

**PURSUING
EXCELLENCE
IN
CHARACTER**

AMOS TARFA

**Pursuing
Excellence in
Character:**

Principles and Lessons in Character,
Leadership and Friendships

Amos Tarfa

This book is for those who want to make a difference and also want to be the best at whatever they find themselves doing and give glory to God. It is meant to encourage you to be the person God wants you to be, because it is only then you can be assured you are pursuing genuine excellence.

Dedication

I dedicate this book to The Most Excellent One, Jesus Christ.

Thank you for transforming my heart, I pray you will
transform the heart of anyone who reads this.

Acknowledgements

I want to specifically thank you for choosing to read this book. I hope you will learn from it and encourage others to also do their best in all they choose to do for the glory of God. Take care, and thank you again for being willing to learn from this book.

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Note: Certain Parts of this book were originally included in 2 different books by the author. Achieving Excellence as a Young Person and Christianity 201: The Pursuit of Excellence.

Some of the lessons were written in 2009 but I hope you can still learn some things from them.

How to Use This Book

The aim of the book is to teach you ways you can excel in the things you do to the glory of God. Discussion questions are included at the end of the book. My friend Eric Svoboda helped with me with the questions. I list songs that I feel are relevant to the book at the end of each section in case you choose to listen and learn the major theme I was referring to in that section.

You can always check the website or the blog for updates on the various sections. I will also put a longer list of resources and materials for further study on the website www.christianity201.com.

In order to get the most out of this book, watch for these components of each chapter:

1. **Bible Reading:** There will be a Bible reading at the beginning of each chapter and references to different passages throughout the chapter.
2. **Practical Applications:** At the end of each chapter will be a list of practical ways you can apply the message of the chapter in your own life.
3. **Songs to Consider:** There will be a list of songs that could help the reader remember the message I present in the chapter.
4. **Questions:** The questions for a chapter will be located in the Discussion Questions section at the back of the book.

Introduction

In the other books in this series on Excellence, I have focused on the foundation of pursuing excellence. I looked at ways we can go deeper in the Christian faith. I also encouraged you to use the gifts God has blessed you with, for His glory.

In this book, I will look at certain principles that can help to guide how you handle certain practical aspects of life today using God's word as a guide. These principles are from God's Word, and I pray you will spend more time looking at them closely. There are many books that talk about humility, leadership, friendships and principles in general, so I hope you will look for more books on these issues and learn more to the glory of God. I am simply presenting a few thoughts on these issues.

Chapter 1

Humility: Remaining Humble in the Pursuit of Excellence

Bible Reading: The Story of King Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4)

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble”
(James 4:6b).

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11).

In this chapter, I want to pause and talk about a very important virtue in the Christian faith—and the opposite of it. This virtue is humility and the opposite is pride. As you pursue excellence, you will notice that some people will choose not to join you in the pursuit of excellence. They might even persecute you for your pursuit. Do not allow that hold you back, but instead continue to pursue excellence with humility. There is much more that could be said about humility, but I want to use this chapter to simply remind you of the blessings of being humble. When we excel, the world expects us to take

all the credit, but I want to remind you that God deserves all the glory, since He enables us to excel.

In his book, *Humility: True Greatness*, C.J. Mahaney describes humility by saying “Humility is honestly assessing ourselves in light of God’s holiness and our sinfulness.”ⁱ Do not compare yourself with anyone, instead look to God and ask Him to make you the person He wants you to be, as you get rid of the sin within you. If you truly want to pursue excellence God’s way, you have to learn to be humble. Pride will try to come in, but you must remember to pray against it and ask God to help you. Do not look down on anyone; instead keep looking up to God and asking Him to show you how you ought to behave toward those around you who refuse to pursue excellence for His glory.

C.S Lewis called pride a spiritual cancer: “It eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense.”ⁱⁱ Be careful not to allow pride to rule over you. Pride will make you look down on those who are not pursuing excellence. The reason you are able to pursue excellence is because God is working in you to do it. It is by God’s grace you are able to excel, so remember to give Him glory and pray that your friends will also join you in the pursuit of excellence. When pride comes into a person’s life, it comes with other sins. Pride will hinder you from admitting that sin is present. If you don’t acknowledge that you are proud, then you will start drifting away from the track that leads to excellence. Examine

your life daily and make sure you have a teachable and humble spirit, so that God is glorified and the pursuit of excellence becomes easier.

Remember to keep in step with God and ask Him to help you never to think more highly of yourself than you should. Paul tells us not to think too highly of ourselves in Romans 12. There are many people in the Bible who felt that they prospered by their own power, and God dealt with them severely. An example is King Nebuchadnezzar. God punished him for his pride. Here is what Nebuchadnezzar said:

“Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, “This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.”

