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THE CHALLENGE TO EXCELLENCE

. . . that you may be able to discern what is best . . .

Philippians 1:10 NIV

Run in such a way that you may win.

1 Corinthians 9:24 NASB

I do not run like someone running aimlessly . . .

1 Corinthians 9:26 NIV

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which
God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:14 NIV

Whoever I am or whatever I am doing,
some kind of excellence is within my reach.

John W. Gardner

The words of the ancient Oath of Hippocrates echoed through the halls of Cornell University as the medical class of 1941 recited their commitment to save human lives: “I will follow that method of treatment which, according to my ability and judgment, I consider for the benefit of my patients, and abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous.”

Outwardly one young physician in the class seemed no different from the other bright students. Each one who wore

the olive-green hood over their black cap and gown, signifying the medical degree, had a look of joy coupled with determination—joy in having completed the grueling years of preparation and determination to make that training serve themselves and others. But this young man had a different perspective from most; he believed in Jesus Christ as his Lord and intended to demonstrate his faith in his medical practice.

By 1953 he and a neurosurgeon combined their knowledge to develop a revolutionary procedure. They discovered how to drain water from the brain to prevent a condition that killed 90 percent of its victims before they were two years old. Babies once doomed to death could now live to become healthy children.

Over the next two decades this surgeon single-mindedly pursued his dream to establish the country's first neonatal intensive surgical-care unit and a total-care pediatric facility. In 1974, his pursuit of excellence led him to tackle an operation other doctors declared impossible. He separated the Rodriguez Siamese-twin girls, whose internal connections were multiple and complex. The day of that operation began, as always, with prayer and Bible reading. "A verse in Psalms, which said the Lord will support the righteous, became my help in time of need," the surgeon later told reporters. "Claiming the righteousness of Jesus Christ, I said, 'We're going to win!' And we did."

Love characterized the surgeon's practice. He was known for his compassionate counseling to parents whose children were terminally ill. Most of all he loved children, including the deformed and unlovely ones. He could see beyond their brokenness to their unique spirits and the possibility of what they could become. But his dreams of healing hopelessly ill

babies broke apart when the Supreme Court legalized abortion in 1973.

He called physicians back to the excellent way, the way espoused in the Hippocratic oath he had taken in 1941: “I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such counsel; furthermore, I will not give to a woman an instrument to produce an abortion.”²

This pediatric surgeon, whom you may recognize as C. Everett Koop, knew he was making abortion advocates his bitter enemies. But he felt God calling him to take this stand.

In the fall of 1981, President Ronald Reagan recognized Koop’s dedication to excellent medical care when he nominated him to be Surgeon General for the United States. The surgeon’s enemies bitterly opposed the nomination for nine long months.

But C. Everett Koop had always been a man of excellent character, so nothing in his past prevented his appointment to become surgeon general.

When the Senate confirmation hearings were finally held in November of 1981, testimony by twelve witnesses on his behalf made Koop’s day on Capitol Hill a victory march.

In his book, *The Right to Live: The Right to Die*, Dr. Koop states, “Once there is the union of sperm and egg, and the twenty-three chromosomes of each are brought together. . . . That one cell with its forty-six chromosomes has all the DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), the whole genetic code, and will, if not interrupted, make a human being just like you, with the potential for God-consciousness.”³ He asks a crucial question: “At what minute can one consider life to be worthless and the next

minute consider the same life to be precious?”⁴

Later in his book, Dr. Koop quotes these words from a secular conference on abortion: “We can find no point in time between the union of sperm and egg and the birth of an infant at which point we can say this is not a human life.”⁵

The New York Times reported Dr. Koop’s death on February 25, 2013, in an article by Holcomb B. Noble titled, “C. Everett Koop, Forceful U.S. Surgeon General, Dies at 96.” Dr. C. Everett Koop was totally committed to excellence.

