

The Passionate Pursuit (Excellence - Chapter 3)

n/a

Ready:

"Brothers, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus." —Philippians 3:13-14

"Desire is the key to motivation, but it's determination and commitment to an unrelenting pursuit of your goal — a commitment to excellence — that will enable you to attain the success you seek." —Mario Andretti

Set

Throughout Les Steckel's 20 years as an NFL coach, he made stops in San Francisco, Minnesota, New England, Denver, Tennessee (via Houston), Tampa Bay and Buffalo. One place the president and CEO of Fellowship of Christian Athletes never coached was in Oakland, but something about that organization will always stick with him.

The Raiders (who spent 1982 through 1994 in Los Angeles) once bragged that they had more victories than any other professional football franchise. The team hung up huge banners all over its stadium touting that fact with catchphrases such as "Commitment to Excellence," "Pride and Poise" and "Just Win, Baby." But eventually, those signs became nothing more than faded reminders of a glorious but nonetheless diluted past.

"If you're going to be excellent, you always have to find ways to get better, and they never changed," Steckel explains. "They kept the same management. They kept the same assistant coaches, and they would always go hire a head coach who would come in and work with those assistant coaches who had been there 15 and 20 years. Everybody's in favor of progress. It's the changes they don't like. Excellence is something that people want, but it's hard to capture."

Before the pursuit of excellence can begin, however, a true understanding of its multilayered meaning must first take place — although Steckel's definition is pretty cut-and-dried.

"Excellence is doing the very best with the gifts that God gave you," Steckel says.

"Unfortunately, I don't think a lot of people wake up every day and say, 'How can I do my best today?' Why is the traffic always the fullest between 4 and 5:30? Because everybody left the office early, and they all want to get home. They're not saying, 'Hey, I can put a little more into my job. I want to do the best I can today.' But if you really want to have excellence in your life, you first have to look yourself in the mirror and ask yourself, *Am I really doing the best I can? Am I utilizing the talents that God gave me?* I think that question is very simple. People know the answer. The problem is that they never ask themselves the question."

Perhaps one of the reasons people wrestle with excellence is because too often it is confused with perfection —

something Steckel admits to often struggling with himself. "I don't want to go overboard, but I do want to please God," he says. "There's a difference between being perfect and pleasing Him."

And in order to truly please God, Steckel believes we must follow the exhortation found in 1 Peter 1:14-16: "*As obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires of your former ignorance but, as the One who called you is holy, you also are to be holy in all your conduct; for it is written, Be holy, because I am holy.*"

"There was only one person who was perfect, and that was Jesus Christ," Steckel says. "But we still need to strive for excellence. Jesus is the best picture of excellence I can have. When Jesus came, He knew His mission, He was going to carry it out, and He didn't dance around it. He met it head on. He went to the cross. He knew what was going to happen, and He did it anyway. What a great example of excellence."

Not only do we have Christ's example of excellence, but we can also benefit from His comforting and heartening Spirit. In 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17, the apostle Paul gives credence to this truth: "*May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every deed and word*" (NIV).

"It's like the little kid who comes to his father and says, 'Daddy, I don't think I can do this,'" Steckel expounds. "So how does he respond? Does he say, 'Yeah, you're right. You can't do it.' Or does he say, 'Sure you can. Let me show you how you can do this.' A good dad will do that with his children. The heavenly Father can do that with His followers, but instead we try to do it ourselves. But you'll never acquire excellence when you try to do it apart from Christ."

According to Steckel, the pursuit of excellence must be intentional. It never just happens. There must always be a sense of purpose behind every decision that brings you closer to the goal. This is especially true in the sports world. "You can compete with yourself and strive to accomplish a goal or get better at what you're doing," Steckel says. "All athletes want to get better."

There's a great biblical example of intentionality found in the book of Daniel. At that time in Jewish history, Babylon had taken over Jerusalem and brought back to Babylon a group of "young men without any physical defect, good-looking, suitable for instruction in all wisdom, knowledgeable, perceptive, and capable of serving in the king's palace." Among the captives

was Daniel along with Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, who were respectively renamed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Daniel was also given a new name: Beltshazzar. Although he accepted this new name, he decided from the beginning that he would not cave in to the traditions of Babylon but instead stay true to God.

