

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Excelling Still More

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2

Code: 52-13

First Thessalonians chapter 4, and the text for this morning is just two verses, and it is the introduction to this final section of Paul's letter. We're going to be looking at verses 1 and 2. Let me read them for you. "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 may excel still more. For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the lord Jesus."

The key to these simple little verses is the phrase "you may excel still more." And I want to speak to you, this morning, on excelling still more. I have some vivid memories of my childhood. Among those memories is the echo of some phrases that my parents used repeatedly in dealing with me, in training me and raising me and disciplining me. One of the favorite ones that seems either in one form or another to be somewhat familiar to me is the phrase, "You could do much better." I can remember my father giving it to me after I brought home my report card. I can remember my father giving it to me after I had done a household task like mow the lawn. I can remember my mother saying it to me, "That's fine, Johnny, we're glad you passed, but you could do much better."

And as if it weren't enough to have my parents constantly repeating that to me, I remember getting a note sent home by my teacher saying, "Johnny could do much better." I remember another note on my report card that said, "Does not live up to his potential."

Now I did the very best that I could to hide my potential. There is no sense in being forced to live at a standard you don't care to live at. I kept telling my parents, "You don't understand, I am exceeding my potential."

"What is this potential you keep talking about?"

"That's the best I can do." They insisted "you can do much better." And so my childhood memories include the phrase, "Johnny, you could do much better." It wasn't that I didn't pass, it wasn't that I wasn't a reasonably dutiful son, it's just that I could have done much better. The key to the matter is, they were right.

Then I became a parent and that phrase became my phrase and there were many times of my children when I looked at their report card and say, "Well, I'm glad you passed, but you could have

done much better." Then I became a teacher and it has been not uncommon for me as a teacher to say, "Well, I appreciate your paper and I appreciate your work and I appreciate your test, but you could have done much better."

And as a pastor, I want to say to you as a church, I appreciate you so very much. I've been around the world and I've checked out a lot of churches and if I had my choice, this is the one I want my membership. I haven't found one that is its equal. You've done very well, but...(laughter)...you could do much better. You really could. And that's saying a lot.

A couple of weeks ago, well actually now a month ago, we had the IFCA Convention, the National Convention for the Independent Fundamental Churches of America. We've received an awful lot of mail from people who attended the convention. Here's one letter that should encourage you.

"Dear Pastor MacArthur: I'm writing to you simply because I am burdened to express my deepest thanks to you and your dear church for the most sacrificial, gracious and Christ-like hospitality I have ever experienced in a church in my life." He says, "I'm still overwrought at the servant attitude of every one on your staff, from you to the seminar teachers, to the ushers, people in the pew, hostesses in the dining hall and the kitchen staff. My wife and I thank God for your church and we cannot believe that all that you provided for us was covered by our one registration fee and meal fee...no way. Thank you for that. Being at the convention at your church is one of the greatest spiritual times of rejuvenation in my life, and the same is true for my wife. We minister in a hard area on the south side of Chicago in a church small enough to be one of your Flock Groups. We left our ministry dreading to come to California. We left somewhat grieved over the hardships we have heard you and your ministry have been under, even from people in the IFCA, yet never did you even hint to these struggles. I thank God for that. We have family in Southern California, nominal Christians who go to nominal Christian churches. We know others who go to such churches in your area, as well. It simply amazed us to walk into your church and see such an incredible stand for the Word of God, for such balance in your philosophy of ministry, for separation from worldly inroads in the church for such sound doctrine and for such worship as we have never experienced, especially in Southern California. I do not say these things lightly, and yet I realize that this is all of God's doing, but what He can do through servants sold out has been plainly made evident to us during that one week with your church."

And then he says, "I preach the Word as faithfully as I can Sunday morning and Sunday evening as my church...in my church, and yet the pressures are intense to do more interesting things on Sunday nights. Another evangelical church a few blocks away shows a lot of movies on Sunday night and it sometimes drains people from our Sunday service. Sometimes in my weakness I say, 'Lord, the Word doesn't seem to draw the people out.' I have rebuked that after being in your fellowship, not because of the members you get out, but due to the spiritual fruit I have seen in your people simply from a firm commitment to the Word. By God's grace I'll preach and teach God's Word until renewal

and revival occur." And he goes on.

Now I read that to you to let you know that you're doing well. But you could do better. The Thessalonian church was doing very well. Back in chapter 1 verse 2 he said to them, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers, constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father knowing, brethren, beloved by God, His choice of you." We're thankful for you, you are doing very well.