—Daniel 4:30-32

Here is what Nebuchadnezzar said after God punished him:

At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: “What have you done?” At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

—Daniel 4:34-37

God is the one who gives us our talents and gifts, so let us use them to His glory while remaining humble. God opposes the proud, so we have to avoid allowing pride into our lives.

When you start depending on yourself or your accomplishments, you forget who is supposed to be in charge. Pride will lead you off the track of excellence. If you want to excel, stay on track with God. Remember, it is not just about using your talents; it is about using them to the glory of God.

As you pursue excellence, people may choose to call you foolish or boring, but I want you to remember that it is only what God thinks about you that is true. God made you the way you are, so He knows everything about you. He told Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jeremiah 1:5). God knows everything about you and me, so He is the one we should listen to. Make sure you look to Him to learn who you really are.

In Hebrews 12, the Bible tells us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Jesus told us that we will be persecuted for believing in Him. This is because we ought to hate evil. Do not allow what someone thinks about you to hold you back from becoming the person God wants you to become. As you pursue excellence, remember God is the one giving you strength; continue to keep in touch with Him and give Him the glory as you excel with all humility and thanks.

Man need only look back to the origin of existence, and he will acknowledge that he owes everything to God.

“It is not the style of clothes one wears, neither the kind of automobile one drives, nor the amount of money one has in the bank, that counts. These mean nothing. It is simply service that measures success.” —George Washington Carver

Practical Applications

1. Make sure you make time to pause and reflect on your life to make sure you are not letting pride in.
2. Read books on humility and learn ways that you can become more like Christ as you serve people with humility.
3. Pride will lead us to glorify ourselves instead of God. Remember to always give God the glory as He enables you to do wonders for Him.
4. Spend time looking at the different choices Bible characters made in regards to being humble or being proud. Read about the kings of Israel and Judah. Also look at the life of Naaman in the book of Esther.
5. Find someone who can help remind you to seek humility when they see that your pride is beginning to come to the surface. Pray for your pride and ask God to remind you of your need for Him.

Songs to Consider

Chris Sligh: “Empty Me”

Jeremy Camp: “Lay Down My Pride”

Chapter 2

From Thoughts to Destiny

Bible Reading: The Way to the Father (John 14:1-7)

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2).

Watch your thoughts: they become your words.

Watch your words: they become your actions.

Watch your actions: they become your habits.

Watch your habits: they become your character.

Watch your character: it determines your destiny.

—YMCA motto

In this chapter, I hope to address the different components of a person's life. By this I am referring to thoughts, words, actions, habits and character. The Bible tells us to glorify God in all we do (1 Corinthians 10:31). I hope to encourage you to glorify God in these areas. I will skip the “actions” component for now and examine it in the next chapter. My prayer is that you will excel in all these to the glory of God.

Watch Your Thoughts

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (Philippians 4:8).

“Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God’s right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth” (Colossians 3:1-2, NLT).

God looks at our thoughts. People will only judge you on the basis of *what* you do, but God will judge you based on *why* you did what you did. If you make a mistake in life, some people will condemn you and judge you based on that mistake you made. The problem with this judgment is that it is focused only on the act, and it does not consider the thought behind it. On the other hand, if you do something the world considers good—maybe sponsor someone to school or avoid breaking the laws of the land—people will give you credit because of your choices. However your reasons for doing what you did might not be in line with what God wants. You could be doing these so-called good things for your glory instead of God’s glory, which is wrong because we are supposed to give God glory at all times. God is the only one who knows our deepest

thoughts. God's judgment is true, because He looks at the intentions of our hearts.

You have to be careful with the things you allow into your heart and mind. If you keep putting the wrong words, movies and songs into your mind, then your words and thoughts will be affected. Your mind is like a control tower, telling you what to do. The Bible tells us we should not follow the pattern of this world, but instead we should make sure our thinking is transformed (Romans 12:2). We need to think about things with God's Word as our foundation. The Bible is the true Word of God, so we need to make sure we do not allow any ungodly philosophy to hold our thoughts captive (Colossians 2:8). Your thoughts can either hinder your progress or put you on track in the pursuit of excellence. Here is an illustration to show the effects of our thinking.

There was a time people thought that the earth was flat. I am sure it was quite hard to convince them of the mistake of this thought with scientific knowledge and the tools that were available. The people who believed this might not travel too far from home, because they might be afraid they would fall off the end of the earth. This belief would limit how far they went in life in regards to exploring other continents. On the other hand, those who believed that the earth was spherical might go ahead and travel around the world to see what it had to offer. Our thoughts on different issues can have a very big impact on our actions. I hope you will not remain in the realm

of the “flat earth” in any area of your life, and I hope you will move out to make a difference wherever and whenever you get a chance to do so.

What you read will shape the way you think, and the way you think will affect the way you act... which will become a habit, and then your habits will determine the kind of character you will have. Be careful with the things you allow into your mind and heart as you pursue excellence.

Watch Your Words

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen”

(Ephesians 4:29).

“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:5-6).