Daniel 1:8 tells us that Daniel *“determined that he would not defile himself with the king’s food or with the wine he drank.”* Instead, he asked the chief official for permission for him and his friends to only eat vegetables and drink water for a 10-day period. At the end of the period, Daniel and his friends were in great health, so the official let them eat as they desired.

Then, in Daniel 1:17 we learn that *“God gave these four young men knowledge and understanding in every kind of literature and wisdom. Daniel also understood visions and dreams of every kind.”* In other words, because they honored God with intentionality and determination, He in turn blessed them with excellence.

This mindset, of course, is the opposite of cutting corners — a practice that happens all too often in today’s society. Steckel says people are usually bent toward taking the easy road, which makes the pursuit of excellence somewhat counter to human nature. As a coach, he has seen this manifested in even the simplest of tasks — such as athletes who run just inside the cones or boundary lines, even though such maneuvers only save them a step or two.

But God’s Word tells us clearly what happens when corners are cut: *“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death”* (Proverbs 14:12). And the apostle Paul admonishes, *“For whatever a man sows he will also reap”* (Galatians 6:7). Self-deception and the abrogation of personal responsibility and discipline are at the opposite end of the spectrum from two attributes of excellence that Steckel believes are invaluable.

“The two most important qualities to have in achieving excellence are discipline and integrity,” he says. “But more importantly, it’s self-discipline and self-integrity. If you don’t have those two qualities, I don’t know if you’ll ever see excellence. We know when we’re doing right or wrong. It’s just a matter of striving to be excellent.”

Steckel’s ideas about excellence didn’t fully materialize until 1990, when he went through what he commonly refers to as his brokenness. Before that, he certainly strove for excellence but didn’t have his pursuit in the proper biblical context.

“That’s when I knew I was being called to excellence,” Steckel recalls. “I’d never had the perspective of living for the Lord. I had these plans and I knew how I was going to go about it, and I knew God was right there with me, because He knew I had a good heart; and I never wanted to hurt anybody. I thought that’s where I was headed.”

While unemployed for the first time in his adult life, Steckel took the time to grow in his relationship with Christ. He listened to an audio series by Dr. Charles Stanley on the topic of brokenness and began to understand the truth found in Psalm 51:17: *“The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. God, You will not despise a broken and humbled heart.”* He returned to the coaching ranks in 1991 at the University of Colorado (the same place he started his career in 1973) with a brand-new perspective and a properly focused pursuit of excellence.

“I still remember the pain and the heartache that I went through,” Steckel says. “If you don’t have that long, painful experience, you might not remember what you’ve learned. But if you wake up in the morning and can see the scars from the car wreck that God saved you from,

that might work.”

Since that time, Steckel has learned about the call to excellence that Paul wrote so eloquently about in Philippians 3:13-14: *“Brothers, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God’s heavenly call in Christ Jesus.”*

And while many get caught up in the end result of excellence — which often is wrapped up in achievements and awards — Steckel believes that the journey is just as enriching and equally important.

“Reaching the goal may not be paramount, but striving to reach it is the greatest part,” Steckel says. “The pursuit of excellence is so distorted in our society. I’ve coached with two teams that played in Super Bowls. Most people have never been to one. Both teams lost, and for months after we were treated like losers. How sad that is. We almost made it, but the response of the fellow players, the coaches and the media is that you’re a loser. It’s the same thing with the NCAA Final Four. You start with 65 teams and at the end 64 are losers and one is the winner. That’s distorted.

“But there’s nothing greater than the pursuit of excellence,” he adds. “You may not reach it as an athletic team or as an individual athlete, but striving to get there is pretty rewarding.”

As we begin to pursue excellence, something unique begins to take place. Others around us are inspired by our effort and our drive. Age doesn’t factor into this process. Young and old alike can set positive examples of excellence for those around them.

