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Excellence in the Ministry

Excellence in any discipline is the byproduct of talent plus hard work, and thus it is typically limited to just a few! Yet this is NOT the expectation in the Kingdom of God. Excellence is the *standard* to which we all have been called! 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 deals with excellence in the kingdom of God. The word “excel” is used twice in this passage (“more and more”- NKJV, ESV, NIV). There is no doubt, that excellence is THE THEME of this section.

1 Thessalonians 4:1, “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.”

1 Thessalonians 4:9-10, “Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for

anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more.”

The word behind “excel” is περισσεύω (*perisseuō*) which denotes that which is left over after everything needed has been taken or consumed. And so it means “to abound, to be abundantly supplied, to overflow, to exist in full quantity, to be over and above.” Thus the idea behind Paul’s exhortation is that when it comes to the Christian’s service, we must go way beyond the needful. We must excel in our love and service to the Lord! Excellence in our:

- Devotion to God.
- Devotion to man.
- Sanctification and holiness.
- Love for the brethren.

Sadly, this is an uncommon concern in our churches! So many today minister with incredibly low standards; our devotion to God is fickle and ever so slight! Think of it! How much of your life involves

- Bible study?
- Prayer?
- Striving for purity of thought?
- Endeavoring to offer to God our best in all things?

Typically, if we endeavor to minister at all we do the bare minimum as it is convenient to us! Yet we must see that God's Standard is EXCELLENCE! It’s going beyond the Christian norm and allowing God's word to bear on every portion of our lives! For example:

Colossians 3:23-24, “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.”

1 Corinthians 10:31, “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

Revelation 3:11, “I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown.”

Matthew 5:38-39, Christ exhorted, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

In a Jewish culture, being slapped on either cheek was a huge insult. Accordingly Christ is saying here, “When it comes to your dignity, *take the insult!*” Don’t play it safe or easy; be willing to suffer for Christ! The Lord continued:

Matthew 5:40, “And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.”

The “coat” was the outer garment used as a blanket at night. Christ is saying, “If you are sued and lose, to show your regret for the wrong, *give more than what is required!*”

Matthew 5:41, “And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two.”

Roman law at the time of Christ gave a soldier the right to conscript a civilian to carry his pack for a mile. This was a hated inconvenience! Accordingly, Christ said, “If you should be so inconvenienced, surrender even more, rather than retaliate!” From this and much more we see that God’s standard is excellence! It is settling NOT for what is good, BUT for what is best!

In light of this, the text before us is all important! It not only contains a call to excellence in ministry, BUT it explains what this looks like tangibly. Notice firstly as it relates to God.

As it Relates to God: Devotion

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.*”

By way of preface, Paul introduces three foundational elements upon which rests the Christian’s pursuit of excellence. Notice the first one is the foundation upon which devotion rests, our salvation.

1 Thessalonians 4:1a, “Finally then, brethren...”

The significance of “finally then” indicates to us that Paul now has transitioned to his closing ethical exhortations, which even though there are two chapters left, really are quite few. Paul is going to talk about the importance and necessity of devotion to God (our focus here) and then the importance and necessity of devotion to the body of Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:9-12). He then is going to transition into some clarifying statements as to living in light of (1) the death of a loved one in Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18) and (2) the Second Coming of our Lord (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11). And then he is going to wrap up the epistle with a final, climatic exhortation (1 Thessalonians 5:12-28).

All of this is keeping with the pattern Paul follows in all his epistles. Paul first deals with

doctrinal issues/truth (1 Thessalonians 1-3) and then he closes the epistle addressing the “therefore”- the practical implications that flow from the truths he just taught (1 Thessalonians 4-5). We see this pattern in Paul’s other books:

- Romans: 1-11 is Doctrine and 12-16 is the “Therefore.”
- Ephesians: 1-3 is Doctrine and 4-6 is the “Therefore.”
- Philippians: 1-2 is Doctrine and 3-4 is the “Therefore.”
- Colossians: 1-2 is Doctrine and 3-4 is the “Therefore.”

The importance of this is seeing that Christian Ethics/Obedience always flow from truth! Or another way of putting this is this way: Duty always flows from the gospel NOT to the gospel! Accordingly, as we examine this text we begin with the understanding that everything Paul is going to exhort can come only AFTER we are saved! Obedience doesn’t lead to salvation, it flows from it!

And so notice the appellation Paul uses here, “Finally then, brethren...” Paul is NOT talking to the Thessalonians in hopes of getting them saved. RATHER, he is talking to them as “brothers” in Christ and so one’s who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb! It is because of this glorious reality that Paul now exhorts them unto greater devotion to the Lord! You have to see that this is huge!