Make sure the words you speak serve as encouragement for those who hear you. As Christians, we have to represent Jesus by the words we speak. Speak to people in love at all times and invest in their lives to the glory of God. Let the words you speak have meaning. There are so many self-destructive arguments around us today. I am not telling you about these

arguments so you go around making fun of those who say them. Instead I am telling you to warn you of the kind of words people are using and how they contradict themselves. Avoid contradicting yourself, because you will end up saying nothing. Here are two examples of self-destructive arguments and the reasons why they self-destruct:

Self destructive argument #1: Every idea is equally true and valid. If every idea is equally true and valid, then your opinion that says, “Every idea is equally true and valid” is just as true and valid as an opinion which says, “Some ideas are better and more valid than others.” If that is the case, then you defending your position that “every idea is equally true and valid” will imply that your idea is better and more valid than mine, and if yours is more valid than mine, then your idea that “every idea is equal” breaks down. Because if your idea is true and mine is not, then your idea is better than mine. If yours is better than mine, then you have shown that my argument is valid while yours is false, because my idea admitted that some ideas are better than others while yours did not. If every idea were equal to every other idea, then you would not be defending your idea. The two key words here are “every” and “equal.”

Self-destructive argument #2: Don't impose your views on others, since that is just your opinion. You are *imposing* your views by telling someone not to impose their views. Everyone has to admit they are imposing something.

They might be doing it indirectly, but they are still doing it. This also applies to saying, “That’s just your opinion.” To say that’s just your opinion, you would have to acknowledge that telling someone, “That’s just your opinion,” is an opinion, which is your opinion, so you will have to explain why your opinion is more valid.

I admit that there are ways that people sometimes shout the truth at you and force you to take it in, to the point where they start arguing with you. This is not what I am referring to as “impose” here. I am talking about a simple conversation, which people take and refer to as imposition. No matter what we do, we will impose a view on people. The question is, how valid is our opinion?

Be careful what you say. Tell the truth, and give God glory.

Watch Your Habits

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act, but a habit.” —Aristotle

A habit is something you do over and over again. It could be good or bad. I am praying you will learn to pick up good habits and encourage others to do the same. Whether you spend your time doing the right thing or doing the wrong thing, you will eventually get better at whatever you are doing.

This is in line with sowing and reaping. If we spend time doing things that gratify the flesh, we will die. On the other hand, if we spend time doing the things that please God, we will live. In the section on academics in this book, I will show you the role that the habits you pick up in life can have on you. For example, if you spend time solving math problems every day, you will get better at mathematics. With God on your side, you do not have to worry about how to keep doing the right thing. All you have to do is to depend on Him and ask Him to give you the grace and strength.

In June of 2002, my dad encouraged me to start playing tennis. I started playing tennis at the Ikeja tennis club in Nigeria. I did not like tennis at first, but I eventually liked it and today I enjoy playing for the University of Wisconsin Superior tennis club team. There is, however, one big problem with my tennis games. When I was learning to play, the coach spent over three weeks teaching me how to use my forehand. After learning the forehand, I spent some time learning the backhand. There was little time to learn how to serve, so I had to learn that on my own. I have not practiced enough to serve very well. On the other hand, I have received compliments from many people about my forehand. They probably wonder why my serves are not fast and accurate, but I know the reason. I have not developed the habit of practicing my serves. I have developed the habit of practicing my forehand. If I start practicing my serves and make this practice a habit, I am sure

my serves will improve. Be careful what you choose to make a habit; make sure God approves of it.

Watch Your Character

“May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ—for this will bring much glory and praise to God” (Philippians 1:11, NLT).

“Our character is measured by what we do when no one is looking or present.” —Bill Hybels

Character could be considered a virtue, and it could also be regarded as an attribute. It is the sum total of our habits and desires. As Christians, we have to make sure we have the character of Christ. When we talk to people about how they ought to behave, we have to be careful in telling them whom to imitate. The character of Jesus is the character we should encourage people to pursue, not our character. It is always good to point to Christ, because He is perfect. As people look at our lives, they should see Jesus working. No matter where you find yourself, make sure you show the character of Christ, whether you are alone or you are surrounded by people.

“Men of power are feared. Men of wealth are envied. Men of genius are admired. Men of character are or can be trusted.”

—Arthur Friedman

Martin Luther King, Jr., said that he wanted a day to come when people would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. We need to stop looking at people and judging them by the color of their skin, or other components of their outward appearance. Jesus said, “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). We need to learn to relate to people based on the content of their heart, not how they appear. A person’s appearance has limitations, and it says little or nothing about the character of the person.

In the book of Samuel, we are told that Samuel was sent to anoint a king from the house of Jesse. When Samuel arrived, he saw the first child and thought that he was the chosen one. God reminded Samuel that man looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart. I want to encourage you to have the character and attitude of Christ. This is described in Philippians 2. As you pursue excellence, I pray that your *character* will be pleasing to God.