Over in chapter 2 verse 13, "We constantly thank God that when you received from us the Word of God's message you accepted it not as the word of men but for what it really is, the Word of God." Verse 14, "You became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus in Judea." Good group. But, Paul says, "I want you to excel still more...you could do better."

Paul looked at his own life in Philippians 3 and said, "Not as though I had already attained, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." None of us have arrived. I suppose there is always the danger of thinking you're sort of where you need to be and you've arrived spiritually. That would be a temptation for our church because in terms of spiritual knowledge and blessing, we may exceed some others comparatively. That would be a temptation for us as individuals because we know so much. It might have been a temptation even for the Thessalonians. Even though Paul had only been there with them just a matter of a few weeks and had only been saved a matter of a few months, the remarkable hand of God upon them had allowed them to have a testimony that spread out throughout all of Achaia. They were living exemplary lives. They were setting a pattern for others to follow. They had known the blessing of God upon them and it might have been that somebody might suggest that they were there right where they ought to be and didn't need to worry about progress.

So, Paul says to them, "I want you to excel still more." You could do better. And it is a message that I simply pass on to you from the Holy Spirit who gave it to Paul. I'm glad for your spiritual progress. And as I said, I've been in a lot of places and seen a lot of churches and this is my favorite one. And I'm glad for your spiritual progress and I'm glad for your devotion to the Lord, your devotion to the Word, your devotion to the Kingdom, but you can do better.

And that's obviously the duty of a teacher, not only to impart truth to you, but to motivate you to apply that truth in an ever-increasing way. That's what's on Paul's heart. Look at the little phrase at the end of verse 1, just as the sort of the setting for the rest of what he says in these two verses. "That you may excel still more."

I'm exhorting now from chapter 4 verse 1 on to the end of chapter 5 verse 28, this whole section of exhortation is for the purpose that you may excel still more. You're doing well, you just haven't

arrived yet. Verse 10 of chapter 3 he said, very similarly, "We want to complete what is lacking in your faith." You haven't quite arrived yet. Chapter 4 verse 10 he says at the end of the verse, "We urge you, brethren, to excel still more." And here he uses the same phrase again. It is a call to do better. It is a call for spiritual excellence, that's what excelling means. It is a call for spiritual growth, progress.

The word "excel," perisson, means to overflow, it means to abound, to be over and above and around, to exist in full quantity, to be advanced, to be abundantly supplied. The word in a modified form can mean extraordinary, surpassing. It is even used in a comparative way in 1 Corinthians 8:8, translated by the word "better." I want you to be extraordinary, I want you to excel still more...that is a comparative, intensive, I want you to excel to a higher degree, I want you to excel to a greater extent.

So here is the heart of Paul calling his church to excellence, to excelling in a life of spiritual service that was everything God would want it to be. Now this isn't unfamiliar ground for Paul. He did this repeatedly. He told the Corinthians they should be always abounding in the work of the Lord. He told the Corinthians again in the second letter, chapter 8 verse 7, that they ought to be abounding in the grace of giving. He told the Philippians in chapter 1 and verse 9 that their love needed to abound still more and more.

Peter joins in on the same basic theme and says at the end of 2 Peter 3:18, he says, "Go in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." This whole matter of pressing toward the mark, growing, excelling is at the very heart of all pastoral exhortation. So I'm really here this morning just to pass this on to you. It's not new ground. It's not new truth to you, it's just an encouragement.

But before we get into the specifics, just a thought. I've been reading a number of books. I read five or six books while I was gone and that's always refreshing to me. I finished reading the last book as people started getting up and leaving the plane and we landed in Los Angeles. I read it right until we hit the gate and just got to the end of it as we arrived. The title of the book was Jonathan Edwards, a new biography by Iain Murray, a biography of Jonathan Edwards the great preacher of the Great Awakening. Born in 1703 in New England and died in his fifties, a life of effective impactful ministry of preaching and writing, pastoring the same church for 23 years in North Hampton. A remarkable man, anointed by God. And I was really searching for something in reading this biography, I was searching for the key to his powerful life. What made him so powerful? Powerful, powerful preacher, powerful writer, powerful thinker, Godly, virtuous, tender pastor, why did God chose him along with his compatriot George Whitefield to be the instruments of the Great Awakening in 1739 and 1740 in America? Why? What was it in that man that made him progress so far? What was it that made him excel still more? What was it that lifted him head and shoulders above his people, his peers? What was the key to his powerful life and ministry?