Over my desk I have a poster of an Olympic runner winning a race. Underneath the victorious runner are the words of Paul the apostle: “Run in such a way that you may win” (1 Cor. 9:24 NASB). Average running rarely wins. Jesus challenged His followers to let their lights shine in such a way that their works would be seen and God would be glorified (Matt. 5:16). Mediocre

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shining will not penetrate the world around us. It was said of Paul and Barnabas that “they spoke so effectively that a great number . . . believed” (Acts 14:1 NIV). Passionless speaking convinces no one.

The dictionary defines excellence as “superior, above the standard.” When we speak of excellence, we speak of that which is choice, first rate, remarkably good!

A major problem in the pursuit of excellence is a lack of standards or confusion about what the standards are—and where they originate.

John W. Gardner reminds us,

Standards are contagious. They spread throughout an organization, a group or a society. If an organization or group cherishes high standards, the behavior of individuals who enter it is inevitably influenced. Similarly, if slovenliness infects a society, it is not easy for any member of that society to remain uninfluenced in his own behavior. With that grim fact in mind, one is bound to look with apprehension on many segments of our national life in which slovenliness has attacked like dry rot, eating away the solid timber.⁶

Just as one quality person motivates others to strive for excellence, so mediocrity spreads like a plague. George Elliot, speaking of Amos Barton, said, “It was not in his nature to be superlative in anything; unless, indeed, he was superlatively meddling, the quintessential extract of mediocrity.”⁷

The dictionary defines mediocrity as “ordinary . . . neither good nor bad; barely adequate . . . poor; inferior.”⁸ Mediocrity is like playing five strings on a ten-stringed instrument. It is typing with five fingers and one eye rather than ten fingers and two eyes. It’s a person with eagle talent thrashing his wings like a prairie chicken and flying no more than three feet off the ground. It is the individual with jet power doing push-cart work. Mediocrity is crawling on hands and knees when we

were created to stand, walk, run, and mount up like an eagle and fly. Dare I say that scores of workers are mediocre? Many church leaders don't earn their salaries, and hundreds of teachers are painfully boring.

Speaking of standards, contemporary artist Charles Close said, "Art is a profession, without a measuring system. There is no way to tell if what I am doing is good . . . so what is quality? I don't know the answer."⁹

Psalm 8:1 states the source of all excellence. "O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth, who have set Your glory above the heavens!" According to the psalmist, the ultimate standard of excellence is found in God's name. His name represents all that God is. His name is the standard for excellence in heaven and here on earth.

God is holy, which means He is without parallel. He is merciful, almighty, just, unchanging, loving, and eternal. Not only is God excellent in His person, but He is excellent in His works (Ps. 19:1), and ways (2 Sam. 22:31), and will (Rom. 12:2).

The National Bureau of Standards in Washington, DC, holds many standards of measurement, which other measurements must match throughout the nation. Just

so, God's name, and a desire for excellence, contrary to the

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I like the way David the shepherd boy spoke of God's ways. "As for God, His way is perfect," David said. "And He makes my way perfect" (2 Sam. 22:31, 33). God's ways are not only perfect (complete), but He makes our way like His way.

Speaking of perfection is not speaking of perfectionism, which is impossible in this life. Rather, the challenge is to be and to do the best we are capable of being and doing.

God enables us to be like Him in spite of our sinfulness that leads us to tarnish God's image or to adopt the carnal desire for money, success, and prestige. The Israelites failed God in the wilderness, but we must not fail Him by turning to materialism, sex, alcohol, and drugs. God calls us to Himself and promises His power to enable us to be like Him.

God calls us to be 100 percent Christians. His resources can make us willing to stand with our friends and neighbors against the evils of our day. Ours need not be the day of the placid pulpit and the comfortable pew.

We must realize that our generation, which lauds the excellence of its scientific accomplishments, perceives God—and the validity of His existence—by our actions. One basis of our judgment before God is the quality of how we live: "The fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is" (1 Cor. 3:13).