Let’s look at the background to Romans 10:2-15. We’ve talked in the past about what I’ve called our “Default Program.” God fitted us for the world in which we would live- physically, emotionally, and SPIRITUALLY! Spiritually speaking, what was the world in which Adam and Eve would live? Recall that in the beginning after creating man, God entered into a relationship with him which was/is based on his conduct; this is what theologians identify as the Covenant of Works.

Genesis 2:16b-17, “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.’”

In other words, man’s relationship with God would be maintained by their individual obedience to God! That was the world in which man was made. Accordingly, and not surprisingly, we have as our “default programming” the desire/need/passion to relate to God on the basis of our conduct!

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.”

Now what happens to this passion when an individual is saved “not by the works of the law” but by grace through faith in Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8-9)? Nothing; it still remains with us

except now we have two competing approaches to God which war against each other. Grace says, "In Christ you are beautiful to God! So forget about your past or present sin; rejoice in the Lord! Serve Him in light of His grace!" The Law says, "By your conduct you maintain your relationship with God! So don't blow it! And if you do, make it up to God through further acts of obedience! Until then, know that God is angry with you!" Because this is prior to 70 AD, Paul is speaking about people who at the time would have been viewed as children of God, the Jews. And with this, notice Paul's words which describe so many in Christ today:

Romans 10:2-4, "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge [they were ignorant of Christ!!!]. For not knowing about God's righteousness [that which is given to us in Christ, by grace through faith], and seeking to establish their own [via law-keeping], they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God [this is none other than Christ Himself! Paul is saying here that they did NOT cling to Christ for their salvation!]. 4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness [we could translate this as '*the struggle for righteousness*'] to everyone who believes."

Do you see THE colossal error into which these people fell? They had a zeal for God by which they sought to impress the Lord with their "righteous" conduct. Yet because "the righteousness of man is as filthy rags" before God (Isaiah 64:6), we know that they only could be frustrated and so defeated! Recall the word of God, speaking of the sacrificial system:

Hebrews 10:3-4, "But in those *sacrifices* there is a reminder of sins year by year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin."

And yet, because of our default programming we return again and again to acts of devotion as the basis of pleasing God; as if our religious acts somehow could satisfy Divine wrath! Paul put it this way in Galatians 2.

Galatians 2:18, "For if I rebuild what I have *once* destroyed [the system of works righteousness], I prove myself to be a transgressor."

Do you see? Many a Christian re-establishes the default program that Christ destroyed when He died on the cross! They "rebuild what has once been destroyed!" How many Christians today have cast off the gospel and so continue to relate to God on the basis of their conduct? How many here today have done that? You wonder why you are joyless in your walk?! You wonder why you struggle? Paul, speaking of the system works righteousness:

Galatians 5:2, "Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, CHRIST WILL BE OF NO BENEFIT TO YOU."

Paul is talking here about Christians! In other words, you can be saved and NOT enjoy the benefits that comes from a saving relationship with Christ!

In this regard it is interesting to NOTE the “benefit” or lack thereof referenced here. As Paul continues in this passage, clearly the “benefit” of Christ is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, self-control” (vv. 22-24). When we lack this benefit, we are characterized by “immorality, impurity, sensuality, etc...” (vv. 18-21)- the very thing Paul is address in 1 Thessalonians 4:3ff!

So indeed this passage exhorts you and me to greater acts of devotion to God! But listen, if you approach this exhortation having adopted or gone back to a system of “works righteousness” there will be NO benefit here, JUST slavery, doom, and guilt! Christian, live in light of the grace of God! Without which, excellence in our service and devotion to the Lord will NOT take place!

And so the first foundational truth you must know and understand when it comes to excellence in your service of God is that of salvation. Christian service always and only flows from an understanding of our position in Christ and so the grace of the Lord! Notice a second foundational pillar upon which excellence in our service is rests is union with Christ.

1 Thessalonians 4:1b, “Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus...”

Notice the words “request” (which is a rather weak word with which to make an appeal; it is the encouragement given among equals) and “exhort” (this is the typical word we associate with an appeal. It carries with it a sense of confrontation; it is much stronger than “request”).

You see the love of Paul here for the Thessalonians. Paul is easing into his exhortation, “as a nursing *mother* tenderly cares for her own children” (1 Thessalonians 2:7b)! Yes, he needs to address some very important issues, but he does so with great sensitivity lest he unnecessarily hurt or offends them. We have much to learn from Paul when it comes to ministering to God’s people.