And what he says in there, basically, as you go through his life and his writings is that the key was strong religious affections. In fact, he wrote a treatise on religious affections in 1746 which really articulated what was in his heart in this matter. And what marked him out from the very time of his conversion on was this tremendous longing to know God. He had these strong religious affections, he calls them, for God and for the things that concern God...purity, holiness, virtue, truth.

Listen to what he said at his conversion. "I felt great satisfaction but that did not content me. I had vehement longings of soul after God and Christ and after more holiness wherewith my heart seemed to be full and ready to break. Which often brought to my mind the words of the psalmist, 'My soul breaks for the longing it has.' I often felt a mourning and lamenting in my heart that I had not turned to God sooner, that I might have had more time to grow in grace," end quote. An insatiable thirst for God. By the way, when he wrote that he was 17...17 years old. Also at 17 he wrote this, "My mind was greatly fixed on divine things. Almost perpetually in the contemplation of them I spent most of my time in thinking of divine things, often walking alone in the woods and solitary places for meditation, soliloquy and prayer and converse with God. And it was always my manner at such times to sing forth my contemplations. I was almost constantly in ejaculatory prayer wherever I was. Prayer seemed to be natural to me as the breath by which the inward burnings of my heart had vent. The delights which I now felt in those things of religion were of an exceeding different kind from those before." Seventeen years old...those kinds of longings after God.

Now this puts us in touch with a very important element. Paul can exhort all of us to excel still more, but that exhortation has to link up with a willing heart, with a certain level of desire to cause a response. Obviously such exhortation can be rejected, pushed aside, discounted, ignored. But when such exhortation is coupled with a strong longing for God, then you get the spiritual progress that Paul was after.

So, I have to say to you that the one unknown commodity in this exhortation this morning is how you hook up with it, at what level of spiritual desire you exist. This is a new section in the epistle, that's why he says, "Finally then, brethren," it isn't the last thing he's going to say, it's just the last subject he's going to speak about. The first three chapters looked at the quality of the church in Thessalonica and the integrity of Paul's life and ministry. He defended the integrity of the church and his own life. Now he gets to the message he wants to give them. Now he comes to the specific exhortations to spiritual excellence that concern him. The unknown is, how they link up with that, or whether there's any link at all, depending on if they have a heart longing after God. This is a call to excellence. This is a call to sanctification. And it has to hook up with a desire for that.

There's no real mystery about what makes a Jonathan Edwards, or a George Whitefield or any other great and effective servant of God. You have a compelling call from God linked to a compelling desire to know God. So, I give to you Paul's exhortation hoping and praying that in your heart there is enough of a longing for God to cause you to hook in to this exhortation and move to excel.

Now, by the way, in case you're saying...Well how do I do this? The principles start in verse 3 and go to the end of chapter 5. The first two verses just introduce the subject. We'll get in to the specifics of Christian excellence, living the excellent Christian life, the excelling life next time. Now we're just going to introduce the subject as Paul introduces it in these two verses.

Now remember, he is very thankful for their progress, as I am for yours. But they could do much better, and he knows that. And if their hearts are right, they will. They haven't arrived, not at all. In fact he ended chapter 3, you remember how? Telling us that his desire was that their hearts might be established unblamable in holiness. He knows they haven't arrived at that perfection which will characterize their eternal state. So there is much progress remaining.

Paul then introduces in these two verses some foundational elements to this exhortational section on excelling in spiritual development. Let me give you five little thoughts here, okay? Five attendant features to this matter of the exhortation to excel.

Number one, the priority of excelling...the priority of excelling. Obviously the Spirit of God is not content with mediocrity. The pastor/teacher, the elder of the church is not content with mediocrity if his heart is right before God. No Christian brother or sister can be content with mediocrity in the life of someone else or his own life or her own life. We should never be content with mediocrity. Paul isn't. He's not content with minimal spiritual progress. He's not content with status quo, he wants them to excel still more. They have excelled. They need to do it more.

So he says, "Finally then, brethren, I want to request and I want to exhort you to excel still more." This establishes his priority. The priority of spiritual growth and the priority of spiritual excellence is what's on his heart. There were a lot of subjects he could have written the Thessalonians about. In fact, up to this point he really hasn't dealt with any specific exhortative subject. He hasn't really given them any doctrinal instruction. He hasn't filled in their theology or their practical principles for living. He doesn't get to that until now and when he gets there, what he's concerned about is this major issue of spiritual growth. That's his priority.

