

## LESSON 13

# Striving for Excellence

Are you willing to be more than you presently are? Are you eager to excel? Is striving for perfection a living reality for you? Excellence for a Christian should be more than a distant dream. It should be our daily aim and lifelong pursuit. In the closing greeting of a letter to the Corinthians, Paul urged the church of Corinth to “aim for perfection” (2 Corinthians 13:11). Paul’s instruction is extended to us today. The Lord is calling us to be the very best at whatever we do, whenever and wherever we do it.

Author Zig Ziglar writes,

Success means doing the best we can with what we have. Success is in the doing, not in the getting; in the trying, not in the triumph. Success is a personal standard, reaching for the highest that is in us, becoming all that we can be. If we do our best, we are a success. Success is the maximum utilization of the ability that you have.

One of my favorite examples of success is Sir Winston Churchill. He had to overcome tremendous obstacles. Nonetheless, early in his life Churchill decided to excel. He wanted a life, not just an existence. He wanted to make his mark so that he could walk in the paths of greatness (Mansfield 1995, 125). To merely exist was no better than death. Churchill believed that one can either reflect on history or create history.

## LESSON OUTLINE

Excellence Versus Mediocrity  
Rebekah's Excellence  
Integrity and Excellence  
Planning for Excellence

## LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Explain the difference between excellence and mediocrity.*
2. *Explain how Rebekah demonstrated excellence.*
3. *Show the relationship between integrity and excellence.*
4. *Show why planning is vital for excellence.*

### Excellence Versus Mediocrity

#### **Objective 1:**

*Explain the difference between excellence and mediocrity.*

Excellence is going beyond the expected, the normal. Mediocrity, however, is doing the minimum—performing neither badly nor well, doing only what is expected and no more, caring nothing for improvement. Following are biblical examples of excellence and mediocrity.

In the book of Revelation, the church of Philadelphia was excellent. The church at Laodicea was mediocre and lukewarm. Abraham was excellent; Lot was mediocre. Samuel was excellent; Eli was mediocre. Daniel was excellent; Balaam was mediocre. Then, of course, is Jesus, the embodiment of excellence.

In illustrating excellence, Jesus said, “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles” (Matthew 5:41). In those days, the law allowed a Roman

soldier to draft someone to carry his pack for him for one mile. The pack was heavy, the roads were rough, and the soldiers were often cruel. The job was always an imposition. But Jesus' response, even to such cruelty, was to give more and do more.

In contrast, Jim Conway writes that some people feel "a weakening of the need to be a great man ... Never mind hitting home runs. Let's just get through the ball game without getting beamed" (Maxwell 1999, 34). Conway's position here is one of mediocrity.

Mediocrity is never good enough for children of God. Never! God did not call you to be an average, run-of-the-mill Christian. He called you to change your world, to make things better. As saints, we must discipline ourselves to work harder, dream bigger, and excel. This is the language of excellence.

## Rebekah's Excellence

### *Objective 2:*

*Explain how Rebekah demonstrated excellence.*

Genesis 24 is a great chapter. Here, we find the very old Abraham in search of a spouse for his son, Isaac. Abraham's wife Sarah apparently had only recently died. Maybe these two things, old age and grief, coincided to make Abraham aware that he had failed to make arrangements for a bride for his son. Isaac is nearly forty years old by now. In those days and in that land, it was the responsibility of the father to look after such matters. Abraham does not attend to this important task himself. He entrusts the assignment to his chief household servant.

The servant immediately organizes a caravan of porters and camels. Each animal is loaded with supplies for the journey as well as with valuable gifts for the new bride. "Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and left, taking with him all kinds of good things from his master" (Genesis 24:10). Understandably, the servant prays:

“O LORD, God of my master Abraham, give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a girl, ‘Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,’ and she says, ‘Drink, and I’ll water your camels too’— let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master.” (vv. 12–14)

There is no way of telling just how many wells were in that land. Nor are we told if the servant stopped only once or if he had to visit numerous wells. We are also not aware of how many girls may have told him to water his own camels when he asked for assistance. But, finally, a beautiful young lady named Rebekah comes to draw water. It is evening, and she is tired. She fills her own water pot and is about to leave when the servant steps forward and asks,

“Please give me a little water from your jar.”  
 ‘Drink, my lord,’ she said, and quickly lowered the jar to her hands and gave him a drink. After she had given him a drink, she said, ‘I’ll draw water for your camels too, until they have finished drinking.’ So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough, ran back to the well to draw more water, and drew enough for all his camels.” (Genesis 24:17–20)

As a result of Rebekah’s kindness, “The man bowed down and worshiped the Lord, saying, ‘Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master. As for me, the LORD has led me on the journey’” (v. 26). His prayer had been answered. Rebekah would become Isaac’s bride! This account teaches us powerful truths about excellence.