With this, notice the next phrase, “in the Lord Jesus” and the focus in this point! Notice that in most instances in Scripture when you read this phrase, you can remove it without impacting the point being made. Because of this, we tend to read over the phrase! Yet that would be a mistake as D. M. Martin wrote:

This... expresses the sphere in which the commands are given and received. (Martin, 1995, p. 118)

You must see that throughout Scripture, salvation, sanctification, service, devotion, and the like all are linked to the “in Christ” relationship that God established between Himself and the saved individual.

Romans 6:11, “Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

2 Corinthians 2:14a, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ...”

Galatians 5:6, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.”

Philippians 3:14, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Ephesians 1:3, “Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ.”

What is this “in Christ” relationship? What does it mean? As we’ve seen in other places, the expression indicates that there is a real union that exists between the child of God and their Lord. It is a literal, real, yet non-material union in which the believer is attached to Christ. Listen to commentary provided by Robert Reymond:

The Scriptures make it clear that, though it is spiritual and mystical, this non-material union with Christ is as real as though there were in fact a literal umbilical cord uniting them, reaching all the way from Christ in heaven to the believer on earth. (Reymond, 2010, p. dccviii)

Think of it in this way. One of the most beloved promises that we read in Scripture is the fact that in and through all things, God is with us. Right? It’s what we celebrate during Christmas, “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’ which translated means, ‘God with us.’” (Matthew 1:23) Accordingly, we comfort our hearts with such passages as these:

Deuteronomy 31:6, “Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you.”

Joshua 1:9, “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

Matthew 28:20, Christ ended the Great Commission with these words, “...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

God indeed is with His people! We never are alone! God is ever and always there- beside you, before you, within you! Now you must see... the Doctrine of Union with Christ takes this promise to another level. Not only is God with us, BUT because we are “in Christ,” we are

always with Him (we literally are attached to Him “in Christ”)! Accordingly, we must see therefore that Paul’s call here unto Greater Devotion to the Lord is based NOT ONLY upon the grace of God given us in Christ, BUT ALSO on the reality of Christ’s presence in each and every one of our lives! This is why Paul said this:

1 Corinthians 6:15, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be!”

In light of this don’t miss it: as now we live in the “sphere” of Christ- with Christ ever and always connected to us and we to Him- every calling, promise, benefit, and responsibility exhorted in Scripture is do-able/attainable... because we are connected to Christ! Likewise, burden proclaimed or warning issued is mitigated and lessened... because we are connected to Christ!

The word of hope or consolation of love is rooted in the In-Christ relationship! Dr. John MacArthur wrote this:

In the Lord Jesus can modify you and refer to those who are regenerate and share the divine life of God by being in Christ. Certainly only the regenerate possess the spiritual power and insight to accomplish the objectives of spiritual growth (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:14). This reality clearly burdened the apostle’s heart... (Dr. John MacArthur, 2002, p. 96)

We need to hear this... for I think many Christians today suffer from “Learned Non-Use!”

Learned non-use is discussed in a fascinating book *The Brain Changes Itself*, by Norman Doidge. Doidge focusses on the plasticity/changeability of the brain in the context of trauma. In chapter 5, Doidge describes the work of Dr. Michael Bernstein in relation to stroke. What is described there is amazing!

When the brain go through the trauma of a stroke, not only is there permanent damage to the brain, but related areas are also bruised which causes a temporary lapse of use. The brain usually recovers these areas by the sixth month. But this is where the problem begins. Most therapy today for stroke victims starts in earnest in the fourth month and is complete by the sixth month! Because of the loss of motor ability in the bruised areas of the brain, the patient acquires what is called “Learned Non-Use” which means that though by the six month they could move their limb, their brain believes they can’t, and so they don’t! Get this! There is nothing wrong with the brain or the limb... but the stroke victim thinks that there is and so they don’t recover what they could.

This describes so many Christians when it comes to Christ and His grace in their lives. Listen brothers and sisters! Because we are connected to Christ, we never are defeated! We never need settle in our walks when it comes to sinful habits or addictions. In Christ, we truly can

do all things called of us (Phil. 3:13). But on account of past failure, so many arrive at the conclusion that they never can be free of a sin or sinful addiction.

Because of Union with Christ we can always get back up after falling and try harder. Knowing the grace of God in Salvation, we are free from the fear of condemnation. Knowing our Union with Christ, we are free from any chain of despair! So how do we break free from a sinful proclivity? That is next week when we consider a third Foundational Element upon which Excellence in the Ministry rests!