“In order for people to experience that feeling of excellence, they need to have a model of excellence in their life,” Steckel says. “That’s where I believe that we as Christian men and women need to understand that each day we’re a ministry that’s on foot, and we have an opportunity to mentor athletes for a lifetime.”

Paul stresses this concept in Philippians 3:16-17: *“In any case, we should live up to whatever [truth] we have attained. Join in imitating me, brothers, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.”*

“I was so blessed to work with athletes who went to the Pro Bowl and were First Team All-Americans,” Steckel says. “They had the natural ability but didn’t want to put in the extra effort. So my job was to push them to be the best. My number one hot button is helping someone else get better. If I can help someone get better, I get really excited.”

Steckel has often used three distinct methods for pushing others to excellence: attention, affirmation and affection. All of these must be distributed with impeccable consistency and discipline in order to be effective. Steckel saw the validity of this style of mentoring even in his earliest days when he was a young assistant coach with the San Francisco 49ers.

“I was 30 years old,” Steckel says. “I had just begun coaching in the NFL. I was working on the field, learning drills and how to help players get better. I coached O.J. Simpson that year and a seasoned veteran like Gene Washington, who is now the executive director of the NFL. I used to tell Gene to come work on drills every Monday through Friday; and he’d say, ‘Coach, we don’t ever do anything in the off-season.’ And I’d say, ‘Well, you are. If you want to finish your career here, you’d better show up.’ Boy, he hated me then, and now we’re lifelong buddies. But I was showing him drills and doing things to help make him better.”

And as you push others to get better, you must continually push yourself toward excellence as well. This comes through a prayerful relationship with God in which listening to His voice always trumps making your own voice heard. As you see excellence come to fruition in your life, Steckel believes it will draw you even closer to God and increase your passion for Him and the pursuit of His will for your life.

“When you get older, you appreciate what God has done for you,” Steckel says. “You want to serve Him. As you go through life and you see how God has blessed you, you want to say, ‘Hey, I’m ready to do it.’ It’s like the coach who says to the player, ‘I’m going to take care of that for you. I’m going to get you that tutor so that you can do better in math. Don’t worry. I’m going to get it done for you.’”

“I can hear myself saying that to players all the time. So you get them what they need and now when they hit the field, what do you think they’re going to do? Loaf? No, they’ll bust their tail for you.”

According to Steckel, the opposite of excellence is apathy. This is a dangerous state to be in for an athlete and even more so for a follower of Christ. The human body needs to be worked to get stronger, as opposed to a machine that gets weaker and weaker over years of hard use. As legendary Michigan Wolverines head coach Bo Schembechler used to say, “You’re either getting better or you’re getting worse.”

Paul says it this way in Philippians 3:12: *“Not that I have already reached [the goal] or am already fully mature, but I make every effort to take hold of it because I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus.”* Steckel echoes that sentiment and again is reminded of the Oakland Raiders, who once fell into the trap of believing they had obtained the highest level of excellence.

“You’ll never arrive,” he says. “There’s no plateau.”

Go

1. Les Steckel talks about the Oakland Raiders’ struggle with change. In what ways do you struggle with change when it comes to training for competition or doing well at your job? What tools have you used to stay motivated in your pursuit of excellence?

2. Steckel says that most people tend to take shortcuts and give only what is required of them and no more. What are some examples of shortcuts people take in athletics, business, ministry and family life?

3. Read Daniel 1:1-21. How was Daniel intentional in his pursuit of excellence? What are some temptations to go with the crowd that we face today? What are some of the benefits of avoiding worldly living like Daniel and his three friends did?

4. Read Philippians 3:12-21. What are some things that can suppress our passionate pursuit of excellence? What encouragement does the apostle Paul give to help us overcome all such obstacles? What is the ultimate prize for those who strive for godly excellence?

5. How does Bo Schemnechler's comment, "You're either getting better or you're getting worse," agree or disagree with the mindset of most athletes today? How does knowing the pursuit of godly excellence never ends impact your ability to push through challenges?

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Bible Reference:

1 Peter 1



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