### Excellence in Little Things

The test proposed by Abraham’s servant involved drawing water. On the surface, it was no big deal. No

doubt, Rebekah went to the well and drew water nearly every day. But this one day, she took a menial task and raised it up a notch. Booker T. Washington once said, "Excellence is to do a common thing in an uncommon way." Peters and Austin (1985) wrote that in business excellence is decided by the way a secretary answers the phone, by the way the clerk handles your package, by the way some people—who may seem unimportant in the whole scheme of the company—treat you as a customer. Peters implies that excellence in small things creates excellence for the whole company.

If you are diligent with the way you spend your minutes at work, your supervisor will more than likely trust you with greater responsibility. If you are honest with your pennies, nickels and dimes, you will never steal fives, tens, and twenties.

During a recent visit to London, England, I was surprised by the large number of Rolls-Royce cars on the streets. People in my part of the world do not drive such vehicles. So when I got back home to the United States, I researched the price of such luxury cars. I found a 2006 Rolls-Royce Phantom with a retail price of \$328,750. The payments would be \$5,355 a month. What makes the car so expensive? Several things:

- It takes over 800 man-hours to make the body of a Phantom VI.
- The Rolls-Royce radiator grille is made entirely by hand and eye; no measuring instruments are used.
- Every Rolls-Royce engine is completely hand built. It takes one person one day to make a Rolls-Royce radiator, and then five hours are spent polishing it.

The makers of the Rolls-Royce give fanatical attention to the "little" things. As a result, 60 percent of all Rolls-Royce cars ever built are still on the road today. Without attention given to the little things, the big things eventually cease to matter.

## Excellence Demands Effort and Sacrifice

Now let us return to the example of Rebekah. Surely, other ladies were at the well drawing water for their own needs, so Rebekah probably had to wait her turn. Do you remember how eager she was to help? Excellence demands effort and sacrifice; it does not come easily. Abraham's servant asked Rebekah for "a little water" (v. 17). She could have gotten by with giving only that, a little. However, Rebekah was not content just to do something. She was committed to excellence. She gave more than was asked of her. Then, as soon as she agreed and began to serve, a spiritual principle kicked in. She received more than she had expected.

Nobody excels by accident. One has to desire excellence enough to make the necessary sacrifices. A story is told of ancient Greek sculptors who used to tear the fingernails off their thumbs to detect with their flesh even a minute rough spot on their works. If any flaw could be discovered even by this exaggerated process, the marble was not smooth enough.

More valuable than the works of these sculptors was Paul's personal sacrifice for the cause of Christ. He lists a number of the things he endured for Jesus:

Great endurance; troubles, hardships and distresses; beatings, imprisonments and riots; hard work, sleepless nights and hunger. . . . Through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything. (2 Corinthians 6:4–10)

Consider, also, the price Moses paid to be Israel's great deliverer. Look at Job, Noah, Peter, and the men and women of Hebrews 11—the great Hall of Fame of Faith. What would these people have accomplished if they had not made personal sacrifices?

## Integrity and Excellence

### *Objective 3:*

*Show the relationship between integrity and excellence.*

### What Is Integrity

The word *integrity* derives from a Latin term meaning “whole” or “complete.” Having integrity means that we have no areas in our lives that are lacking in moral soundness, that our hearts are not divided. Integrity is demonstrated by doing the right thing even when no one is looking.

We learn integrity from the Bible, for the Bible is the handbook for integrity. God's Word is forever settled in heaven. People of all cultures can find the same truths because the Bible is consistently consistent. The manifestation of integrity in our lives comes from knowing God's expectations of us as His people, from self-discipline, from deep trust in God's faithfulness, from the work of God's Spirit in our lives, and from a decision to be relentlessly honest in all situations.

### Personal Integrity

A person of integrity does not have a Sunday face that is directly opposite his or her weekday face, carrying on the work of the Lord on one hand and the work of the devil on the other. Integrity speaks of a singleness of purpose, will, and heart. Proverbs 10:9 says, “The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.” One of the benefits of walking in integrity is confidence.