And so he says, "As I write this letter I can't come to you," he says in chapter 2 verses 17 and 18, he was hindered in doing that. "I can't come to you and so I'm picking up my pen to do what is so much a burden on my heart." Remember he said I wanted to come to you, I longed to come to you, I am more eager with great desire to see your face. But I can't come. But here's what I want to tell you. This is his priority message. This is it. "We request and exhort you to excel still more." That's the pastor's priority for his people.

The term "request" reflects a gentle, kindly request, not a harsh word. It's a humble word of sorts. By the way, the word "request" is generally used of equals in rank, not...it doesn't have some military

overtones from a commander to a soldier, it doesn't have any sovereign overtones from a king to a subject, it doesn't have any slavery overtones from a master to a servant. It's more the idea of a suggestion, a request among equals. It is used, by the way, at least five times in John's gospel in Jesus communicating with his father, requesting things of an equal. And so he's not bashing them at this point, he's lovingly, gently, graciously, kindly requesting.

The word "exhort," to come along side and encourage, again is a sort of a partnership word. While it does carry the potential of an authoritative use, it also has the idea of coming alongside to sustain someone in a process which you desire them to fulfill. It is a helping word, an encouraging word.

So we find a certain humility of heart here, a certain pastoral warmth within him. He doesn't want to club these people, they're already doing very well. They need to excel more but they're excelling. They need to walk more pleasing to God but they're already walking, he says, in that way. So his attitude is gentile and gracious and kind while at the same time being urgent and establishing his priority...the priority of excelling still more.

The priority in ministry isn't teaching class. The priority in ministry isn't attending a service. The priority in your Christian life isn't doing some function in your Sunday School group. The priority is spiritual progress, spiritual growth which is compelled and driven by a longing to know God. Something like Psalm 42, "As the deer pants after the waterbrook, so pants my heart after Thee, O God." It's that panting heart, that person desiring, longing to know God that is the basic element of spiritual growth. It isn't even the desire to know the Word, unless to know the Word is a means to an end to know the God of the Word. That's why the epitome of spiritual growth in 1 John 2 is spiritual fathers who have known Him who was from the beginning. The high point of spiritual growth is knowing God, the pursuit of God, the pursuit of knowing God, not just His Word. Knowing His Word is a means to an end. Gaining more information about the Bible, praying, witnessing, serving, those are all attendant to the desire to know God, else they're not even legitimate.

And so, the priority then is to excel still more so Paul exhorts that knowing it has to hook up with a heart desire. And where the heart is pure and submitted to Christ and led by the Spirit, that desire is there to one degree or another.

Let me just say another word about that desire. Desiring to know God is sort of a two-fold thing. Let me give you two words: fear and delight...fear and delight. I have a longing to know God, I'm driven to know God better, to understand Him more clearly. In fact, any time I ever study the passage in any portion of Scripture, I'm always trying to extract out of it what it says about God so I can know Him more. But knowing God in a sense is two sides of the same coin. One side is fear, on the other side is delight.

Fear means I reverence His holiness. I hold Him in awe for His right to condemn sin. I understand that He hates iniquity and He chastens every son He loves and He will scourge me if there's sin in my life and I honor that and I respect that. And when I draw near to Him, I realize that I'm exposed to the fact that He has a right to deal with the sin in my life. That's a healthy fear. And it's that kind of fear that drives sin out. It's not a servile fear. It's not the fear of a slave under a cruel master. It's the fear of a sinner under a holy God, the God who has the right to deal with my sin any way He wants because it offends His holiness puts fear in my heart.

But the other side of it is delight. My longing after God has a fear side which causes me to be dealing with sin all the time in my life so that I am not brought in to His favor in chastening, but it has a delight side and that is that I long to commune in fellowship with Him. There's something sweet and refreshing and joyful and loving and encouraging about that fellowship. And so there is in my longing after God a mixture of pleasure and reverence, a mixture of dread and delight, a mixture of awe and joy. And where that exists I hear the call of the priority to excel still more and I pursue the knowledge of my God and the attendant obedience that comes along with that.

The priority in the Christian life, beloved, is to excel still more spiritually. In order to do that you must be driven by a longing to know God which encompasses a healthy fear which causes you to deal with your sin, and a wonderful delight which causes you to rush into His presence. The fear part helps you deal with the sin in your life, the delight part helps you fill your life with praise and prayer.