Destiny: The Importance of Having a Vision

“A goal without a plan is just a wish.” —Antoine de Saint-

Exupery

Having a vision for the future is very important. This is because it enables you to throw unnecessary things out of your life, and start putting necessary things in. For example, if your vision is to become a pediatrician, it will help if you start reading books about the human body. A vision shapes how you ought to live. Get a vision, and don't just live your life for the here and now alone. Remember to dedicate your vision to God and ask Him to show you if it is in His will. Ask Him to give you wisdom to start working hard.

At this point, I want you to get a journal and write down what you want to do for God and what He wants you to do as you grow up. By this I mean a vision. Commit it to God, and ask Him to help you. A vision will help you stay on track. As you watch a game of soccer, you will realize that the players on each team need to know where they are expected to score. When they figure this out, they keep moving towards the goal, whether their fans support them or not. Please keep your eyes on God and ask Him to bless your vision and goals, whether people support you or not. Remember that when you achieve your goals, God is the one who gave you what it took, so He should get the glory. As we excel in our goals and aspirations God places in our hearts, God should be glorified.

“Put your idea into imagination. Take the imagination and document it into a plan. Put the plan into action. If you think it, you can do it.” —Myles Munroe

Practical Applications

1. Examine the rating of the movies you watch and the music you listen to.
2. Examine the books you read and the ideas that you take in.
3. Watch the way you spend time with people, and make sure they don't make you start putting down God's Word.
4. Make sure you spend time feeding your mind with God's Word every day. There are many lies going around, so you have to be on guard.
5. Try and get someone to hold you accountable to the words you use when spending time with people.
6. Make sure you check on the things you have made a habit. Ask yourself, "Do they glorify God?" Remember habits will eventually determine your character.
7. Here are some questions you could consider as you go on in life:
 - What will you live for?
 - How are you moving towards your goal?
 - How are you spending your time?

Songs to Consider

Hymn: "Be Thou My Vision"

Chapter 3

Choosing to Do the Right Thing to the Glory of God

Bible Reading: The Choices of Solomon (1 Kings 3:1-28, 1 Kings 11:1-13)

In this chapter, I will look at three issues that have to be considered when a person chooses to do anything. The first thing is that actions have consequences. The second thing is why you do what you do. I will examine two reasons why people often do what they do and mention a third reason which is a valid reason for doing anything. The last thing I will discuss is what I call “good ideas vs. bad ideas.” Some ideas will lead you to trouble, and I will explain this later in the chapter.

Sowing, Reaping and Long-term Thinking

“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows” (Galatians 6:7).

Watch Your Actions

“Do All the good you can
By All the means you can
In All the ways you can
In All the places you can
At All the times you can
To All the people you can
As long as you ever can.”

—John Wesley’s motto

It is an established fact that whatever a man sows he must reap. Everything one does in life, either good or bad, has repercussions and consequences. Often, people regret certain things they do because they did not care while they were doing them. The important things you fail to care about in life will affect you later on. Stories and lives of people around us attest to this fact. It is therefore of great importance to consider carefully the effect of the things we plan to do. It is always good to look at what the Bible tells us and the long-term implications of what we want to do.

Let us therefore look at two factors that could help us avoid a mistake:

1. Observation
2. Experience

Observation

Observation is one of the primary ways of learning in life. It is taking cognizance of the events around you. The truth is you don't have to partake in an event to learn from it. Other people's experience can be a very good way of learning in life.

Older people can tell us what they have gone through so that we can learn from them and not repeat their mistakes. They can sometimes point out to us that there is a pit in front of us which we should avoid falling into. However, many of us want to fall into the pit first, thinking that when we come out we will change. We should take advantage of the good stories and experiences of older people and others around us to guide our steps so that we don't repeat their mistakes. This will help us to excel in life.

Avoid the unnecessary mistakes that have been committed by others. Learn from older people, and then you can teach others.

Experience

It is often said that experience is the best teacher. We have to understand that this is no reason for us to indulge in some acts, saying we want to experience them for ourselves. We must be careful when we do this, because we might not survive the act, especially if it is a destructive activity.

It is understandable, if we do not have people to advise and tell us the consequences of our actions, that we would make

a mistake. But we have a lot of people who can mentor us; teachers, parents, some of our colleagues, so let's listen to them. When we apply the truth they tell us to our lives, the pursuit of excellence becomes much easier.

There is actually no time to do evil or repeat the mistakes of those who have gone before us. Life has obstacles, ups and downs, bumps, dead ends and dangerous turns. We need God to direct us all the way as we pursue excellence.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path”
(Psalms 119:105).

Do your best to think about your actions and ensure that you have good reasons for whatever you do. Actions not backed by concrete reasons could be futile and useless. Do your best to engage in activities that will give you productive and useful experiences.

Why Do You Do What You Do?