The late Babe Zaharias was known as a person of integrity. Zaharias was a champion amateur golfer in the 1932 Olympics and later became a professional golfer. On one occasion she penalized herself two strokes when she accidentally played the wrong ball. “Why did you do it?” asked a friend. “No one saw you. No one would have known the difference.” “I would have known,” replied Babe Zaharias. Babe demonstrated integrity. She was true both in public and in private (Cohen 1998, 11).

Personal integrity also includes adherence to a set of values, which incorporates honesty and freedom from deception. It means doing the right thing at the right time for the right reasons.

Leonard Roberts, named Retailer of the Year by *Brandweek* magazine says, "You cannot fake it. You must stand up for what is right regardless. You cannot maintain your integrity 90 percent and be a leader. It's got to be 100 percent" (Cohen 1998, ¶18). Written on a poster entitled *The Courage of Integrity* are the words, "The highest courage is to dare to be yourself in the face of adversity. Choosing right over wrong, ethics over convenience, and truth over popularity . . . these are the choices that measure your life. Travel the path of integrity without looking back, for there is never a wrong time to do the right thing."

Are you a person of integrity? If you are serious about moving to excellence, then regularly ask yourself these questions:

- Have I been completely honest today?
- Have I met my financial obligations?
- Have I acted in an appropriate way toward members of the opposite sex?
- Have both my private and public life been above reproach?
- Have I fulfilled my commitments without compromise and with a willing spirit?
- Have I met with the Lord today?
- Have I indulged in unwholesome thoughts or sexual images, or fostered uncharitable feelings toward others?
- Have I conducted a motive check recently?
- Have I spent sufficient time with my family or friends?
- Have I harbored unconfessed sin or unforgiven hurts?

## Planning for Excellence

### *Objective 4:*

*Show why planning is vital for excellence.*

So excellence comes by design, not by accident. And planning is your roadmap to excellence. Following are some tips for personal planning.

### Set Goals

Some people are goal oriented. Goals can certainly serve to motivate us. Researcher George Barna notes the following about Christians in the United States: “While three out of five Christian adults claim to have a deep commitment to the Christian faith, they are not involved in any intentional effort to grow spiritually” (Hammett, under “Discipleship Models”). Only four out of ten church members claim to have set personal spiritual goals for themselves. Only two out of ten believers who are serious about their spiritual development have defined any specific spiritual goals. On top of that, the majority of believers who have life goals generally have no clue on how to reach them (Hammett, under “Discipleship Models”).

Ask yourself, what do you hope to attain for Christ during your lifetime? Where do you hope to be in the Lord five years from now? Ten years? How do you plan on reaching those goals? What tools will it take? What changes, if any, will you have to make in your daily routine? Write your thoughts. A University of California, Los Angeles, study showed that while only 5 percent of people ever write down their goals, those who did achieved 80 percent of their goals.

Setting goals is necessary to achieving excellence. Jesus, the most excellent of all examples, had very specific goals: to go to Jerusalem, to die on the Cross for the world's sins, and to be resurrected to life. Jesus came to save the lost. And He accomplished this goal excellently.

Maybe you are considering a career in the ministry. As worthy as that goal is, one does not automatically attain the goal. Rather it is wise to break the process down into bite-size chunks. One must commit to getting good grades in school, commit to serving the Lord, set aside time for daily spiritual disciplines, and be active in outreach and ministry. Each of these steps can be further broken down into manageable bits. Then, you can mark each step off the list of goals as you complete it.

### Determine to Grow

Are you acquainted with the medical term achondroplasia? It is the most common form of dwarfism. Achondroplasia affects about one in every 25,000 children. Men who are affected grow to an average height of 4 feet 3 inches while females grow to an average of 4 feet. The average height for an adult male in the United States is 5 feet 9 inches while the average female is 5 feet 5 inches (National Center for Health Statistics). These figures can vary from one culture to the next.

Just as God created our physical bodies to grow, He expects our spiritual lives to grow as well. As a pastor, it has been my joy to know people who have experienced spiritual growth up into their seventies, eighties, and nineties. The apostle Paul encourages such growth. In Ephesians 4:13, he urges the church to “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Second Peter 3:18 adds that we are to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” Here, the word *grow* actually suggests “keep on growing.” It is a command, requiring full obedience.

Several years ago I created as Spiritual Growth Chart, which defines the various stages of Christian growth. See where you are on this chart.

