

Redefining Success (Excellence - Chapter 12)

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Ready:

"Therefore, my dear brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work, knowing that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." -1 Corinthians 15:58

"Losing is no disgrace if you've given your best." -Jim Palmer

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When people think of excellence in higher education, Oxford University is often mentioned. That's because some of the world's most foundational philosophical ideas in government, religion, sociology, literature and business have been intellectually designed and developed by men and women who attended its various colleges. Luminaries such as John Wycliffe, Adam Smith, John Wesley, William Penn, J. R. R. Tolkien, T. S. Eliot, Margaret Thatcher and C. S. Lewis are just a few notables to have walked Oxford's hallowed halls.

But anyone who believes brilliance can only come from places like Oxford, Cambridge or perhaps places in America like MIT or the Ivy League schools fails to recognize the simplicity of wisdom.

For legendary UCLA Bruins basketball coach John Wooden, everything he truly needed to know about life didn't take place in college—although he did quite well while attending Purdue University—but instead was taught to him and his brothers by Joshua Wooden on a farm in Centeron, Indiana.

Wooden's father ingrained two key principles into his heart and mind that became the cornerstone of a successful coaching career and that have, in turn, impacted the lives of countless athletes and fans: (1) Don't try to be better than someone else, and (2) always try to be the best you can be.

"Dad reasoned that whether we were better than someone else should not be the focus because our position in relation to others was out of our control," Wooden explains. "We could not control another's performance, nor could we control how we would be ranked. All we could do was our best ... He wanted us to try very hard to give the best possible effort to become the best we could be and let the results take care of themselves."

Wooden took his farm-boy sensibilities with him to Purdue, where he played basketball, and then to the high school coaching ranks, where he was increasingly dissatisfied with the educational system's definition of success. By 1934, he had devised his own personal definition that has since become synonymous with excellence.

"Success is peace of mind that is the direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming," Wooden says. "Within this framework, each person becomes the only one who can ultimately judge his or her own success."

For Wooden, excellence breeds success, but both of those terms should be determined by effort and not necessarily the end result. His philosophy is quite different from today's model of success, which is generally measured in wins and losses—he contends that true success comes from the heart.

Enthusiasm, for instance, is one of Wooden's essential keys to excellence. He believes that people must truly enjoy what they do if they are to succeed, and he points to Romans 12:11 for his biblical impetus: *"Do not lack diligence; be fervent in spirit; serve the Lord."* "If we don't enjoy what we do, we won't be able to push as hard as we need to push for as long as we need to push to achieve our best," Wooden says. "However, if we do enjoy what we do and if we're enthusiastic about it, we'll do it better and come closer to becoming the best we can be."

Another important cog in Wooden's wheel of success is what he refers to as industriousness. He experienced the vital nature of hard work firsthand on the farm where his diligent parents led by example. Wooden says that's how a disciplined work ethic became part of his nature.

"There is no substitute for hard work," Wooden says. "Most people have a tendency to look for shortcuts or at least for the easiest way to complete any given task. If we only put out a minimum effort, we might get by in some situations, but in the long run, we won't fully develop the talents that lie within us."

This proved true for Wooden as an athlete and as a coach, and it continues to be the case as he approaches his one-hundredth birthday.

"As a basketball player, I wanted to be in the best possible physical condition," he says. "There was a time when I'd tell myself, *I'm going to be in better condition than anyone else*. As I grew older, my thinking changed to, *I'm going to be in the best possible condition I can be*. I had learned that I only have control over myself."

By exercising this principle, Wooden has reaped the benefit of Proverbs 21:5: *"The plans of the diligent certainly lead to profit, but anyone who is reckless only becomes poor."*

Wooden's profit as a basketball player included a national championship at Purdue in 1932. In 29 years as a college coach (including two seasons at Indiana State), he led UCLA to 10 NCAA championships. His team's enthusiasm and hard work (among other foundational values) led to competitive greatness—although he is quick to point out that winning should never be used as a barometer of excellence or success.

"Having competitive greatness does not always mean that you are the one who scores the most points or hits the winning shot," Wooden says. "Lewis Alcindor [now Kareem Abdul-Jabbar] could have set every college scoring record in the book. However, he didn't. He could

see the big picture, always reining in his own play for the sake of elevating the play of his teammates.

“We don’t have to be superstars or win championships to reach competitive greatness,” Wooden adds. “All we have to do is learn to rise to every occasion, give our best effort and make those around us better as we do it. It’s not about winning. It’s about learning to give all we have to give.”

And that brings us back to Wooden’s time-tested definition of success, in which winning is actually irrelevant. What’s important is giving one’s all. “We are the only ones who really know the truth about our own capabilities and performance,” Wooden reemphasizes. “Did we do our best at this point in our life? Did we leave all we had to give on the field, in the classroom, at the office or in the trenches? If we did, then we are a success—at that stage of our life. But being successful at one point doesn’t necessarily make us a success at every point—and it does not mean that we reach the apex.”

Instead, success (the by-product of excellence) can be summed up in Jesus’ parable of the talents found in Matthew 25:14-30. In that story, the ultimate reward for excellence came when the slave successfully took the money his master had given him responsibility over and increased its value. Verse 21 tells us, *“His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful slave! You were faithful over a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Enjoy your master’s joy!’”* In other words, it’s all about doing the most with what you are given that constitutes Christ-centered success.

“No one truly knows whether a person is excellent or has performed excellently, because what might be seen as excellent in the eyes of one might not be in the other’s,” Wooden says. “I feel that only the individual can really know whether they have executed near their level of competency. They must make the effort to execute near their own level and not be concerned about somebody else. Don’t try to be better than they are. Try to be the very best you can be. And I don’t care how good that is in the eyes of others’. To me, that’s success. That’s being excellent.”

Go

1. In your sport or field of interest, how is success typically defined? How do you usually define success for yourself? Can you describe a time when you succeeded at something without giving your best? How did you feel about your success after the fact?

2. John Wooden’s father used to tell him, “Don’t try to be better than someone else.” How does that philosophy differ from the idea of competitive success that most people have? What are some ways you could follow that advice while still striving for excellence in whatever you choose to do?

3. Read Romans 12:11. What are some ways that we can show enthusiasm in sports and in life? In what ways has enthusiasm helped you stay on track in your pursuit of excellence? What are some things that have at times challenged your enthusiasm?

4. Read Matthew 25:14-30. What are some things these talents represent in your life? What kind of personality and character did the first two servants display? How was the third servant different?

5. Who are some people who have excelled despite not having as much talent or natural

physical ability as others? In what ways have you seen that philosophy ring true in your life?

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Bible Reference:

1 Corinthians 15



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