

The Spirit Of Excellence (Excellence - Chapter 2)

Ready:

"Let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." —Matthew 5:16

"Sports serve society by providing vivid examples of excellence." —George F. Will

Set

Excellence. That power-packed word can be found in catchphrases and taglines, heard in motivational speeches and printed on huge banners. It has been written about in countless books and has inspired major motion pictures. Athletes are especially fond of the word "excellence." The pursuit of it drives them to practice and train long hours. It compels them to discipline their bodies beyond the capacity of an average human being.

But what exactly is excellence? There seem to be many opinions on the topic but no one answer to that perplexing question. Within the world of sports, excellence tends to be measured by winning percentages, championship seasons and record-breaking performances. And while that is a somewhat skewed perspective, individuals and teams must give their absolute best efforts in order to accomplish great things.

NFL running back Shaun Alexander has learned that lesson playing for championship teams at every level — from high school to the pro ranks — and says that there was always an attitude of excellence and "a spirit where everybody was at the top of their game."

It's that spirit of excellence that Alexander has allowed to permeate his very existence. Therefore, excellence isn't just some unreachable lofty goal. It is instead a way of life. For Shaun Alexander, excellence is what he does. Alexander says achieving excellence requires obedience and purity of heart, which in turn inspire others to pursue excellence. But first, excellence requires what Alexander refers to as the attitude of perfection.

"Excellence is noble," he says. "It's first-rate. It's the highest form of honor. It's above normal. It's as high as you can get. I think of something that's worthy."

For Alexander, that attitude of perfection shows up on the football field as he gives that extra effort to reach the first-down marker, or at home when he rushes to the door to help his wife get the kids out of the car and bring the groceries to the kitchen. It's something he learned from influential people like his mother, Carol, and his legendary high-school football coach, Owen Hauck, who won 15 district titles and 12 regional championships at Boone County High School in Florence, Kentucky. "Coach Hauck was committed to excellence," Alexander says.

“He was like, ‘People are going to know what we’re going to do, and they won’t be able to stop it because we’re more committed to doing this thing precisely correct than they are to stopping it.’”

Hauck was a living, breathing example of commitment to excellence — the same kind of commitment Paul talked about in Ephesians 4:1 when he wrote, *“I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received.”*

“That to me is saying we should walk in the spirit of excellence,” Alexander says. This philosophy is contrary to an ever-growing belief found in today’s world that, according to Alexander, states a Christian has to be weak. But according to 1 John 5:1-15 — a passage that extols the benefits of being a believer — that twisted perspective is anything but true. In fact, in verse 5, John asks this rhetorical question: *“Who is the one who conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”*

John emphasizes this thought later on in verses 14 and 15, where he shares this powerful promise: *“Now this is the confidence we have before Him: whenever we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears whatever we ask, we know that we have what we have asked Him for.”*

To take it a step further, Alexander believes that excellence among Christians is not only a calling and a provisional blessing but also something that ultimately pleases God much the same way that excellence from a child pleases his or her parents. In both cases, a strong commitment to obedience is required, and that, Alexander says, is what really makes God happy.

“The best way to honor God is to be obedient,” he says. “Whatever it is I’m doing, I want to be obedient. I want to pursue Him with excellence with all that I’ve got. That’s going to lead into true obedience and true love, which pleases God.

“That’s where our heavenly Father isn’t like our earthly fathers. Our earthly fathers might get upset when we don’t hit the game-winning shot, but our heavenly Father looks at our heart. If our heart is in the right place, He’s going to be satisfied and say, ‘Well done.’ No matter how much your earthly father loves you, he still wants you to win the championship. But with God, the championship’s already won.”

While the ultimate purpose of excellence is to please God, there are other reasons for pursuing it. Excellence is one of the most effective tools for building God’s kingdom because it involves having a disciplined work ethic and living a life of service to others. Jesus validated this concept in Matthew 5:14-16, one of the Gospel’s most prominent passages: “You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

“When you listen to God, you can’t help but do what He says, and you can’t help but be that light and be that salt of the earth,” Alexander says. “The spirit of excellence brings light because Jesus is light. When you’re listening to Him and you’re following Him and you’re being obedient to Him, it just works.”

