence/maturation obviously isn't intended for us! We are not nor will we ever be spiritual giants! Accordingly, we settle!

The doctrine of Union with Christ says, *"Be gone with such thinking! In Christ you ALWAYS have the ability to grow and so know victory over any sin no matter how deeply it might be ingrained in you! You are attached to Christ; you can overcome!"*

A third element that serves as the foundation upon which excellence in ministry is built submitting to the word of God.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-2: "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us *instruction* as to how you ought to walk and please

God (just as you actually do walk), THAT YOU MAY EXCEL STILL MORE. For you know what commandments we gave you by *the authority of the Lord Jesus.*”

From this verse and the rest of this epistle, it should be obvious that the Thessalonians were quite responsive to God’s word. *Think of it...* they heard the message of the gospel one time and immediately they turned their backs on their culture, idolatry, family relations, security, worldly pleasure, and a whole lot more (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10)! It gives us new perspective to the “more noble minded Bereans” (Acts 17:11)! Clearly the Thessalonians loved God’s word, and it was based on this that Paul could exhort them to excellence in the ministry! Notice the elements that went in to their love of God’s word- it was fourfold.

First it Involved Knowing God’s Word, vv. 1c, 2a, 3a, 6c.

1 Thessalonians 4:1c, “...received from us *instruction* as to how you ought to walk and please God...”

1 Thessalonians 4:2a, Paul wrote, “For you know what commandments we gave you...”

1 Thessalonians 4:3a, with the exhortation to excel in their devotion to God, Paul further instructed them, “For this is the will of God...”- if they didn’t know it before, they would know it now!

1 Thessalonians 4:6c, after giving further instruction, Paul qualified it with, “...just as we also told you before and solemnly warned *you.*”

Clearly God’s word was a major part of the Thessalonians’ conversion, their initial discipleship and training, and their ongoing service and devotion. Now if the Thessalonians were going to excel in their service, they must BOTH remember what they had been taught AS WELL AS continue to be informed as to God’s will/plan and so His word!

Truly! Reading, remembering, and understanding God’s word is a major part of excellence in ministry! Think of it in terms of adding a wireless printer to your computer. You purchase a printer, bring it home, unpack it, and then fire it up. What is the first thing you have to do? You have to download and/or install a new program in order for your printer to work.

The new program we have to install is the gospel! As we’ve seen it is a competing program which works opposite to our default program. As we function according to this new program, we know the riches of God’s grace in Christ. As we neglect it, again “Christ will be of no benefit to us” (Galatians 5:2)- even though we are saved! In other words, *the printer won’t work!*

O.K. so the new program is installed on your computer... what now? Well, the computer and the printer have to connect. So sometime in the process your computer is going to search for the “new device” and once found, it will form an un-seeable, intangible, but nevertheless real

connection. For the Christian this un-seeable, intangible, real connection is union with Christ. But unlike the printer that can be disconnected, the union we have with Christ will never pass away or fail. It is not affected by time, distance, neglect, or sin. Union with Christ means we always are connected to Christ... He always is connected to us... and so we never throw up our hands in defeat when it comes to the Christian life!

And yet in spite of the new program and the real, yet un-seeable connection, the printer still does NOT function! What must happen? The printer needs to receive information telling it what to print! For the Christian, the data we need to receive is the word of God. In order for us to grow in Christ, we must feast upon the word. In the Christian life it is that which directs us, encourages us, corrects us, and trains us unto the service of and growth in the Lord! Listen to the teaching of Paul:

2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate [mature], equipped for every good work."

If you are going to grow in your walk with Christ- if you are going to mature and so be a vessel that is useable to God- you will NOT do it apart from knowing/fellowshipping with God through His word. This is why Peter exhorts us thus:

1 Peter 2:2, "...long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation..."- this is incredible. If you are going to mature as a Christian, it will only come as you appropriate the word of God in your life! This is how we "grow in respect to salvation."

Paul related this to the Ephesian elders:

Acts 20:32, "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

In Salvation, we are set apart unto God as a holy vessel. In order for us to grow, we must feast upon "the word of His grace, which is able to build [us] up!" This was a large part of the Thessalonians' walk! As such in this section where Paul is going to exhort this body unto greater excellence, he begins with this obvious yet important reminder and exhortation: You know the word; here is the word; now follow it!

And so we begin here as well! Think of the passages we just read. The word of God is that which makes us "...mature, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:17)! It is by the word that we "...grow in respect to salvation" (1 Peter 2:2)! It is the word that "...build[s] us up and give[s] us the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32)! And if we don't read God's word on a daily basis, or if we can't find time to be in it we will be weak and sickly in our faith. Family of God, please know... This is NOT condemnation... it is the height of folly!

We have in our laps the word of God which is “the power of God for salvation” (Romans 1:16-17) and we neglect it? THAT’S JUST CRAZY!!!

It always amazes me in counseling that this seems to be a universal when it comes to Christians struggling in life... THEY HAVE NEGLECTED THE WORD OF GOD! Let me put it another way: I’ve NEVER formally counselled an individual who daily supped upon God’s word. NEVER! In fact as a policy, I start all my counseling with an inquiry as to their time in God’s word over the past week, which sadly is often taken as a rebuke (which I don’t mean). Yet with “the rebuke” as their perceived penance, they then essentially say, “*Now help me with this problem!*”- a problem which:

- If they had been in God’s word would have been addressed.
- I address with them by pointing them to God’s word.

Christian if excellence is going to be part of your ministry, you must frequently sup on the word of God. For the King in Israel, this was a DAILY requirement. Moses wrote that this would be a requirement for the future king:

Deuteronomy 17:18-20a, “Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, [Why?] that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left...”