These things are so inextricably mixed that I myself cannot take them apart, nor distinguish them as clearly in my own experience as I might have tried to do in my words. F.W. Faber wrote some magnificent lines of poetry about this mingling of fear and delight, listen to what he wrote, "My fear of Thee, O Lord, exults like life within my veins, a fear which rightly claims to be one of love's sacred pains. There is no joy the soul can meet upon life's varied road, like the sweet fear that sits and shrinks under the eye of God. O Thou art greatly to be feared, Thou art so prompt to bless, the dread to miss such love as Thine makes fear but love's excess. But fear is love and love is fear. And in and out they move. But fear is an intenser joy than mere unfrightened love. They love Thee little if at all, who do not fear Thee much. If love is Thine attraction, Lord, fear is Thy very touch."

The priority of excelling still more compelled by a longing after God, that's our priority. Let me give you a second thought that rises from this text. The power for excelling...the power for excelling. Notice verse 1, "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus."

Now the question comes up, to what does this phrase "in the Lord Jesus" apply or to whom? Does it modify the verb or verbs, request and exhort in the Lord Jesus? Or does it modify the pronoun you? Without taking you through all of the hoops in the process, suffice it to say that I think it best to see this as modifying the pronoun you. "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus." We're speaking to those of you who are in the Lord Jesus. It is you we are requesting and

exhorting to excel. Why? Because you are the only ones who have the power to do that. By virtue of being in the Lord Jesus, that wonderful concept of having your life hid with Christ in God, being united in solidarity with Christ, in Christ, by virtue of that union with Him is the resource and the power to excel. That, I believe, is what is on his heart.

Back in verse 12 of chapter 3, he wanted their love to excel, their love to abound and he said, "May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love." And there he recognizes the same thing. The only way that love can excel, the only way that you can excel still more and more in your spiritual progress is when the Lord causes it to happen. And the Lord only works in those in whom He dwells. The point here is the power of excelling is the power of the indwelling Christ. He's calling then to a level of spiritual excellence, possibly only to those who are in Christ.

As I was coming in to Los Angeles for a landing, I was going back over one of the sections of the book about Jonathan Edwards which was a very heartbreaking one. For 23 years he pastored the church in North Hampton, 23 years he taught them with profundity, with clarity, with power, with passion and was their pastor and their shepherd. For 23 years he poured his life into them. He was one of the great minds, one of the great literary geniuses of American history, and one of the great preachers of the church's history. They had the best of it. By the way, his church was simply numbering in a few hundreds at that time. But he gave them 23 years. At the end of 23 years, during his twenty-third year in that church, they voted him out. They kicked him out of the church. That was their gratitude for 23 years of ministry.

They put his family on the street without an income. And for a number of months he had no resources at all. And finally he took a church north, a church that never had more than 18 families in it and was mostly made up of Indians. And he had to reduce his preaching to the level of instructing pagans who knew nothing. After 23 years his heart was broken and he was the instrument of God in 1739, 1740, to bring the Great Awakening, the Great Revival.

So why did they kick him out after 23 years? Because they said his theology was too narrow. What was the issue? He demanded that anyone who take the Lord's table have made a public confession of faith in Jesus Christ. They said that's too legalistic, we won't stand for it. They threw him out of his church.

Needless to say his heart was grieved. And he awoke to the realization that for all of those years...he first of all was shocked that they would vote him out, and he wondered how it was that the people hadn't grown anymore than that under all that good teaching. And then he realized that they never were regenerate to start with. They never were regenerate, many of them. And when he pinpointed and said, "You can't be a member of the church and take communion unless you make public confession of faith in Christ," they threw him out because there were so many members of the church who never were regenerate. And then he realized what was very obvious, that people who aren't

saved don't grow, right? You can't excel still more unless you are in the Lord Jesus. Unless the life of God is there, there isn't going to be any progress. Heartaches of all heartaches to come to the end of your ministry and recognize that. Jesus Christ alive in us is the source for spiritual growth, spiritual excellence.

Now a footnote. It is obviously possible, it happens every day, to be in the Lord Jesus, to have the power to excel, but to resist that power, right? A classic illustration, the Corinthian church. First Corinthians chapter 1, Paul said, "You come behind in no gift." You Corinthians, you've heard the gospel, you've believed the gospel, you got saved, you were given the Spirit of God, you were given the gifts of the Spirit, you have the multiplied ministry of those gifts within the body. You come behind in no gift, you don't lack a thing, but you are in big trouble.