God calls us to give our all. Excellence, by definition, means "the finest." It takes hard work and constant commitment, but we can excel. Many Christians seem to see how little they can

Many Christians seem to see how little they can do and still remain God's servants. Yet we can learn from the dedication of the Old Testament Israelites who gave the Lord the firstfruits of their crops and the best of their flocks.

do and still remain God's servants, measuring their Christianity in teaspoonfuls of Bible reading, moments of prayer, occasional Sunday service, old suits or dresses for the missionaries, and just a little of their income for God's work. Yet we can learn from the dedication of the Old Testament Israelites who gave the Lord

the firstfruits of their crops and the best of their flocks, which meant a lamb "without blemish" (Ex. 12:5).

David committed the sin of numbering the Hebrew people. The penalty was severe. His only hope of restoration was to make a sacrifice to show his repentance. One faithful citizen, named Ornan, offered David all he needed for his sacrifice—the oxen, the wood, and the wheat for a grain offering. It would have made David's work quite easy. But David refused the generous offer by saying, "I will not take what is yours for the LORD, nor offer burnt offerings with that which costs me nothing" (1 Chron. 21:24). Excellence is never cheap. It's costly. Constant care, serious preparation, and continual application are required. Excellence requires desire plus discipline plus determination.

I began my own pursuit of excellence during my student

days at the Moody Bible Institute. I sat under the teaching of quality professors. My compassion for a sinful world was kindled by some of this century's heroes of the faith who visited our campus. We were challenged to be our best and to give our best.

I encountered serious roadblocks along the way. During my senior year, the doctors discovered I had cancer. I underwent two immediate operation at Chicago's Swedish Covenant Hospital, followed by a series of radiation treatments. I faced the prospect of not living through that year. I walked through the valley of death.

But God in His mercy intervened and spared my life. Fellow students rallied to my side. With their prayers and help, I was able to complete the school year with honors. To me, graduation was my commissioning to the pursuit of excellence, which I have tried to follow to this day.

When I became president of Moody Bible Institute in 1971, I made the pursuit of excellence the theme of our administration. I placed on the front of my desk, where it could be seen easily, a bronze plaque with the word *Excellence* inscribed on it. I gave each member of my managerial staff a picture of Dwight L. Moody with *Excellence* written across it.

I knew that just saying, "We are committed to excellence" was not enough. So I searched the Scriptures for the qualities that lead to excellence. I found nine marks of Christian excellence: faith, character, action, single-mindedness, love, suffering, prayer, wisdom, and staying power. These marks can be seen throughout the Bible, particularly in Matthew

5, Galatians 5, and James 3:17–18. These qualities blended together, give us a portrait of what God is like. Since God is excellent, these same characteristics mark out what we ought to pursue. Chapters 2 through 10 will examine each of these marks of excellence and tell how to achieve them.

I also studied the lives of quality people. They displayed these same traits, as you will see particularly in chapters 11, 12, and 13. Finally, I questioned Christian educators and leaders and discovered a consensus among them. Each felt that excellence is impossible apart from a God-like character.

I began this chapter with a quotation from John W. Gardner: “Whoever I am or whatever I am doing, some kind of excellence is within my reach.” The pursuit of excellence is not just for a privileged few, like C. Everett Koop. Nor is excellence reserved for the elite or genius. It is for you—whoever you are, wherever you are, whatever you do.

Today many people feel the roles of wife and mother are mediocre and mundane. I fervently reject this attitude. My wife excels as a mother and wife. For years she has taken time to listen to our children’s fears and feelings of inadequacy, as well as to their dreams. She has always been there to sympathize, to offer an encouraging word at the right time, to make the children feel comfortable with who they are and what they have done—and what they hope to achieve. It is she, more than I, who set their feet on the road to do God’s will. Both of us have given our best to be with them each step of their journey.

You do not have to be the Surgeon General or an outstanding business person or a well-known writer to achieve excellence. God knows many people who have achieved excellence

that you and I have never heard about. It is the quality of what you are and do that counts. Join me in this adventure to make spiritual excellence part of your life. I promise that if you do, it will change you—and the world around you.