



"In character, in manners, in style, in all things, the supreme excellence is simplicity."

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

26-Jun-15

The Pursuit of Excellence (Part One)

The American Heritage Dictionary defines *excellence* as "the state, quality, or condition of excelling; superiority." The verb *excel* means "to do or be better than; surpass; to show superiority, surpass others." It and its synonyms—"surpass," "exceed," "transcend," "outdo," "outstrip"—all suggest the idea of going beyond a limit or standard.

Competition or being better than others is a prominent part of these words, but when we consider the pursuit of excellence from a biblical standpoint, we realize that rivalry and superiority are not part of godly excellence. Those who approach life from the viewpoint of [the world](#) typically think of success in terms of beating the competition and of outstripping others, but such is usually done for the person's own glory or to receive praise of others.

"Excellence" is greatly emphasized these days in athletics and in the business world. Yet none of the excellence sought after today is that of which we Christians are to seek. The "excellence" often sought by people of the world concerns records, numbers, money, worldly standards, and the appearance of quality or merit rather than the moral character that emulates the excellencies of our Lord and Savior to His praise and glory.

So, biblically speaking, the pursuit of excellence refers to pursuing and doing the best we can with the gifts and abilities [God](#) gives, that is, giving our best to the glory of God. But ideally, it is done without the spirit of competition or seeking to excel simply to be

better than others.

The apostle Peter speaks to this point in [II Peter 1:3-7](#):

[Christ's] divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your [faith](#) virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly [kindness](#), and to brotherly kindness love.

"Virtue" in verse 5 is the Greek word *areté*, a difficult concept to define. The difficulty can be seen in the various ways it is translated in modern Bibles: "resolution," "[goodness](#)," "moral character," "manliness," "noble character," "real goodness of life," "moral excellence," and simply "excellence."

The key to resolving this seems to be found in the usage of this term in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint. *Areté* is found in [Isaiah 42:8](#), 12, and 43:21 as the Greek translation of a Hebrew word that means "praise."

- [Isaiah 42:8](#): "I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise [*areté*] to carved images."
- [Isaiah 42:12](#): "Let them give glory to the LORD, and declare His praise [*areté*] in the coastlands."
- [Isaiah 43:21](#): "This people I have formed for Myself; they shall declare My praise [*areté*]."

When we compare these Greek Old Testament uses of *areté* with New Testament occurrences of this same term, the meaning begins to come into focus:

- [Philippians 4:8](#) (English Standard Version [ESV]): "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any *excellence*, [*areté*] if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Emphasis ours throughout.)

- [I Peter 2:9](#) (ESV): "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the *excellencies* [*areté*] of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."
- [II Peter 1:3](#) (ESV): "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and *excellence* [*areté*]."

The King James Version's use of "virtue" as a translation of *areté* suggests a singular characteristic or quality of God. However, its Greek usage indicates that we should understand it as those things for which God is praised or praiseworthy. In Isaiah 42 and 43, it is in context with the glory of God. God's glory is one of His excellencies, for which He is worthy of praise.

In summation, the excellence of God is His glorious nature, which we should pursue as the goal of our character development to the praise and glory of God.

In [II Peter 1:5](#), Peter writes we are to "add to" faith. Originally, in the Athenian drama festivals, this term meant "to finance, support, or back a chorus," and the idea of providing financial support is primary to most usages of the word in Christian literature. It is similar to our idiom, "Put your money where your mouth is." What this implies is that Peter is calling upon believers to put everything they have into supporting their faith with virtue, knowledge, self-control, etc.

In our pursuit of excellence, the glorious nature of God, we are to do our very best—give everything we have—to support this precious faith we have been given. In Part Two, we will discuss four points that will aid us in doing that.

- Clyde Finklea

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[A More Excellent Way](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Richard Ritenbaugh, alerting us that we are perpetually bombarded with a deluge of sales pitches and advertisements (all claiming that "this product" is better than all the

rest) marvels that this desire for improvement does not seem to penetrate our spiritual lives. Nominal Christians seem to be satisfied with "just as I am," thinking God will be satisfied with anything when it comes to overcoming sin. We spend an inordinate amount of time trying to improve our computer software. We should be spending an equal amount of time on spiritual improvement. Why are we satisfied with what we are when we know we could be doing much better? God has given us a marvelous sales pitch in Deuteronomy 30, stating that His way is better than our way, bringing blessing and life. The 'fine print' declares we must keep His Commandments and walk in His ways, something the lying competitor Satan assures us is not necessary. Righteousness and disciplining the body is not easy. God wants us to choose what is best, not necessarily what feels good. It is better to trust in God than to put confidence in man. Our physical life, with all its trials and pains, does not compare with our eternity if we place our trust and confidence in God.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Living By Faith and God's Grace](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

In nominal Christianity, God's saving grace is placed at the center of the message of the gospel and is often emphasized to the point of overshadowing many of Christ's other teachings. Agreeing that grace is vital to a Christian's walk with God, John Ritenbaugh defines the term, showing that God gives grace from start to finish in a person's relationship with Him. It cannot be limited merely to justification and His forgiveness of our sins.

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