Alexander has taken Jesus' words to heart as a mentor to many teenage boys. He can share numerous stories about how letting his light shine in both word and deed has made a significant spiritual impact.

"When I first got to Seattle, there were these junior high kids who would always come to me to talk about Scriptures, and they'd ask me to give them Scriptures to memorize," Alexander says. "I knew they didn't know Jesus. But here they are now — they're seniors in high school — and eight of the kids are saved, on fire for Jesus, walking strong and being godly. How did that happen? I just developed a relationship with those kids.

"About two years ago — I've known them for six years now — they came to me and said, 'You know, Shaun, when we first met you, we weren't saved.' I was like, 'Really?' And they said, 'We just wanted you to sign autographs for us and our friends.' And I said, 'So you were just trading Scriptures for autographs?' And they said, 'Yeah, but we're all fired up now.' But I already knew that, and that's how it works. There are people who want to get close to you because they want something, and that's an opportunity to let your light shine."

For all of the significance that accompanies excellence, Alexander is also aware of the fact that this core value can also be perverted. This happens, for instance, when people who have been gifted with various talents and abilities use them for personal gain instead of for their intended purpose — to glorify God and draw people to Him. To illustrate this point, Alexander points to Paul's words found in Romans 11:29: *"For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance"* (KJV).

"You can be a gifted speaker," Alexander explains. "You can be a gifted football player. You can be taught the truth in the Bible and not follow it, but you've still got your gift. So what happens is you turn your gift into an idol. That's the greatest form of deception. You love the gift and not the giver."

The temptation to focus on the gifts that allow us to strive for excellence as opposed to giving all of our attention to God — the One who supplies those gifts — is something that we need to fight even at an early age. That's why Alexander has always made sure that his three daughters — Heaven, Trinity and Eden — know the difference between the two ways of thinking.

"When my daughter Heaven turned three, I bought her the first toy bike that she ever had. When she saw it, she ran right past the bike and jumped into my arms. That's because she loved the giver more than she loved the gift. And I thought, God, help me continue to teach her to love You more than the gifts that You've given her."

Another temptation associated with excellence is to become so caught up in the pursuit of it and work so hard to attain it — even in the name of Jesus — that time isn't taken to get to know Him. Alexander says that's the same thing as giving it your all while working for a large organization but never taking time to learn more about your employer.

"Paul Allen was my boss when I played for the Seahawks," he says. "He's one of the richest men in the United States. If he walked into the locker room and saw me standing next to one of the guys on the practice squad, Mr. Allen would say, 'Hey, Shaun, how are you doing?' And I'd say, 'I'm good.' And he'd ask, 'Shaun, who's your friend here?' The friend would say, 'I'm on the team. I work for you.' And he would say, 'Oh, I'm sorry. Well, good luck this year.'"

“The two of us guys were both wearing Seahawks’ uniforms. We were getting paid from the same place. We both had the same goal — winning the Super Bowl. But there was one difference: I knew the head of the organization. To the other player, he was just the owner he worked for. People do the same thing with Jesus every day. They work for Jesus, but they don’t really know Him.”

At that point, the desire for excellence becomes an issue of motivation. Is it all about God or is it all about you? “Your motives reflect your heart,” Alexander says. “That’s who you really are. For a lot of people, their motives are not godly. Their motives are selfish. At the end of the day, God’s going to reveal the truth.”

Having reached the pinnacle of success in the world of professional athletics, Alexander has been forced to check his motives on a regular basis. In particular, the 2005 NFL season provided numerous opportunities for him to ask some hard-hitting, introspective questions. In particular, he wanted to make sure he was giving God the glory — both publicly and privately — for his accomplishments, which included an NFL-leading 1,880 rushing yards, an NFL-record 28 total touchdowns (since broken by LaDainian Tomlinson), an appearance in Super Bowl XL (where the Seahawks lost to Pittsburgh) and the coveted NFL Most Valuable Player award.

