

Deciding To Excel In Everything
II Corinthians 8:1-7, 11-12

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James Russell Lowell wrote:

*“Life is a leaf of paper white
Whereon each of us may write
A line or two, and then comes night.
Greatly Begin! Though you have time
but for a line, be that sublime -
Not failure, but low aim is crime.”*

When the apostle Paul asks the Corinthians to help the mother Church of Jerusalem he makes his appeal on the foundation of excellence. *“Just as you excel in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for one another — see that you also excel in the grace of giving.”* I would like to talk about striving for excellence for a few moments today.

What I love most about this congregation is your commitment to the best. Whether we are talking about buildings or business, ministry or missions, community or fellowship, there is an abiding principle throughout this congregation that nothing less than the best will do. I love that about you. Today, on this commitment Sunday, I simply ask you again, why not excel? Why not continue to excel in everything? Why not? Why not the best? Why not?

You have a folder in your bulletin. I want you to take it and then take out the tab that says “Prayer.” Will you simply walk with me through this folder that you have in your presence this morning? I want you to look at it for just a moment.

WHEN IT COMES TO PRAYER, WHY NOT THE BEST?

In a baseball game the score was tied two to two, with two outs in the bottom of the 9th inning. When the batter stepped to the plate, he made a sign of the cross on home plate with his bat. Yogi Berra, that heroic catcher for the New York Yankees, called time out. Yogi took his glove, wiped the plate clean and said to the batter, “Why don’t we just let God watch this game?”

If life were just a game, we could just let God watch it. Life is more than a game. It is the real thing. Never morning lasts to evening but hearts break and trouble comes. Struggles are a part of people’s lives and because we have no where else to go, we are called to be a people of deep, deep prayer. Prayer must permeate everything we do, say, think, and every action that we take. It is at the core of who we are as a community of faith.

Monday after Monday our pastoral staff prays over the prayer requests received

from the congregation on Sunday. The names change but the concerns are the same—someone's sick and needs healing, someone's hurting and needs helping, someone's struggling and needs strength from the Lord to carry on. Where can you go with needs like that except to the Lord?

I read the newspapers and recognize that we move a little closer each day to war with Iraq. Where can we go with a concern like that but to the Lord? When I become conscious that children by the thousands are orphaned and abandoned around this world of ours through no fault of their own and my heart is deeply sorrowful, where can I go but to the Lord in prayer? Prayer is at the heart of who we are and it must permeate everything that we think, all that we do, and all that we believe. More than anything else, I want us to be known as a praying people. Surely that is what the world expects from us.

From the last two Septembers, if we didn't learn anything else, we ought to know that the world still expects the Church to be a "place of prayer for all people." How else can you explain this Sanctuary being packed full, not only on the event of September 11th, but on the first year anniversary of it, as well? Will we convince people outside the Church that we inside the Church believe in prayer?

How can we take that biblical mandate and make it effective in our day and time? We can let prayer determine every action that we take. Let us devote ourselves to the will of God. Let every prayer request that is made in this congregation have the honor of being remembered. We can keep our word, we really can.

One of the greatest promises that you can make to somebody else is that "I will remember you in my prayers." I say today, my friends, to myself and to you, "Have I kept my word? Have I prayed over the list of people who are in our bulletin every Sunday? Have I prayed over the children who are presented at this altar for baptism? Have I remembered those who come for confirmation? Have I remembered the new members who have come among us?" Praying is not just the role of the pastor and the staff. It is the role of the people. Let us unite today in a powerful movement of PRAYER. Will you commit yourself to be a praying person in the months and year that is to come? When it comes to prayer, why not the best?

WHEN IT COMES TO WORSHIP, WHY NOT THE BEST?

Will you pull that tab that says "Presence"?

A mother made her way up the stairs on Sunday morning to awaken a family member for church. "Get up, it's time to go to church," said the mother and a sleepy family member pulled the cover over his head and said, "I don't think I am going to church today." The mother said, "You are going to church today and I give you three good reasons why. One, it's good for you. Two, it's a habit. We always go. Three, you are the pastor; you are expected to be there on Sunday morning."

If worship were just a matter of obligation, I guess there would be days and times

when all of us would just forget it. Worship is not an obligation. Worship is adoration. It is giving thanks and praise to almighty God.

How was it Isaac Watts put it?

*“I’ll praise my maker while I’ve breath,
And when my eyes shall close in death,
Praise shall employ my nobler powers.
My days of praise shall ne’er be past,
While life and thought and being last,
Or immortality endures.”*

Worship is a meeting place with God. The criteria of our worship is whether or not people have made a connection with the Almighty. When Franklin Roosevelt was president, he used to attend a particular church in Washington. The members of that church learned to deal with visitors. One Friday afternoon the pastor got a call from someone in town who said, “We would like to know if the President is expected to be in worship this coming Sunday.” The pastor kindly replied, “Whether or not the President is going to be here this Sunday, I am not sure, but I am sure that God is going to be here and we think that is a reason for you to attend.” Worship is a meeting place with God.

About a year ago, we made a covenant with you that we would provide multiple times and types of worship so that there would be no excuse for anyone in the fellowship of this congregation not to have an opportunity to be in worship every week. How are you doing?

Over the last year how has it been—ten Sundays, twenty Sundays, forty Sundays, fifty Sundays? Have you been faithful meeting God at the place of worship? I renew with you that covenant today. We will continue to offer multiple times and types of worship. I make that commitment to you. I need another hundred people to make Saturday night really viable. It’s going well, but I need another hundred. Maybe you would be one of those persons.

