

Series: Five: Timeless Values for Today's Church

Title: Ministry Excellence

Text: Colossians 3:23

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Local Christian churches exist to lead people to know Christ and make Him known. In short, congregations should foster a strong commitment to Jesus' two great teachings — the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40) and the Great Commitment (Matthew 28:18-20). A local church fulfills Jesus' two great teachings by providing opportunities for people to engage in biblical activities like worship, fellowship, discipleship, and ministry outreach (Acts 2:42). On top of such things, it is important for congregations to develop biblical convictions that undergird their service and work for Christ. In this study, we have already looked at two convictions, or "core values," that drive and direct the ministry of Tabernacle Baptist — Biblical authority and faithful stewardship.

Tabernacle Baptist's third core value is stated as follows — "We desire to glorify God by doing everything to the best of our ability. To minister effectively and faithfully, we realize we must aim to do things to the best of our ability. Tabernacle champions 'ministry excellence' in all that it does." This core value is rooted in Scripture. In His Word, the Lord often encourages us to serve Him wholeheartedly, with full devotion. Scriptures that support this core value include Colossians 3:23; 1 Corinthians 10:31; 1 Corinthians 15:58; 2 Timothy 4:7-8; Ephesians 4:12-15; and 2 Corinthians 8:7. In what follows we will examine our desire for ministry excellence by examining three ideas related to the work and ministry of local churches.

GOD'S WORK

Our conviction concerning excellence in ministry is grounded in Scriptural truth. From the earliest pages of the Bible, we see a precedent for excellence in the created order. Genesis 1 tells of the way God created all things. An interesting word appears on numerous occasions throughout the creation account. In Genesis 1:3-4, we read, "Then God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw that the light was *good*, and God separated the light from the darkness." Notice the Lord's qualitative analysis of His handiwork. He deemed it as being "good."

In English, the word "good" is often overused. Thus, it has lost some of its significance. To say something is "good" can sometimes be seen as a slight. "Good" seems generic. If one wants to emphasize the superior nature of something, such an adjective might be deemed insufficient. Why not use a superlative like "great" or "outstanding?"

Despite modern conceptions of the word "good," Scripture used a Hebrew equivalent of the term in the creation account for a reason. On seven different occasions in Genesis 1, the Lord is depicted as regarding His handiwork as "good" (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). What is the meaning of the Lord's qualitative analysis?

The Hebrew word rendered "good" is one that meant useful, fitting, or "healthy." It referred to something that was advantageous, beneficial, or profitable. As used in

regard to the created order, it spoke of God's creation as being "conducive for" and "enhancing to" human life.¹ The repeated appearance of the term in Genesis 1 was meant to underscore the way God's handiwork was good for supporting life on Earth. One has said, "Everything, including the bounded darkness and sea, satisfies God's purpose. Because God is completely benevolent, as well as all-powerful, humanity has nothing to fear from creation."² Though creation would eventually be marred by sin, it was initially good. The Lord finely tuned it to support human life.

Looking at the use of the word rendered "good" throughout Genesis 1 reveals that this interpretation is correct. The Lord first pronounced that light was good (Genesis 1:4), because He knew that the process of photosynthesis would ensure the growth of vegetation that would give sustenance to animals, birds, fish, and humans. He then called the parting of waters from the dry land "good" (Genesis 1:10), as both the newly formed landmasses and bodies of water would help support life. Next, He called plants and trees good (Genesis 1:12), as He knew they would provide food. The day and night were also deemed "good" (Genesis 1:18), as they would govern the seasons that would yield harvests. The creation of birds and sea creatures was all regarded as "good" (Genesis 1:21), as they would serve as food for both humans and animals. Last, God pronounced all animals as "good" (Genesis 1:25), knowing that such living beings would be used for food, industry, clothing, and labor.

At the end of the creation account, the Lord regarded all He made as being "very good indeed" (Genesis 1:31). The last verse of Genesis 1 contained language that was more emphatic than previous references. Instead of being simply "good," all was depicted as being "very good indeed." The Bible portrayed the Lord's work as being completely and unequivocally beneficial and advantageous to human life.

God's method in creating provides a precedent for His people. As we live and work within His creation, we should aim to be image-bearers of His nature (Genesis 1:26-27). Like Him, we should steward, manage, and work to contribute to the good of the world He has made. Through our labor in the home or at the workplace, we should make it our goal to bless both God and others. Concerning the place of such work in the Christian life, one has said, "From the beginning, God created human beings to be working creatures. Working hard corresponds to the nature God gave us."³

Nowadays many within the world of business talk about "adding value" to customer's lives through business endeavors. God was the first to perform value-adding work. His creation contributed to the good of human society. It provided life-sustaining resources. Like our Creator, we should work zealously to add value to others in all our work. Such is especially true in regard to our service for the Lord in the church. Scripture says, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31)

¹ Ross, Allen P. *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 108.

² Waltke, Bruce K. *Genesis: A Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 57.

³ Vandrunen, David. *Christian Anthropology and the Moral Life. Table* (Sanford, FL: TableTalk, Sept 2022). 21.