The Corinthian church was not growing. It was anything but excelling, anything but excellent. There was rife with all kinds of problems, doctrinal problems, moral problems, ethical problems, practical problems, worship problems. They failed to excel. They had the resource. They had the power. They were in the Lord Jesus. But they failed to excel.

What was their problem? Let me suggest three things, and this is just sort of condensing it all. Number one, their spiritual growth was hindered by corrupt worship, or the absence of proper worship. All you have to do is read 1 Corinthians 10 through 14, read those five chapters and you'll understand that they had totally polluted the worship. It was chaotic. When they came together, for example, for the highest point of worship, which would have been the Lord's table, some of them were drunk, some of them were gluttonous. They didn't even want to share the love feast with those who didn't have any food. They were going out and offering to demons and idols and then coming in and taking communion. They just desecrated the Lord's table, they polluted their worship.

Apparently they were out of order in chapter 11, even with the role that women were playing in that. Chapter 12, 13 and 14 tell us that in the worship itself it had turned in to an ecstatic orgy of confusion, demonic utterances, cursing Christ in the name of the Holy Spirit. Misappropriated spiritual gifts, deviant tongues, chaos without order, they had corrupted worship. There isn't even a mention in the 1 Corinthian epistle about any leadership. The only reference to leadership in the whole church is, "Let the spirit of the prophets be subject to the prophets." It doesn't say anything about elders or pastors or anything. We don't even know who was running the thing. Chaos in worship, corruption in worship. Pursuing the emotional, the esoteric, the ecstatic, the experiential. It was an improper worship. Their

worship was so corrupted that spiritual progress was greatly hindered.

The second thing, they were indulging in sin, all kinds of sin: incest, homosexuality, adultery, fornication, law suits against each other, discord, fighting, squabbles, struggles, pride. They even

went so far as to think that light and darkness could get together, Christ could be linked up with Belial.

The third thing that impacted them was they allowed themselves to be influenced by false teachers. They sat at anybody's table and ate anybody's food. They didn't care what the teacher was serving, they ate it.

And there they were with a corrupted, deviated, ecstatic, messed-up, unscriptural kind of worship expression without proper leadership, without proper edification. Also indulging in all kinds of sins. And then being exposed to false teachers. And as a result, the whole process of spiritual excellence was halted dramatically. That's why Paul said, "I wrote out of much affliction and anguish of heart," 2 Corinthians 2:4. It is very possible that in your life and my life by not properly worshiping God, by indulging in sin and getting exposed to trashy theology, we can short-circuit the power for excelling.

Third little principle. Not only is there a priority here and a power with regard to excelling, but principles. The principles for excelling. He refers to them in verse 1. He says, "As you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God, just as you actually do walk."

He says, "Look, we request and exhort you to excel still more just in the way we told you to do it. We told you how to walk and please God." And he harks back to the principles that he gave them. When he went there he preached the gospel, of course, the Word of God's message to save the lost. And they believed and were saved. They believed the saving gospel. The gospel didn't come in word only but in power of the Holy Spirit and full conviction, it says in chapter 1 verse 5. They believed the gospel. But he didn't stop at the gospel. He went on and talked about ethical things and moral things, talked about sanctified living, gave them instruction. And though the term "instruction" is not in the original text, the implication is here. As you received from us how you ought to walk. In other words, instruction, teaching, doctrine, principles. We told you that. You heard the true gospel, you believed and you were transformed. And for the brief time we were there, we gave you instruction on sanctification, the Christian living, on the counsel of God, as he called it in Acts. 20.

They knew the basics. Surely he had told them you need to seek to glorify God in everything you do. You need to pursue humility. You need to suffer when God is dishonored. You need to be content to do God's will at any cost. You need to confess your sin. You need to learn to trust God with a stronger faith, a God who is unfailing and worthy of such trust. You need to bear fruit in your attitude and your service. You need to praise God, to pray, to suffer for the advance of the Kingdom. You need to be at the Lord's table. You need to submit to the Word. You need to live a pure life, seek loving unity. You need to care for one another. You need to reach the lost. Surely he talked about things like marriage and family and purity and anger and all of those kinds of things that are part of human life. We gave you instruction how you ought to walk and you're actually walking that way, but we want you to do more of it.