There are three primary reasons people choose to do what they do (there may be more, but I will focus on these three). One is the “everybody is doing it” syndrome. Avoid doing things and justifying them by saying that everyone is taking part.

Following the crowd is not healthy, because the crowd could be going in the wrong direction. Learn to stand for the truth even if you will be alone. Remember Jesus said we should

enter through the narrow gate in Matthew 7. “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13-14). Everybody taking part in an act does not make the act right if that act is wrong. If the Bible says that a certain act is wrong then it is wrong whether people choose to follow it or not.

The second reason many people do what they do is tradition: the “it has always been like that” factor. “Jesus replied, ‘And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?’” (Matthew 15:3). Traditions are things that are handed down from the past. Following bad traditions could be a hindrance to progress. Don’t ever do wrong things and justify yourself by saying it has always been like that. Throw out wrong traditions. Even if something wrong has been taking place for a long period of time, it remains wrong. If you want to excel, learn to throw out bad traditions that can act as burdens; don’t allow them stop you from becoming who God wants you to be. These traditions could include laziness, procrastination and so on.

A third reason people do things is to glorify God: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). The Bible tells us to glorify God in all we do, so I am hoping that this will be the foundation for all your decisions. God is worthy of all our

praise and glory, so let our actions show that we love Him and let us live for His glory.

For every action we take, let's remember there are consequences which we will have to face.

Good Ideas vs. Bad Ideas

Here are some questions to consider when making decisions:

Will God be glorified?

What does the Bible say?

What are the long-term implications?

How does it affect those around me?

Remember the first two questions are the most important. We were created to bring glory to God, and we can find ways to do this from the Bible so we need to look at what God wants first. In the last chapter I talked about the problem with the phrase “all ideas are equally valid and true.” With this philosophy, you will notice that both bad ideas and good ideas are supposed to be equal. If this is the case then doing your homework, which is a good idea, is just as valid as not doing your homework, which is a bad idea. If you want to excel in your academics, then you are expected to do your homework. If someone tells you not to do your homework, then that should be considered a bad idea because it will affect your overall grade in the long run. Some ideas are good and some are bad.

In 1 Kings 3 and 11, Solomon's story shows us the implications of obedience and disobedience to God's Word. Solomon started out strong, but he sinned against God by getting married to the women that God had warned him about. There were consequences to his bad decisions. We have to always look at the implications of our decisions.

There are four situations we often find ourselves in when making decisions. First, there are times we know the right thing to do, and we do it. This is good, especially if we are using the Bible as our standard. For example, the Bible teaches us to preach the gospel (Matthew 28:18-20), so when we do this we are doing the right thing. We should also encourage people to do what is right for the glory of God.

Second, there are also times that we know the right thing, but we choose to rebel against God and do the wrong thing. For example, if we choose to reject what Jesus said about preaching the gospel, then we are disobeying. It is not just about knowing the truth; it is about what you do with the truth. I pray you will not just be a hearer of the Word, but also a doer of the Word. James states this in the first chapter of his book: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22).

The third situation we sometimes find ourselves in is when we know that something is wrong according to the Bible, and we still take part in it. This is unhealthy. In Matthew 6, Jesus tells us not to worry about anything:

So do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

—Matthew 6:31-34

And finally, there are times we know what the wrong thing is, so we move away from it and go God’s way. We don’t just condemn the act, but we also encourage others to condemn it. We need to encourage people to look to God’s Word for the answers to their challenges. We need to make sure that we do not approve of the things that God disapproves of.

“Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them”
(Romans 1:32).

When You Know The	And You
Right Thing	Choose To Do It, That Is Obedience
Right Thing	Choose Not To Do It, That Is Disobedience
Wrong Thing	Choose To Do It, That Is Disobedience
Wrong Thing	Choose Not To Do It, That Is Obedience

From these four categories, I want to encourage you to pick the first one and the last one. If you know what the right thing is, as defined by the Bible, do it and encourage others to also obey. If you know what the wrong thing is, then please don't do it, and encourage others to also move away from it so that God is glorified. Make sure you correct people with the right motive, which is to glorify God and become more like Christ.

No matter what you choose to do, there will be people who love you and those who will dislike you. Remember Jesus said that the world will hate us because we hate evil. Paul reminded us in Romans 12 not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Obeying God always wins. He knows what is best for you, so please listen to Him.

Remember to do things that God approves of. We are to show that we love Him by the way we live our lives. If you want to excel in the decisions you make, make sure you acknowledge God. He is the one that can lead you in the path of excellence.

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).

Practical Applications

1. When you want to make a decision, spend time considering what God's says about the issue.
2. Always remember: choices have consequences. Think before you act. Thinking through the questions asked in the chapter could be a good starting point.
3. Examine the choices you make and ask yourself, "Why do I do what I do?" Does it glorify God?