THE CREATION MANDATE

After depicting the Lord's acts of creation, the Bible tells of the way He commissioned mankind to engage in work similar to His. In Genesis 1:28, we read, "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth.'" Many refer to the words of Genesis 1:28 as the Lord's "Creation Mandate" or "Cultural Mandate" for humankind. Interestingly, the Creation Mandate was repeated after the flood. The Lord told Noah, "The fear and terror of you will be in every living creature on the earth, every bird of the sky, every creature that crawls on the ground, and all the fish of the sea. They are placed under your authority" (Genesis 9:2). The repetition of the Lord's mandate is telling. Humanity has a distinct purpose. It is to be continually involved with managing and stewarding the earth.

Within the Lord's mandate for Adam and Eve, Moses used two words to speak of God's desire for humanity. The first ("subdue") was a political term in Moses' day.⁴ It meant "to bring something or someone under control."⁵ The second word ("rule") portrayed the act of exercising authority granted by another.⁶ Together, the terms were often used in military contexts. They painted a picture of an invading hoard defeating a town and taking control of it.⁷ Moses' language strongly conveyed humankind's responsibility to work hard as caretakers and managers of the Lord's creation. Men and women are to work heartily within God's creation for God's glory. Charles Spurgeon once said, "Tis is the portion of God's saints — to work, and to find a reward in so doing. God is the God of labourers."⁸

The New Testament confirms that men and women are to be active in taking dominion of God's creation. James affirmed, "Every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and fish is tamed by humankind" (James 3:7). Man stands atop the pyramid of creation. He has been made to subdue and steward all that God has created. These truths should compel us to be responsible stewards of the Lord's created order (Proverbs 12:10, 13:23; Luke 16:1-13). Within the Lord's Creation Mandate we have a filter for understanding the way in which we are to use agriculture, technology, science, healthcare, medicine, leadership, management systems, tools, trades, crafts, machines, personnel, art, music, education, and other disciplines for the glory of God.

Within the creation mandate, we also see a precedent for fervent and faithful service within the church. The Bible says, "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58). Local churches and their

⁴ Walton, John H. *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 132.

⁵ Walton, 132.

⁶ Walton, 132.

⁷ Morris, Henry M. *The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976), 76.

⁸ Renihan, James M. C.H. Spurgeon's Treasury of David – Preaching from the Psalms. *The Banner of Truth Magazine: Aug & Sept 2021*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust), 28.

members should strive to work hard in all types of ministries — whether ministries to children, students, young couples, empty nesters, or senior adults. Furthermore, concentrations should be concerned to perform all ministries in a spirit of faithful excellence, knowing that the Lord has commissioned people to work well for His glory. Worship programs, teaching ministries, outreach strategies, missions engagement, and more should all be done with an eye on pleasing the Lord.

THE NEW TESTAMENT MANDATE

When we turn to the pages of the New Testament, we also find that God's people are called to exhibit excellence in worship and service. The Bible says, "And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17). It is important to note that Paul's words were uttered to a local church. In addition, it is important to note that his words were given within the context of a conversation concerning worship and ministry within the church. Just a verse earlier, the apostle had said, "Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts." (Colossians 3:16).

In giving instructions on how it should function, Paul encouraged the church, whether in "word or in deed," to "do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." The phrase "word or deed" was often used in the ancient world to speak of the two realms of action that encompass all of human life. Every external human activity can be thought of as being associated with either a person's speech or conduct. According to Paul, everything the church does should be done with an eye on pleasing the Lord.

The church at Colossae was plagued by inferior Christian teaching that diminished both the person and work of Jesus. One only needs to consider Paul's words in Colossians 1:15-18 to see that the apostle was concerned with presenting a high view of Jesus. In admonishing the church, the apostle instructed them to "do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus." The concept of a "name" in the ancient world represented the character of a person. As used by Paul, the concept implied that the Colossians were to perform all acts of worship and service in the church with a concern for the character and will of Jesus.

Paul's words reveal that churches are to have a foremost concern for pursuing Christ. The church at Colossae had a number of issues. The church was plagued by sexual sin (Colossians 3:5-7) and social sin (Colossians 3:8-11). In addition, the church needed a renewed commitment to the Great Commission (Colossians 3:12-14) and biblical worship (Colossians 3:15-16). Paul's words in Colossians 3:17 revealed that a healthy regard for Christ was the solvent for all of the spiritual sicknesses at Colossae. When a congregation has a holy zeal for the person and work of Jesus, it will faithfully embrace its biblical responsibilities.

Paul's admonition to the Colossians is worth repeating to modern congregations. Many local churches are weak and lethargic in worship and ministry endeavors because they have the wrong focus. The seeker-sensitive movement and the church-growth craze has led many churches to start with the wrong premise in church life. Many start with the question, "What does our community want?" While

the Great Commandment certainly encourages us to consider the needs and welfare of our neighbors (Matthew 22:37-40), it is important to remember that the church's first priority is to glorify Christ.

When a congregation or a people become inordinately concerned with the whims and wishes of fallen humanity, spiritual peril is imminent. The Bible says, "The fear of mankind is a snare, but the one who trusts in the Lord is protected" (Proverbs 29:25). By looking unto Jesus, believers receive power and perseverance to serve the Lord faithfully and with excellence (Hebrews 12:1-2). Such a Christ-centered approach to worship and ministry also results in greater glory for Christ. When Jesus is the centerpiece of church life, more people are drawn to worship Him (Matthew 5:16).