

#37 “Excel Still More”

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When Paul, along with Timothy and Silvanus, wrote the first letter to the Thessalonians, they were overjoyed to hear of the faithfulness and love of their brethren at Thessalonica. This church, into which they had poured their lives, had indeed not succumbed to persecution from the Jews, but it had continued to grow. The writers were sure to gratefully acknowledge the growth of these believers, but almost within the same breath, they eagerly challenged them to excel still more. These missionaries were aware of Satan’s schemes of undermining those who were doing well in growing in Christ. They could succumb to pride, to a mere going through the motions without the proper heart attitude, to a loss of their first love of the Lord, or to an attitude of superiority. Though they were making great progress and living to honor God, they were still vulnerable, for they, like us, had not yet been perfected. Only when we go to meet our Savior will our sanctification be complete. In the meantime, challenges will mount, sanctification must continue, and Satan will continue to try to tempt us, discourage us, and lead us astray. Our flesh is ever present with these mortal bodies, rendering with it the capacity to sin. This is why Paul and his brethren did not build up the egos of these people for being so great. They acknowledged their faithfulness and praised God for it, and then they quickly challenged them to keep on keeping on. They were not to stay merely as they were and persist in that same level of faithfulness, but they were to grow, improve, change, and become more and more like Christ.

The Thessalonians were challenged to excel still more in two specific areas. Again, it is not that they were doing poorly; in fact, they were acting very faithfully. It is just that their journey was not over yet, and there was growth that still needed to be accomplished. The first area is revealed in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2 which says,

“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 excel still more. For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.”

Paul and his fellow writers went on to describe specific areas in which these believers needed to continue to walk in holiness, ranging from sexual morality to living peaceably with others to working hard at what the Lord had given them to do. Perhaps they could be more faithful at work, perhaps they could be more thankful to God for their employment, perhaps they could treat their husbands or wives better, or perhaps they could sharpen their listening skills and argue less. The Spirit would have to reveal to each specifically where the growth needed to take place, but the message was clear. They knew the commandments of Scripture, and they knew that they were to live under the authority of Christ. They

were doing well, but they needed to keep on doing better and better which God would enable them to do as He graciously showed them where and how they could grow.

The second area in which the Thessalonians were encouraged to excel still more is given in 4:9-10 which says,

“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.”

These people were doing a fantastic job of loving one another, God, and all those in their region. This is a tremendous testimony of the essence of being disciples of Christ. Yet, lest they would settle for great instead of greater leading to ultimate perfection as Christ is perfect, they were reminded to keep growing in this area as well.

None of us are what we ultimately could be, should be, or will be. One day Christ will perfect us, but that day has not yet come as long as we have life and breath on this earth. God’s will for us, as it was for these early believers, is to keep growing in Christ, not settling for decent, good, or even great. We must seek to excel still more in our understanding of God’s Word, in our faithfulness to obey His commands, and in our love for God and others.

This is a tall order, and one in which we are, as in all things, dependent upon the grace of God. We must choose to have faith and honor Christ, but ultimately, we can rest in God’s faithfulness to us. This letter closes with Paul and his brethren praying for the believers saying in 5:23-24,

“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.”

Let’s do our part to excel still more as we rest in Christ Who will accomplish this in and through us as we yield to Him in faith and obedience. He is faithful, and He will bring it to pass. His grace is sufficient to accomplish this otherwise insurmountable task.

We must not grow complacent. We can’t afford even to settle for excellence. Our calling is to excel still more, letting Christ work in us to make us blameless when He comes.