Songs to Consider

Casting Crowns: "Slow Fade"

Chapter 4

The Power of Friendships

Bible Reading: David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18, 19 and 20)

“He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm” (Proverbs 13:20).

“Imagine how different our world would look if we gave the kind of love to others that God has given us through Jesus.”

—Marvin Williams

In this chapter, I will look at the types of friendships, effects of friendships and importance of friendships. I want to encourage you to read the story of David and Jonathan and learn from their friendship. I am talking about basic friendships, not dating relationships that lead to marriage.

According to Dr. Charles Stanley, friends are people who accept you just as you are and love you too much to leave you that way.ⁱⁱⁱ Friends help remind us of what really matters in life. We all need friendships. With friends, we can get support as we go through life. In the book of Daniel, we see

that Daniel and his friends were willing to stand for God even when things were tough.

Types of Friendships

In chemistry, you learn about two types of bonds: covalent bonds and ionic bonds. Ionic bonds are formed when an element receives electrons or donates electrons to another element. For example, table salt (sodium chloride, NaCl) is formed when sodium (Na) gives its electrons to chlorine (Cl) and chlorine accepts those electrons so that a bond is formed. On the other hand, covalent bonds are formed when two atoms or elements share electrons and both benefit. An example is methane. A carbon atom bonds covalently with four hydrogen atoms to form methane (natural gas). Why am I talking about chemistry and bonds? Because most times, friendships also fall into these two categories. There are people who just want to take away from you all the time, and there are others who are willing to give back. I have been guilty of having ionic friendships and demanding from others continuously. As we make friends, let us be careful not to be selfish, thereby taking from people all the time without asking if they need anything and encouraging them.

When you apply heat to a container with water, the temperature rises and the bonds start breaking. As you make friends, there will be time heat is applied and conflict arises. When conflict arises, make sure you handle it the way the

Bible teaches us to handle it. Learn to forgive. Jesus talked about the connection between forgiveness and prayer in Matthew 5:21-26. Do your best to communicate and apologize when things go wrong. In order to avoid conflict, make sure you tell one another what you like and dislike. Communication is key to creating friendships that last.

Effects of Friendships

“Do not be misled: Bad company corrupts good character”
(1 Corinthians 15:33).

Just as your friends can influence you, you can also influence your friends. The issue of influence is very important, because it could either make you a better person or hold you back from being a better person.

People always want approval, so they look for friends who will accept them and approve what they do. Be careful with people who approve the bad things you do, things that God does not approve of. Do not allow the pressure of those who accept you to lead you into sin. Your friends are not perfect, so they might encourage you to do the wrong thing, but God is perfect so it is His approval we should seek.

Your friends greatly influence your life, so, please, if you want to excel in your life, make sure you walk with people who are focused and serious. If you choose to walk with people who are not focused, be alert and make sure you

encourage them to get serious with life. Remember to do this in love.

Importance of Friendships

“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10).

“As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another”
(Proverbs 27:17).

We need friends for support and encouragement. It is always good to have someone who can listen to you when you are down. But remember: friends are important, but they should not take the place of God. This is because friends can be inconsistent, but God remains the same.

Friends can commit to pray for one another, and friends can also help to keep us on track. A good friend will be willing to tell you the truth, even if it is going to hurt your friendship. Our friendships should glorify God, so be careful if your friends don't correct you when you do something wrong.

There are many Bible stories on friendships. Spend some time learning from Bible characters that had friends.

Friendships are a blessing, and they are important. Friends can hold us accountable as we pursue excellence, so let us watch closely as we also encourage our friends.

Practical Applications

1. Examine the people you spend time with. Are they having a bad influence on you? Are they holding you back? Do you have a healthy relationship with them?
2. Make sure you serve as a person who encourages your friends. We all need words of encouragement.
3. Spend time studying David and Jonathan's friendship and draw out as many lessons as possible.
4. Learn to ask your friends if there is anything you can help them with.

Songs to Consider

Joseph Scriven, Charles Converse: "What a Friend We Have In Jesus"

Chapter 5

Components of Leadership and Outreach: Going the Extra Mile

Bible Reading: The Story of Joshua (Joshua 1)

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Colossians 3:23-24).

True leaders are not afraid to surround themselves with people of ability and then give them opportunities for greatness.

—Warren W. Wiersbe

Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may

be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

—Joshua 1:6-9

There is a lot that could be said about leadership. There are many books, countless seminars and many websites that talk about leadership. I am simply going to present some virtues that will help you as a leader. Later in the chapter, I will show you why it is good to make a difference wherever you find yourself.

In this chapter, I am mostly looking at leadership positions for high school and college positions.

Inward Leadership: Commitment and Dedication

Leaders ought to be dedicated and committed to whatever position they find themselves in. It is not about how much you do; it is about how well you do what you have been called to do. Whatever you lay your hands to do, give your best and give God the glory (Colossians 3).