“It’s a dangerous thing anytime people start calling you valuable and it’s not wrapped around Jesus Christ,” Alexander says. “It’s very easy to fall in that trap of thinking, *Now I’m something* ; or, *Now I’m somebody*. It’s honorable. I wouldn’t mind being called MVP again next year. But at the same time, it really humbles me to say, ‘Okay, God, I want to make sure that I’m Your MVP first.’ A lot runs through your mind. You’re shooting commercials. You’re on top of billboards. Your book’s coming out. All of the sudden you start believing that you’re the world’s MVP. But that’s not the real goal. As exciting as it is, it also brings this soberness that when you’re put up this high, it’s even easier to fall off.”

The Word of God bears out Alexander’s sentiment. According to Proverbs 16:18, an oft-quoted Scripture, *“pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall.”*

Of course, sometimes it’s just life that causes a fall. Such was the case for Alexander during the two seasons that followed his MVP performance. In 2006, he fractured the fourth metatarsal in his left foot during the third week and missed nearly three months of action. The 2007 season was just as devastating, as Alexander was plagued with a plethora of injuries, including a fractured left wrist, a twisted knee and a twisted ankle.

Throughout these difficult circumstances, however, Alexander continued to strive to give his best. While that wasn’t always good enough for the fans or the media — who criticized him for a lack of effort (not realizing the severe pain he was playing with) — he says the true test of excellence is continuing to push toward the prize no matter what obstacles may be waiting ahead. Alexander is quick to point out that this requires honesty with yourself and others. “You have to learn to be real with yourself and be real with your brothers,” he says. “Let’s get back to the truth. The truth sets everybody free.”

Alexander’s paraphrase of John 8:32 (*“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”*) points toward honesty — one of the more infrequently taught aspects of excellence. This in turn goes back to the issue of motivation. With that in mind, Alexander quotes Proverbs 28:13: *“The one who conceals his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them*

will find mercy.”

“God’s going to judge our hearts, and if you conceal sin, you’re not going to prosper,” Alexander says. “So be vulnerable. Learn how to be vulnerable with God. Learn how to be vulnerable with your buddies and your brothers and the ones who you’re mentoring. I will get around people, and it doesn’t take long for them to figure out that I’m much more about Jesus than I am about football or anything else.”

Alexander is driven to be excellent as a football player, as a husband, as a father, as a philanthropist, as a mentor and, most importantly, as a worshiper and follower of God. That’s because he understands the father-child relationship that His Creator wants to have with him. He wants to embrace God the Father with a passion, gratitude and thankfulness that recognizes the Giver of his gifts more than the gifts themselves. That’s the kind of excellence that truly pleases God and can, in turn, make the biggest impact on others.

“The last thing He’s going to say to us is, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant,’” Alexander says. “That is a phrase of affirmation. You can’t help but look at God as the Abba Father, because He’s the One who’s affirming us even to the end.”

And until he hears those words for himself, Alexander will strive to walk out his life with the same spirit of excellence that he has carried thus far.

Go

1. Shaun Alexander talks about the excellence displayed by his high-school coach, Owen Hauck. Who are some hometown heroes who have inspired you because of their excellence? What qualities do they have that make them stand out in the crowd?
2. Read Ephesians 4:1-3. What callings are there on your life? What does the phrase “walk worthy of the calling you have received” mean to you? What are some concrete examples of how a person could follow Alexander’s directive to “walk in the spirit of excellence”?
3. Read 1 John 5:1-15. What are some misconceptions people often have about Christians? What parts of this passage give you the courage to wholeheartedly pursue excellence? What are some things for which you should confidently ask God?
4. Read Romans 11:29. What happens to our talents and gifts if we misuse them? What are some ways we can use our gifts for selfish purposes? What are some ways that we can use those same gifts to glorify God?
5. Read Matthew 5:14-16. What are some ways that God has used excellence in your life as a light to attract others to Him? What are some other areas in your life where excellence could have a similar effect?

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Bible Reference:

1 John 5



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