Notice also a little phrase, "How to walk and please God." How you ought to walk and literally, and strive to please God, erizo, the verb. Now we're right back to pleasing God again. How you ought to live pleasing God. You see, if you're pleasing...if you're seeking to please God, you pursue pleasing God which has a fear side which means I eliminate sin because I fear His reaction to it, it has a delight side which means I rush into His presence cause I love the sweetness of the communion there. If I'm pursuing God, pursuing God, pursuing God, then I'm going to walk the way I ought to walk. The term "walk" means daily conduct.

He says, "Look, we gave you principles about pleasing God. We probably talked about fearing God and delighting in God and then we told you how to walk, and you're already doing that, but want you to do it more. Want you to do it more."

You say, "What do you mean more?" More often, more faithfully, more consistently. I seek to please God, that controls how I walk. So the priority here is to excel still more. The power is the Lord Jesus Christ. We're in Christ, we have that power. The principles are laid down in the Word of God and, by the way, we're going to go over those principles which he reviews in chapters 4 and 5. Probably some of the same principles he gave them when he was there.

The fourth word, progress...the progress of excelling still more. He says at the end of verse 1, "Just as you actually do walk that you may excel still more." You started down the right path, keep going...keep going. May I say to you, this isn't some instantaneous thing, this isn't some second work of grace, this isn't some second level zap. This isn't that you go along believing in Jesus as Savior and all of a sudden you get zapped and you take Him as Lord and you have some dramatic thing happen. This isn't having reached a point of eradication of your sin nature, a second work of grace where sin is no longer an issue. This is not a one-time deal, this is a progress. You're walking that way, just keep doing it more and more. Sometimes you fall, sometimes you stumble, sometimes you walk unwisely and have to be told to walk circumspectly. Sometimes you walk in the flesh and you have to be told to walk in the Spirit. But keep taking those steps of spiritual progress. Keep going in that same direction. Keep pressing toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God and Christ Jesus. Keep excelling more.

Now not all of you are going to grow at the same rate. And failure doesn't mean the end of your growth, it just means get up and go again. And your spiritual progress may not always be visible outwardly. And circumstances of life and success or failure in life doesn't necessarily reflect God's commendation of your progress. But keep excelling...keep excelling. I love what Paul said to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:14, he said, "Let your spiritual progress be known to all men." Keep going, keep progressing.

People sometimes ask me, "Why don't you preach like you used to?" Cause I'm not who I used to be. Does that help? I can't be who I used to be, I don't want to be who I used to be. I don't even remember who I used to be. I have to be who I am and I have to be progressing. People sometimes say to me, "You know, you used to preach much simpler sermons, your sermons get deeper and deeper." You understand why, that's me...that's me. That's progress. You shouldn't discount that. You should be thankful for it as long as I'm not absolutely incomprehensible. There's a progress here.

And then last little word is the word pressure. The priority is excelling more and more. The power is being in the Lord Jesus. The principles are laid out in Scripture and taught to us by the Apostles. The progress, we're already walking in that way. Hey, when you were a Christian you stepped on to this path and started walking. Just keep doing it more and more. The pressure comes in verse 2, "For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus."

Now he makes reference to the authority of his commands. The word "commands," strong word, parangello, military directives, word from a commanding officer to a subordinate. Here is the strong authority. You can't take this exhortation lightly, my friend, because this is a command given by Paul under authority from Jesus Christ. And he says, "You know it." By the way, that's about the sixth time he's referred to "for you know." He reminds them of what he said to them. You know the commands we gave you, you know what they are. And I think what he says from here to the end of the book is a lot of repeating what that was. You know the commands we gave you and we gave them by the Lord Jesus, implied by His authority. Your memory is fresh, you haven't forgotten these commands, these military directives. They're not at the authority of a man or the authority of a church or an ecclesiastical body, they're the authority of Christ and that's the pressure. You're either going to obey Christ or you're not, that's the pressure...not a man, it's Christ.

Now we're going to get a lot of exhortations in the next weeks, lots of them. In fact, when he gets down to the end of chapter 5, he starts rapid-firing things so fast that it's about a sermon for every two or three or four words. There's going to be a lot of exhortation. Just keep this in mind. It all comes under authority from Christ...from the Lord Jesus.

The call then in this last two chapters, beloved, is to spiritual excellence that we will excel still more. You do well, I commend you. You do well. But we can all do better. That's what he wants to say to us. But the key thing is to have that longing, that appetite.