Inward Leadership: Integrity

I read about a story a few years ago. A couple drove to a fast food restaurant to buy some snacks, and the attendant gave them their package. They drove far away, and when they opened their package, they saw that it was filled with money. They drove back to the fast food restaurant and returned the money saying, “Sorry, you made a mistake. Here is your pack of money.” This is wonderful, but how many people can do this? Integrity requires consistency. Integrity involves doing the right even when no one is watching.

Inward Leadership: Transparency

When we say something is transparent, we mean we can see through it. This is how we should be. Let us not have anything hidden behind our backs; instead let people be able to see through us. Throw out all the things that will make people doubt your character. Transparent people are easily understood. Your lifestyle should not be complicated or deceitful.

Inward Leadership: Time Management

Please spend time at the end of the day reflecting on how you spent your time. Time is very important. In my high school we had a clock that was placed close to the entrance, and it said, “Every second counts, use it wisely.” I hope you consider this principle. Both the rich and poor have twenty-four hours in a day. As a leader, make sure you use your time wisely and plan

it out well. The way you use your time will ultimately determine how far you go as leader. Planning is very important with every resource you have.

As a leader, you should bring out the best in the people you meet. Do your best to empower and encourage them as they look up to you for guidance. Make sure you keep growing and learning leadership skills.

Leaders are not perfect, but they are willing to accept responsibility for their mistakes and faults. As you pursue excellence, remember to invest in the lives of others. If you are given an opportunity to lead, take it and use it for the glory of God.

Outward Leadership: Teamwork

As a leader, you will be required to work with other people. One of the first things you will discover is that people have different ideas, characters, habits and interests. Diversity is not just about a person's country or ethnic group: it is also about the ideas the person holds to heart. No two people are exactly the same in ideas or genetic makeup. We are all different, but we have similar needs and this brings us together. We need to be loved; we need food, shelter and clothing. There is however one more need many seem to overlook. We need a relationship with Jesus Christ. It is when we allow Him to live through us that we can truly make a lasting impact. As a leader, your first

goal should be to encourage people to be like the greatest leader of all time, Jesus Christ.

Leaders should have a vision (or a goal) of what they want to do when they start leading. When the vision is clear, a leader can work with his team to accomplish the goal.

As you assign roles, remember that these roles are equally important and complementary to one another. Encourage everyone to give their best.

While growing up, I started watching a cartoon called *Voltron: Defender of the Universe*. Voltron was composed of five metal lions that came together to form Voltron. When the bad guys attacked, it was very hard for the five lions to defeat them when they were separated. However, when they formed Voltron, they were able to defeat the bad guys easily. A leader should be able to work with his or her team to accomplish tasks to the glory of God. We cannot do it on our own, so we need the help of those we work with. Remember to acknowledge the efforts of those you lead. With a team, you can accomplish much more for God.

Making a Difference

“Since new developments are the products of a creative mind, we must therefore stimulate and encourage that type of mind in every way possible.” —George Washington Carver

What does it mean to make a difference? To make a difference means to change things from one way to a better way.

Whether you choose to lead or not, I want to encourage you to make a difference. Do not leave your city the way you found it. Do not leave your school or church the way you found it. Instead, reach out with the love of Christ and make a difference with the gifts and talents God has blessed you with.

When you look at various technological devices around, you will notice that they have undergone several levels of change before they became what they are now. I want to encourage you to look for something that needs change and work on it so that someone gets blessed.

One person who did this was Blaise Pascal. He was willing to help his father by making a device that would help make his father’s job easier. He saw a need and he was willing to step out and help. Blaise Pascal invented the calculator at the age of eighteen, and he died at the age of thirty-nine. He was also a mathematician, philosopher and apologist (defender) of the Christian faith. He made a difference at a very young age.^{iv}

The Wright brothers were able to step out and help make a device that would make traveling easier. Today it takes about fourteen hours to get to Nigeria from New York. This would not have been the case if people did not set out to make a difference. It is now easier to send people around the world to preach the good news of Jesus Christ.

Why should you make a difference? There are many reasons why you should make a difference, but I want to give you a few. First of all, God has blessed you with talents that can help make the world a better place for someone. You have what it takes to make a difference. You might not have financial resources, but there are many other things besides money that you can use to make a difference. You can make a difference in a person's life with a smile, a word of encouragement, an invention or by just listening to them when they are in need. We need to reach out and bless people's lives.

Secondly, we have a limited time to live on this planet, so we need to get up and start using what God has given us to His glory now. Remember, Jesus is coming back soon, so we cannot sit around doing nothing for Him. You have a limited time to do what you can do. You must therefore first know what you want to achieve and then set goals for yourself and make sure you accomplish them. That is why you must find out those things that are lacking and put them back in place.

Be innovative and creative. You can make a difference, so start today and leave your prints in the sands of time.

Finally, you have to remember that the younger generation is looking up to you to show them what they ought to be doing. Make sure you show them that life is not all about you, but also about reaching out to others for the glory of God.

