

"Striving For Excellence"

2 Timothy 2:15 says, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed." *Do your best! The Message* paraphrases this verse: "Concentrate on doing your best for God, work you won't be ashamed of." The Apostle Paul is writing this to the young pastor Timothy. This seasoned church leader urges the young man to do his best for the Lord!

I would say that's good advice for *every* follower of Jesus! Do your best for God! Another way to put it is: *Strive for excellence!*

Paul has a right to say that because he practiced it himself! He walked the walk! He writes to the Philippians, reminding them how he has left everything in his past life to follow Jesus, and how he considers everything he gave up as dung (manure)! Then he says, "This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and *straining forward* to what lies ahead, I *press on toward the goal* for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). Can you sense his zealous striving to be the best he can be for God!

In Colossians 1 Paul says his goal is to present every person mature in Christ. "That's what I'm working so hard at, day after day, year after year, *doing my best* with the energy God so generously gives me" (Colossians 1:29 *The Message*).

I came across this book title, *Seize the Day: How to Achieve Excellence in a World of Mediocrity*. Good title! *How many people settle for mediocrity.*

In the work force. It seems every business, every shop, has its employees who do just enough to get by, who take very little pride in their work. You see it when you check out at the grocery store or a department store. Some cashiers are customer friendly; others...well. It reminds me of the time I checked out at a grocery store. The checker was a young lady who all the time she was checking me out was talking to another young lady beside her about personal things. She hardly even acknowledged I was there. Mediocrity.

It can be true in the area of education. How many students are content just to get by, rather than using their God-given brains to the best of their ability. Or the college student who majored in partying, wasting mom and dad's money, and a professor's time. In every walk of life we see people content with a so-so effort.

The Apostle Paul urged Timothy to *strive for excellence! Do his best* for God. *That makes sense, doesn't it, when you think of all God's done for us!* God created us. God loves us. God provides for us. God went all out for us, He gave His best, in giving His own Son, to pardon our sin, to bring us back into a relationship with Himself.

I took music lessons for 10 years from a lady named Opal Petters. She was a single woman, devoted to music and her students. She not only taught me how to play the accordion, but she gave me some valuable life lessons. She instilled in me a desire for excellence. I did solo work,

and she never allowed me to be content slopping my way through a song. She showed me the importance of using my God-given ability, and doing what I did to the best of my ability.

Imagine what a difference it can make in the work place, the classroom, the service club, the military, if people strive for excellence!

I'm not talking about being perfect. There's a big difference between striving for excellence, and expecting to be perfect. Edwin Bliss once said, "The pursuit of excellence is gratifying and healthy. The pursuit of perfection is frustrating, neurotic, and a terrible waste of time." Nobody's perfect. To demand perfection only frustrates, and shames people. I'm not suggesting we demand perfection, and lay a guilt trip on ourselves or other people. But striving to do our best, to be the best we can be at something, is healthy and uplifting.

This means doing whatever we do to the best of our ability, for the glory of God. Booker T. Washington said, "Excellence is to do a common thing in an uncommon way." One person put it this way, "Every job is a self-portrait of the person who does it. Autograph your work with excellence."

Richard J. Foster tells a story about his youth, working among the Inuit people of Kotzebue, Alaska. Only a teenager, he had gone to Alaska to help build "the first high school above the Arctic Circle," but the work was backbreaking. One day he was digging a trench through the frozen soil. An Inuit man watched him for a while and then said, "You are digging a ditch for the glory of God." Foster never forgot it. Nobody would remember that he dug that ditch — or perhaps even that a ditch had been dug in the first place. But he dug, he says, "with all my might" because "every shovelful of dirt was a prayer to God."

The story is told of a Harvard professor who had given an assignment and now was collecting the papers. He handed them back the next day and at the bottom of one was written, "Is this the best you can do?" The student thought, "no," and redid the paper. It was handed in again, and received the same comment. This went on ten times, till finally the student said, "Yes, this is the best I can do." The professor replied, "Fine, now I'll read it."

The Apostle Paul says to Timothy (and us), "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed" (2 Timothy 2:15). We're not talking about *being perfect* – no one's perfect. We're not talking about *being the best at something* – there's probably someone better than you or me, whatever we may do. We're not talking about *being successful* in everything you do – that's impossible.

Brian Harbour, in his book *Rising Above the Crowd*, writes: "Success means being the best. Excellence means being your best. Success, to many, means being better than everyone else. Excellence means being better tomorrow than you were yesterday. Success means exceeding the achievements of other people. Excellence means matching your practice with your potential." Be the best you can be, given your potential. Give your best effort at each task.