## Spiritual Growth Chart

<u>New Convert</u>	<u>A Babe in Christ</u>	<u>Growth Begins to Take Form</u>	<u>Mature in Faith</u>	<u>Discipler</u>
<p>Byrs a Bible</p> <p>Begins to Pray</p> <p>No Spiritual roots</p> <p>Takes money to church</p> <p>Develops an appetite</p> <p>Has not yet heard of the Holy Spirit</p> <p>Thinks fruit is an apple</p> <p>Begins to attend church</p> <p>Faith is born</p> <p>Repents</p> <p>Confesses sin</p> <p>Forms new habits</p> <p>Friends begin to notice a difference</p> <p>Baptized in water</p>	<p>Has a Bible</p> <p>Prays in times of crisis</p> <p>Roots start</p> <p>Gives offering</p> <p>"Milk" diet</p> <p>Has heard of the Spirit</p> <p>Fruit</p> <p>Attends church if convenient</p> <p>Faith is small</p> <p>Double minded</p> <p>Weak conscience</p> <p>Tossed by every wind of doctrine</p> <p>Easily offended</p> <p>Prone to falling</p>	<p>Reads Bible</p> <p>Prays daily</p> <p>Roots take hold</p> <p>Begins to tithe</p> <p>Starts to feed self</p> <p>Filled with the Spirit</p> <p>Starts to bear fruit</p> <p>Faithful to church</p> <p>Faith has substance</p> <p>Knows right from wrong</p> <p>Establishes new friends</p>	<p>Knows the Bible</p> <p>Prayer warrior</p> <p>Roots are down</p> <p>Tithes and offerings</p> <p>Eats "solid food"</p> <p>Prays in the Spirit</p> <p>Mature fruit</p> <p>Loves church</p> <p>Faith is strong</p> <p>Talks easily about matters of faith</p> <p>Good reputation</p> <p>Fruit of the Spirit</p> <p>Exhibits personal holiness</p> <p>Slow to take offense</p> <p>Thankful</p>	<p>Teaches the Bible</p> <p>Sought out for prayer</p> <p>Roots are strong</p> <p>Sacrifices financially</p> <p>Able to feed others</p> <p>Walks in the Spirit</p> <p>30,60,100-fold fruit</p> <p>Influencer</p> <p>Faith is bold</p> <p>Serves</p> <p>Knows spiritual gift</p> <p>Spiritual warfare</p> <p>Seeks to know Christ better</p> <p>Stable</p>

As you can see, growth in Christ is progressive, and excellence is intentional. Read Hebrews 5:12–14,

Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

The writer of Hebrews was pointing out a fault in the lives of his readers. He was exposing their lack of spiritual development and was holding them responsible for this deficiency.

Surely, the Lord knows right where we are and where we ought to be in Him. Determine that you will never stop growing.

### Find a Mentor

A mentor is a trustworthy counselor or guide. Timothy's mentor was Paul. Elisha had Elijah. The twelve disciples had Jesus. Solomon had David. Today, we also need somebody who is older in the Lord to help guide us and hold us accountable. Everybody needs a coach. Everybody needs a model. A godly mentor can fill both needs. Proverbs 1:7 says, "Fools despise wisdom and discipline." "But many advisers make victory sure" (Proverbs 11:14).

### See As God Sees

Let us go back to the time when Jesus called Peter to be His disciple. Jesus said, "'You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas' (which, when translated, is Peter)" (John 1:42). We find here five of the most hope-filled words in all literature: "You are . . . You will be." Peter was intensely human; he was impetuous, fickle, bold, and loyal. He could be wonderful in his goodness or terrible in his badness. Nonetheless, Jesus affirmed him. Those who knew Peter must have doubted that he would ever be

anything different than what he had always been. They may have seen no room for the growth Jesus predicted.

But one day everything changed. Jesus asked Peter, “‘Who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it’” (Matthew 16:15–18).

Not long after this, at Pentecost, Peter stood firm and preached the gospel to a potentially antagonistic crowd. Three thousand people were converted. Thus, Peter went from being a spiritual dwarf to a spiritual giant because Jesus had seen him for not only what he was, but for what he could become. Obviously, there was more to Peter than he had ever dreamed about. The same holds true for you!

Judges 6 shares a similar account. Israel was being bullied by the people of Midian. To make matters worse, Midian had an army that was too large to count. The situation appeared hopeless. Judges 6:6 records, “Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help.” As Israel cried, God in heaven heard. How did He answer? He called on a simple, ordinary man named Gideon. But when the angel of the Lord approached Gideon, the angel saluted him and said, “‘The Lord is with you, mighty warrior’” (v. 12).