Some of you talk about contemporary worship. If you want it on Sunday morning, write your name down and we will talk about it. I’m serious about providing for you every opportunity of worship that you can possibly imagine in this community of faith so that we can come to meet God. That is what worship is all about. Meeting God face-to-face.

When it comes to worship, what kind of commitment are you willing to make? Why not your best? “You excel in everything,” said Paul. Why not excel in worship?

WHEN IT COMES TO GIVING, WHY NOT THE BEST?

You have another tab in the insert in your bulletin. It’s called a “Pledge” card. If you would pull it I would like to talk with you about it for just a moment.

Someone said, “Money talks.” I guess it does. According to legend, a hundred

dollar bill and a dollar bill got into a conversation at a local bank. The hundred dollar bill said to the dollar bill, “Man, I’ve had quite a life. It’s been a wonderful life. I’ve been on cruises; I’ve been to resorts; I’ve been to exotic places all around the world. I can tell you that life is exciting and wonderful, a grand adventure. Mister Dollar, how has life been for you?” Looking droopy in the drawer, Mr. Dollar says, “Well, for me it’s just been the same old thing—church, church, church, church.” I’m not knocking dollars at church because Jesus said the widow’s mite sometimes amounted to more than all the elaborate gifts placed into the treasury. I do want to tell you today that there is a difference between a tip and a tithe.

If you have not learned to give to the level of hilarious generosity, which Paul refers to in this passage in Corinthians, you are missing one of the greatest joys in your life. Don’t give until it hurts; give until you feel good. That’s the level of giving. You have missed one of the greatest privileges in life if you have not learned the joy, the wonderful joy, of sharing and giving to other people. I plead with you today, just learn the privileges of joyful generosity.

Today is a unique commitment Sunday in the life of this church. There has been no stewardship program. I don’t have an operating budget for you today. I’m not here to talk to you about raising your commitment by a certain percent. We can do all of that, but it just didn’t seem like the right thing to do this fall. If this doesn’t work, blame your senior pastor. I am responsible.

All of that means this—your financial response today is more critical than ever before. Do you know why? We are going to write the budget based on what you have to say. Let me say that again - we will write the 2003 operating budget of this church based on what you have to say today. What do you want in ministries for the next year? Your estimate and declaration becomes absolutely critical to the finance committee and the responsible parties in this church to make it happen.

I can tell you that we need 4.1 million dollars to hold our own and Missional Apportionments went up 14%. I can tell you all the statistics you want to know. If you want them, you call me and I will personally tell you about them. What seems important today is the joyful experience of generosity. How far are you willing to go in your giving? It’s just that simple. When it comes to giving, why not the best?

WHEN IT COMES TO SERVICE, WHY NOT THE BEST?

There is one other tab in your insert, “Service,” and if you would be kind enough to pull it out I would like to talk about it for just a moment.

According to Peters and Waterman in their book, In Search of Excellence: Lessons From America’s Best Run Companies, there is a common characteristic of the great companies of this country. The common thread that holds all of them together is radical commitment to service.

If service is good for business, how much more is it the appropriate and right thing for the Church to do? Excel in service. I talked about this extensively a couple of weeks ago so I will only touch the highlights of it today. A few weeks ago, there was a visitor in this congregation. He was just passing through town and knew no one. He wrote me a letter that said, "I was overwhelmed with your beautiful sanctuary, the beauty of the worship service and the fabulous music that was a part of it. In fact, I was so enthralled by the surroundings, I don't remember a single word you said in your sermon." Then he said this, "With all of the grandeur that surrounds you Sunday after Sunday, you surely must not care at all for the marginalized or the poor or the needy of the world." I wrote that gentleman a response. My response was four words, IF YOU ONLY KNEW. Sincerely, Howard.

Afterwards it dawned on me. I wonder if our own people know. I wonder if we who sit here week after week really grasp what it is: Room in the Inn, 61st Avenue Tutoring, Hobson Vacation Bible School, Miriam's Promise, the Mexico Mission project, the church at Perovo, Russia, The Manger, Prison Ministry Bible Study. I am just touching the list. You have one hundred eighty altogether on this sheet in front of you and I can only scratch the surface. The reality is that we are doing much more than most of us imagined, but we can do so much more if God were to ever get a hold of us.

I said a couple of weeks ago in that sermon on 'Service,' that if we really got motivated, we would find a thousand people or so who would be directly engaged in ministry to the inner most parts of the city. A couple of you came out of church and said, "If you are serious about that, let me know." I say to you today, I am serious about that. You let me know so I know who you are.

Today, I need a thousand people who will commit themselves to a ministry of service in the name of Christ through this church. It may be the most important response you can make today. Eye has not seen and mind has not imagined what God may choose to do with people who dream. I hope you come up with something completely new and fresh. I pray it may be God's vision for us at this particular moment. When it comes to service, why not the best?

On June 2, 1995, U.S. Air Force Captain Scott O'Grady was shot down over Bosnia. For the next six days he managed to evade capture subsisting on a diet of leaves, insects, and grass. In a miraculous recovery, Marines arrived with a helicopter and rescued him. Captain Scott O'Grady talking about that experience later said, "In those six days my priorities in life were slapped into line and I now know that in reality only three things really matter in life: my faith in God, my family and my friends, and my health. Everything else is negotiable.

My friends, today as you excel in everything, let me ask you this question: Are you excelling in the things that really matter? Would you in this moment of worship, face-to-face with God, make a faithful response for his honor and glory?

Amen.