Do you see the incredible blessing that comes from fellowshiping with God via His word on a daily basis? It is a life lived:

- In light of the greatness of God- “fearing the Lord”!
- In humility- “that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen”!
- In submission to the word of God which protects and guides us all our days- “that he may not turn aside from the commandment”!

Now in the New Covenant, we have been made princes and princesses in God’s Kingdom. As such let me encourage you, with the kings of old, to make Bible reading/study a daily habit... A CORE VALUE! There is no more important thing you could do to ensure success in your walk! God told His people this in the Old Testament:

Deuteronomy 5:32-33, “So you shall observe to do just as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right or to the left. You shall walk in all the way which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong *your* days in the land which you shall possess.”

Joshua 1:8, “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.”

Secondly notice that when it came to the Thessalonians’ excellence in ministry it involved appraising God’s word accurately.

1 Thessalonians 4:2b, “For you know what commandments we gave you by *the authority of the Lord Jesus.*”

The word for “authority” is NOT in the original, BUT the thought clearly is. Paul was mindful that his letters were given by the inspiration of the Spirit of God and so were authoritative and binding upon the church.

1 Thessalonians 2:13, “And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God’s message, you accepted *it* not *as* the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.”

When Paul wrote a letter to a church, he knew he was writing Scripture! Paul understood the import of church discipline and what that meant for the rebellious Christian (he taught on it: Galatians 6:1-5; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13). In this regard, it is quite significant that he would suggest such a course for someone who did not submit to his written exhortation.

2 Thessalonians 3:14, “And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him [as a brother or sister], so that he may be put to shame.”

How is it that Paul was so brazen? Again, he knew his writing was nothing less than the word of Almighty God! In fact, that is what we are saying when we identify this as God’s word:

2 Timothy 3:16a, “All Scripture is inspired by God...”

The word used here for “inspired” (θεόπνευστος [*theopneustos*] which means “God breathed”) speaks NOT of *how* God’s word came to be, BUT *what* God’s word is! If you trace the language throughout Scripture- God-breathed/God’s breath- you will discover that “the breath of God” is that by which:

- The world was created, 2 Samuel 22:14.
- Stars were flung into place, Psalm 33:6.
- A lump of dirt became a living being, Job 32:8; Isaiah 42:5.

- Man's life is sustained and or ended, Job 34:14; Isaiah 40:7.
- The passing of the seasons is determined, Job 37:10.
- God's will for man is brought to pass, Job 4:9.
- The wicked perish, Isaiah 11:4.
- Judgment is executed on this earth, Isaiah 30:32; 33:11.
- The sea was parted in the Exodus, Exodus 15:8.
- People are saved, Ezekiel 37:5ff.

Isaiah 30:27a, 28b, "...His breath is like an overflowing torrent... to shake the nations back and forth in a sieve."

Accordingly the "breath of God" in Scripture is nothing less than an assertion of God's Almighty Power! And so when Paul declared that "all scripture" is the product of the Divine breath (is "God-breathed") he asserts with as much energy as could be employed by human language at the time that Scripture is the exclusive product of a Divine operation! And this was the conviction that accompanied his writing! It was and is nothing less than the word of our Almighty God! In fact, notice the first half of this verse.

1 Thessalonians 4:2a, "For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus..."

The word for "commandments" is NOT the typical word in the Bible for a command (which is ἐντολή [*entolē*]). The word used here is παραγγελία (*paraggelia*) which in Paul's day was used for military orders passed along a line of soldiers. They were strong, authoritative directives delivered by a commanding officer to his subordinates. That is God's Word! It is nothing less than God's authoritative directive passed to us through His prophets/apostles by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, when you read this book you are NOT reading the word or opinion of man, BUT the will/directives of nothing less than God Himself!

This is such an important truth to keep in mind. See, Paul is about to zero in on a matter of morality that was NOT thought of as immoral in much of the Greco-Roman world! You know what that means, don't you? Paul is about to sound like a kill-joy to these people- archaic, old fashion, a fuddy duddy! Accordingly, he explicitly said here that the ultimate source of his instruction is none other than "the Lord Jesus" Himself.

This is so important! We tend to view ethical issues as a matter of *personal* preference; and so we bend with the time!

- You can't tell me what I can and cannot do with my free time!
- You can't tell me how I am to live in the privacy of my home, behind closed doors!
- You cannot tell me who I can date or marry... or even restrict me to a specific gender!

Now don't miss it! When it comes to ethics, there is a latitude of freedom. In so many areas

we live “in faith” according to personal conviction- no question about it (cf. Romans 14:23). But listen, before we claim “personal conviction” we must first inquire as to God’s standard and will. If God has spoken on an issue, then what He says is binding no matter how archaic or foolish our culture wants to say it is!

- Does God prescribe what food we ought to eat? No! (cf. Romans 14:13ff)
- Does God dictate what form of education a parent must use when raising their children?
- Does God say a woman can only wear a dress?
- Does God dictate the hair length of a woman?

Rhetorically, No! No! And no! BUT the wise man is the one who in answering these questions BEGINS with the word of God! For God does indeed dictate who we should marry (2 Corinthians 6:14), how much we can drink (Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:18), what we should or should not place before our eyes (Psalm. 101:3-4), and much, much more! In this regard therefore, it is imperative when it comes to excellence in ministry that we avoid the extremes of:

- Legalism- where we legislate that which God doesn’t.
- Antinomianism- where we claim freedom where God does NOT give it.

To avoid both extremes it behooves us to be people of the word, and so people who know the word, who understand God’s commands, and so know where God has spoken and where He has not! Then with hearts devoted to the Lord, we submit no matter the cost!