Gideon had been hiding at that very moment. He was trying to keep what little grain Israel had left from being stolen by the enemy. Gideon’s reply to the angel showed his insecurity. He declared that he was of the smallest tribe in all of Israel and the least in his family. Instead of seeing himself as God saw him—a mighty warrior—Gideon stressed his shortcomings and inadequacies. But the angel did not give up. He said that Gideon would be a great deliverer for Israel, and by his hand the enemy would be destroyed. The angel was right. With the help of the Lord, Gideon defeated the army of Midian in one night.

When Gideon saw himself as God saw him, he became a different person. He became a mighty warrior!

Gideon is an excellent example of how God can use the least among us. And for that, Gideon is listed in Hebrews 11 as a member of the hall of fame of faith.

When the Christian gets God's perspective, his or her daily living becomes a succession of victories. God creates a climate of excellence. So, see yourself as God sees you—living victoriously, becoming like Christ, doing faithful service, loving those around you, winning other to Jesus, and achieving goals.

### Conclusion

A story is told of three women who lived on a Louisiana bayou. Every day they complained, "We've got it so bad living here on this here old smelly bayou. There ain't no opportunities. Others are living in the city when they have unlimited opportunities. Us? We ain't got nothing." Then, one day, a lady from down the road came to visit the three woe-begotten souls. After listening to their sad laments, she told them, "Nonsense! You want opportunity? You've got opportunity! You live on the bayou. The bayou leads to the river. The river leads to the gulf. The gulf leads to the ocean. You can go anywhere you want from right here where you are!"

Opportunity is present. You can go anywhere you want from right here. Why not leave the maddening throng behind and go for excellence?

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## SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

- Mediocrity is*
  - doing the best you can always.*
  - doing nothing at all.*
  - caring little for improvement.*
- Excellence is*
  - doing enough to get by.*
  - going above and beyond the expected.*
  - not even trying because you know you will fail.*
- In Genesis 24, Rebekah showed very little initiative when she met Abraham's servant.*
  - True*
  - False*
- Scriptural examples of excellence include all of the following except*
  - Gideon.*
  - Lot.*
  - Apostle Paul.*
- Excellence demands sacrifice.*
  - True*
  - False*
- Integrity comes from a root word that means*
  - good.*
  - divided.*
  - intact.*
- Proverbs 10:9 says, "The man of integrity walks \_\_\_\_."*
  - securely*
  - happily*
  - proudly*
- Planning is important because it*
  - helps one develop mental powers.*
  - so often impresses others.*
  - is a roadmap to success.*

9. *Most Christians set life goals.*
- a) *True*
  - b) *False*
10. *Two characteristics of a discipler are he or she \_\_\_\_\_.*
- a) *seeks to know Christ better; is sought out for prayer*
  - b) *prays in times of crisis; is easily offended*
  - c) *buys a Bible; forms new habits.*

## ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: If you answer a study question incorrectly, you can find the objective it was drawn from by looking at the references in parentheses.

1. c (13.1)
2. b (13.1)
3. b (13.2)
4. b (13.2)
5. a (13.2)
6. c (13.3)
7. a (13.3)
8. c (13.4)
9. b (13.4)
10. a (13.4)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS LESSON

Michael Jackson has been a pastor since 1970 and is currently serving as the senior pastor of New Life Assembly of God, Janesville, Wisconsin, since November 1999. During this time, New Life Assembly has seen hundreds of people accept Jesus Christ. The church has also planted four new churches. Mike has traveled across America and Eastern Europe as a Bible speaker. He has also published articles in journals, magazines, and newspapers. *Charisma* magazine honored Pastor Mike as one of the “Outstanding Pastors in America” in 1987. Jackson is married to his college sweetheart, Marilyn. They have two daughters and four grandchildren.



## Facing Issues

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Ongoing discipleship is vital for spiritual health and usefulness in the Kingdom of God. "Facing Issues" is the second of three courses belonging to Global University's 21st Century Discipleship series. It contains practical lessons that will help you identify and deal biblically with challenges to experiencing the joy and excitement of a relationship with Christ. Each lesson was written by an active pastor, Bible teacher, missionary, or Christian writer. If you are serious about spiritual growth and fruitfulness, this course is for you.

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08/08 250 3C  
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978-0-7617-1304-3



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