



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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5th Sunday after Pentecost

A sermon by Rev. Brent J. Eelman

The Pursuit of Excellence

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written,

'The one who had much did not have too much,
and the one who had little did not have too little.'

"Excellence." How many of us would describe that as our pursuit in life? Are we seeking excellence or are we happy with the ordinary, the mundane, the adequate, and the mediocre? "Excellence." Is it a worthy pursuit? I believe that most of us would say, "Yes, it is." We admire excellence in any number of things.

- The musician appreciates excellence in an instrument, or in the ability of someone to play it.
- A carpenter pursues excellence in building and requires high quality tools to pursue his craft.
- A teacher will work hard to achieve excellence in the classroom, and she will expect the same effort from her students.

Recently, while in a bookstore, I made a note of the number of books and magazines that are committed to excellence in different areas of activity.

- There are many that rank colleges according to their excellence.
- There are periodicals and books devoted to the pursuit of excellence in all fields of activity, from exercise to music, from cooking to landscaping.
- There is a magazine entitled *Excellence*. It is for owners and "wannabe" owners of Porsche automobiles.
- *Executive Excellence* is for the business person who desires to achieve excellence in the office place.
- *Par Excellence* is not a golfing magazine. It is for women in the business world.

We get the picture: we want excellence and quality in many areas of life: most often in the things that we own and the work that we do.

But there is another type of excellence to pursue. This is excellence in the less tangible things of life: **Spiritual excellence.** Do we pursue excellence in discipleship or are we spiritual slackers? The apostle Paul exhorted the Corinthians: "Excel in all things." He wanted them to pursue spiritual excellence.... And God expects the same from us. There are five components to excellence in discipleship: 1. Prayer and spiritual discipline. 2. Intellectual rigor. 3. Moral courage. 4. Grace 5. Generosity. Let's examine these five things individually.

1. **Prayer and spiritual discipline.** The lifeline of Christian faith is prayer. When one reads the story of Jesus in the Gospels she discovers that Jesus taught a great deal about prayer. Not only did he teach about prayer, he lived it. His ministry began with 40 days of prayer in the wilderness and it ended with a prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. We read in the gospels that Jesus would often retreat to pray and be alone with God. Prayer is the discipline of making time in your day and in your life for God.

We make time for exercise. We make time for dinner. We make time for entertainment. We make time for family and friends. Spiritual excellence requires that we make time to be alone with God; to share with God those things that are closest to our being. This is the nature of loving God. One who loves wants to be alone and intimate with the one whom she loves. Prayer is intimacy with God and it is the foundation of spiritual excellence. The language of prayer is "love language."

2. **Intellectual rigor.** This may surprise you, perhaps not. We need to free ourselves from the notion that faith is blind, blissful fealty. Faith, by its very nature, seeks to understand God better and consequently it is an intellectual journey. Faith struggles with the hard issues of the day. Faith studies the world that God created, to know it better so as to understand the mind and genius of God, (this is science.) God gave us minds and the ability to think and to reason. This is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. Christ said that we are to learn to love God with our whole being and that includes our intellect.

Modern disciples of Christ need to think! We need to abandon the notion that we leave our brains at the door when we enter the church!

Think about it: scriptures say nothing about email, about computers, about weapons of mass destruction, about atomic power, about energy crises, about global warming, about stem cell research, about macro-economics, or about psychological cognition. Yet these are the issues with which we must wrestle in our modern age. It takes intellectual rigor to understand our modern world in terms the biblical message. Have we forgotten that most of the great universities in the world were founded by Christians so that they could better understand the world that God created and Christ redeemed.

3. **Intellectual pursuit without moral courage is empty.** Moral courage is the willingness to stand up for your convictions. Often that means paying a price. It might mean taking a position that is unpopular. One of the common characteristics of the saints is moral courage... from Joan of Arc, to Mother Theresa; from Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Albert Schweitzer. These were women and men who had the courage of their convictions.

The 19th century poet James Russell Lowell, alluded to the importance of moral courage in the life of our nation in his poem "The Present Crisis." It was written about the annexation of Texas as a slave state. This was a moral outrage. In response, Lowell penned the words:

*Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side;
Some great cause, some great decision, offering each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever, 'twixt that darkness and that light.*

Excellence in discipleship requires moral courage.

4. **Spiritual excellence is characterized by grace.**

- Grace is the foundation of the Christian life.
- Grace is the recognition that we are created by God, and not God ourselves.
- Grace is the recognition that we are sinners and stand in need of forgiveness and thus we need to be forgiving of others.
- Grace is the recognition that we just may not be right all the time and that we need to make room for change in our lives and the lives of others.
- Grace is the recognition that we do not deserve the love of God or the promise of salvation, but that it is given to us, in spite of our shortcomings.
- Grace is an attitude that pervades the life of spiritual excellence.
- Grace forgives, forbears and eschews self-righteousness.

Consider the events that occurred in Charleston South Carolina during the past ten days. What was the reaction of the Christian community to the racist murders of nine women and men who were gathered together for Bible study and prayer? It was not rioting. It was not retribution or getting back. It was gracious forgiveness. There is an old folk song that asks the question, "Will the circle be unbroken?" If anything will break the destructive cycle of violence and hate that characterizes much of life, it will be the grace of God. It will be women and men who have the moral courage to embody God's grace in their own lives and in the face of evil. Never doubt the power of grace.

5. **Last is Generosity.** Generosity is rooted in a spirit of thankfulness for what God and others have given to us. The surest sign of gratitude is the willingness to share. Generosity is the sure sign of the spiritually mature heart. The late Karl Menninger, (a Presbyterian elder and founder of the Menninger Psychiatric Clinic), was once asked what was the best indicator of mental health. He replied: "Generosity".

Generosity is the gift of letting go of something that is important to us... sharing it with others. It is living life with our hands open, rather than grasping, clutching, and holding tight.

Five qualities that contribute to spiritual excellence: 1. Prayer and spiritual discipline. 2. Intellectual rigor. 3. Moral courage. 4. Grace. 5. Generosity. The apostle Paul exhorts us to excel in all things. Most of us excel in our work and in other areas. Can we strive for excellence in our discipleship? Can we commit ourselves to the disciplines of spiritual excellence? This is the challenge of Christ's command to be a disciple and it is the Good News. Amen.