As you strive to achieve your goals, be mindful of the fact that people might want to discourage you, while others might criticize you. It is certain that leaders will always have critics, so don't be discouraged. Keep working hard and be focused on your goals. You will only see obstacles if you take your eyes off your goals. This is your time and opportunity to make things better.

Here are some words from the greatest leader of all time:

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

—Matthew 20:25-28

Jesus said we need to serve people. As you choose to make a difference for God, remember to use what He has given you to encourage those around you. I pray you will step out and make a difference to the glory of God.

Practical Applications

1. Spend time reading books on quality leadership. John Maxwell has a lot of books on leadership
2. Look around your vicinity and see if there is anything you can do to make it a better place for someone.

Songs to Consider

Casting Crowns: “Lifesong”

Matthew West: “Motion”

Discussion Questions

Here are some questions to consider for personal reflection and group study as you read through the book. You do not need to attempt all the questions at once.

Chapter 1:

- 1- Define humility.
- 2- What things are you proud of in your life when you compare yourself to your peers, and how do you feel about those same things when you compare yourself to God?
- 3- C.S. Lewis calls pride a spiritual cancer. What is the treatment against pride that you would suggest to someone who is serious about battling pride?
- 4- What are the things that you can learn from Nebuchadnezzar's story when it comes to pride and humility?
- 5- How is your pursuit of humility fueled by the knowledge of Jeremiah 1:5?
- 6- Read 1 Corinthians 4:7. How does this verse help you in battling pride?

Chapter 2:

- 1- Ponder the YMCA motto. What are the things we should work on in determining our character? In what ways can we work to change?

- 2- Read 1 Corinthians 10:31. How can you make changes in your daily life to make this true of yourself?
- 3- Share a time that you did something that someone thought was a good thing, but because of your motives you knew it wasn't a good thing?
- 4- If you consider that God knows your motives and the thoughts of your heart when you make decisions and do things, would you want the people around you to know those same things? Read Romans 12:2. What is the most effective way to have your mind transformed?
- 5- Amos encouraged you to let the words that you speak have meaning. How often do you think about the meaning behind the things that you say? If you were to try to go as long as you could without saying anything you were ashamed of, how long do you think you could go?
- 6- What are two habits that you have developed that you are proud of? And what are two habits that you have developed that you believe need to be changed? What are the things in your life that you could improve on through repeated practice?
- 7- Knowing the truth that God looks at the heart, yet man looks at the outward appearance, what are the ways that you have concerned yourself more with what man thinks of you instead of concerning yourself with what God thinks of you?

Chapter 3:

- 1- What things do you consider when you make a choice?
- 2- What kinds of consequences, good and bad, have you encountered from decisions you have made in the past?
- 3- If you had to give the reason that you do what you do, what would it be? Of the two wrong reasons (majority or tradition) Amos gave for doing certain things, which one do you think most often influences your decisions?
- 4- Share a story about a friend or family member, or someone you know who made a choice or mistake that you learned a positive lesson from.
- 5- Pick a situation you recently were in that required you to make a decision. Go through each of the questions Amos gave that could help us in making choices and list how you should have handled that situation differently and why.
- 6- What kinds of rewards should one expect for obedience to God?

Chapter 4:

- 1- Why are your closest friends your closest friends? Why did you choose them? What are the reasons you remain friends with them?
- 2- Are you more of a covalent friend or an ionic friend? Which do you want to be? Why?
- 3- Think of your three closest friendships. Are you more of an influencer or are you more influenced by those friendships? If

you are more influenced, are you being influenced more towards God? If you are the influencer, are you taking that role seriously and influencing your friends towards God?

- 4- How do you keep your friends accountable? How do they keep you accountable?
- 5- Give some examples of friendships in the Bible. What can we learn from them?
- 6- How important are friendships? Is there such a thing as a perfect friendship with no conflict?

Chapter 5:

- 1- Do you think of yourself as a leader? If so, why? If not, why not?
- 2- If you do think of yourself as a leader, what leadership opportunities do you think God is making available to you right now?
- 3- If you do not think of yourself as a leader, what leadership opportunities do you think God is making available to you to begin being a leader?
- 4- In what ways can you work to be more transparent in your relationships?
- 5- Who in your life could be the other pieces of “Voltron” for you? What is hindering you from asking them to join you in the work God has called you to?

- 6- What are the ways you feel God has equipped you and placed you to make a difference for Him? Why should you make a difference in this world?

Extra Questions

- 1- What other ways do you think you can pursue excellence?
- 2- List some Bible characters that were willing to pursue excellence and how they excelled.
- 3- How important is it to finish strong?
- 4- In what ways can you begin pursuing excellence?
- 5- In what ways can you reach out and use the principles from this book?

Note: www.Christianity201.com will have more resources to help you digest the information in this book.

All the best as you pursue excellence to the glory of God.

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