Let me close with another comment about my experience in Russia. To put it mildly, I was overwhelmed with the experience, Russia was far worse than I could ever imagine. To put it simply, it is an unbelievable ordeal to find food in Russia...a piece of cheese, a pound of meat. If you get a coupon, a rationing coupon that allows you to buy one, then you have the problem of finding a piece of cheese, or finding a piece of meat. It would be a rarity to find a box of Russian tea.

Walking around the streets I went into a little market. this market would be about the size of your living room. There were ladies behind glass and on the shelf there might be four cans, a couple of pieces of bread, some little stacks of flour, and that was it. There might have been 25 people in the store passing in these little ration tickets and walking out with one little can of something. Wherever there was a store in the city that had more people in that there was a line all the way down the block. People carry plastic bags all day long in case they pass a store that has something. They can't even get their Russian tea, now they have to drink the detested Turkish tea that they all hate. They can't even get Russian vodka, it's replaced by cheap Ethiopian wine. There's no fruit available. They used to say they could get it from Bulgaria, but the Russian ruble has no value at all. It has nothing behind it so it's useless. So the Bulgarians don't want any payment in rubles, so they won't sell them anything.

They live on 250 rubles a month which is less than a hundred dollars. We talked to a man who is a graduate of the university there who makes 250 rubles a month, he and his family live in a two-room flat with another family. Another person we talked to lives in a four-room flat with four families, 31 people using the same bathroom and they've never known any other kind of life. This one young man has waited ten years for his own flat. Don't...everything's owned by the government. There are no single family homes, they're all apartments and they're all owned by the government. Recently they've gone in to some kind of new enterprise co-operatives, but they're very costly and the people can't afford them, for the most part.

I asked a couple of people, "Do you want to get out of the country?" They said, "Yes, but how? We don't have enough money to get a ticket out and you can only take 200 rubles with you and you can't spend rubles anywhere in the world because nobody wants them. And what good is 200 rubles going to do you?"

So anything that is good that comes into the country goes on the Black Market, illegally. And the Black Market people sell you everything because they want American dollars, which they use to buy their way out. Shoddy workmanship, no pride, nothing to buy, no money. Tons and tons of oil leaking out of deteriorating, antiquated pipelines in Siberia. No cars for people to drive, maybe six families own one car that's been passed down from two generations. Phone system totally dysfunctional. Half a million Soviet troops are coming home and nobody has any idea where they're going to live and who's going to pay them or what they're going to do. No place to put them. Cockroaches and mosquitoes in their highest season, hot water is off in Moscow for a month for annual maintenance. Black Sea beaches are polluted.

But worse than all of that is the total despair in the country because the Communist dream was a lie. The dream never came to pass. Utopia never came. They're in despair. They have nothing. They are the most sad, tragic, wretched, despairing people I've ever seen. You go down the streets and

these people milling everywhere, their faces are barren and blank. The only laughter I saw or heard was children. And once you've grown out of your childhood, there's nothing to smile about.

They've been lied to for so long, the dream never came true. They resent Lenin, they mock him. Their heroes are dead. Their history means nothing. They have nothing in the past, they have nothing in the future, they have nothing in the present.

And in their tremendous deprivation they are hungry for everything they can get their hands on. I was overwhelmed, I was absolutely overwhelmed. One little boy came up to me and asked if we would take a picture of he and his father because he had never had a picture of himself and his father. Of course, he couldn't afford a camera. And so we took a picture of him with his arm around his father, cute little freckle-faced, dimpled boy. And he gave us his name and address so we would send him a copy of a picture of himself with his father. One moment of joy. So we will send him that, along with a Bible.

Tragic. They want the simplest things in life. They hunger. They're desperate for these things. And I came out of there in my mind thinking of that spiritual analogy, here we are in America, we are fat and sassy and have need of nothing. And somehow that gets translated over into the spiritual dimension. And we've got an awful lot of people who are sort of over-fed on junk food but don't have the right longings after God. Whereas in the Soviet Union, even among the Christians, when we went into the churches, they have a longing after God. Forget the junk food, give us the real stuff. They are wretched and naked and blind and they know it and they want it different. We are wretched and naked and blind and don't know it, and that's much tougher to deal with.

IF there's a desire in your heart to excel still more, it's because you have a longing after God.

Father, thanks for our time in the Word this morning. Good reminders. Make us faithful to apply what the Spirit has taught. In Jesus name. Amen.

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