All of this, of course, applies to the church, and what we do as the church! In some of the churches I served we developed "core values" for the congregation. These are non-negotiable values that define who we are, what we do, what we allow and what we don't allow. In each of those churches one of the core values I fought for was, "Strive for excellence." No slouching here. No half-baked effort here. We want everyone to give this church, and God, their best!

I realized that this had to start with me. I had to be the model for those in the congregation. I had to set the example for the church staff. Would you be satisfied if I didn't put much effort into preparing sermons? If I just slopped something together to present to you on Sunday? If I only gave a half-hearted effort to visiting people in the hospital, or conducting a wedding or a funeral service? I hope you wouldn't be satisfied with that!

When people are looking for a church, most people today are looking for quality. People already in the church may be content with mediocrity, dullness, or careless performance, but not outsiders – especially younger people. Where is one of the first places people look for quality in a church today? Not the worship service – but in the nursery, and child care. Is the church nursery room clean, bright, safe? Are toys intact, or broken? Is the church nursery well-staffed? Now unfortunately, we don't have children here. But if we would want to attract families with young children, those are issues we would have to address.

Are we giving our best effort in our worship services? Most people today are not content with poor quality music or sermons. Is there excellence in our music program? Are those leading worship giving our best effort? Are we well prepared so we can lead others in worship? In one of the churches I served we always did a Christmas cantata. But our organist/pianist/music director also played for the area community orchestra, and we only got his full attention *after* the community Christmas concert was finished.

I contrast that with another church I served, where we did original Christmas musicals. We practiced for many weeks before Christmas, and had 2-2½ hour rehearsals the week before the performance. But we filled the seats not only with church members, but people from the community, as the quality of our Christmas musicals became known.

We can strive for excellence even in the printed materials the church produces: the Sunday bulletin, letters, newsletters, etc. In one of the little country churches I served one of the ladies in the congregation typed the bulletin. It was good of her to serve the church in that way. But that was back in the days of the typewriter, and the old mimeograph machine. Well, on her typewriter, one of the keys was defective, so whenever that letter was typed, it was distorted, or even completely missing. It was awful. She said different times, "I'll have to get this fixed someday." What I felt like saying was, "Right. How about now!" But she was unpaid. And I didn't want to hurt her feelings. But I was ashamed of the quality of our bulletins. (Frankly, I don't remember how that played out. I've probably put that out of my mind). But it drove me crazy.

Excellence applies to the appearance of the church, and the church grounds. We send a message

to people coming to this church for the first time even before they set foot inside the building. Is the grass mowed, flower beds weeded, the lobby area clean or junked up? Is there adequate signage to show where to enter the building, where to find the rest rooms?

After we've been in the church a while we no longer notice these things. It's a good idea every so often to a walk through the church and around the church property, and try to see it through the eyes of someone seeing it for the first time. I appreciate the great job Bob Krady does as our janitor, and others who do things to keep the facility looking nice.

So often, churches seem to be content with 2nd rate, 3rd rate stuff. Some years ago the congregation I was serving got involved in a very intensive congregational wide Bible study program called "The Bethel Series". Another lay person and I flew out to Madison, Wisconsin and spent 2 weeks being trained to launch this in the congregation. I then spent two years just training a few key people to teach this to the congregation. The man who developed the study shared with us how he felt so often the church is satisfied with mediocrity. The two weeks there was anything but mediocre! The first night we had a superb dinner. As we dined, a string quartet entertained us with music. For me, it set the tone of how The Bethel Series strove for excellence in teaching us the Word of God.

The Scripture tells us, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed" (2 Timothy 2:15). Excellence doesn't just happen. It's a product of dedication and conscious effort.

The name Stradivarius is synonymous with fine violins. Antonius Stradivarius insisted that no instrument made in his shop should be sold until it was as near to perfection as human care and skill could make it. Stradivarius observed, "God needs violins to send His music into the world, and if any violins are defective God's music will be spoiled." God needs *people* doing their best for him, to send His song of salvation to the world.

The cover page of a magazine showed a picture of the Statue of Liberty taken from a helicopter. It showed the top of the statue's head. The sculptor had fashioned her hair with painstaking detail. Yet he must have realized that the only eyes that would see this detail on the top of her head might be sea gulls. It was dedicated in 1886. The Wright Brothers didn't fly their first airplane until 1903. So the sculptor could not have dreamed that any person would ever fly over the statue. He was artist enough, however, to finish off this part of the statue with as much care as he had devoted to her face, her arms, the torch, and everything that people could see as they sailed up the bay.

The moral of this story, for me, is: Strive for excellence in all you do, even when we think it doesn't matter, or no one will ever know. For we never know who will see it, and perhaps be inspired by our giving all we've got for the glory of God.

