

The Teacher and Creating an Island of Excellence

“By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice” (Hebrews 11:4).

“And yet shew I unto you a more excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31).

Objectives

At the conclusion of this lesson the participant will be able to accomplish the following:

1. Define “excellence.” Apply this definition (a) personally and (b) to the Bible school environment.
2. List five biblical areas where one is admonished to “excel.”
3. Distinguish between excellence and success.
4. Identify a Bible character whose life was marked by excellence and relate how.
5. Propose how one can rise above tribalism, racism, and sexism by utilizing a high standard of excellence.
6. State seven steps in creating an island of excellence.
7. Identify ways one can personally raise his/her own standard of excellence.
8. Explain how one can personally increase his/level of excellence in the classroom.
9. Develop a strategy for creating a personal standard of excellence. Prioritize and state the various components of this strategy.
10. Relate the differences between covering a subject and learning it.

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11. Appraise the statement, “He who learns, teaches.” (Do you accept or reject this statement? Why?)

Introduction

Growing up, I had an attraction to islands. Come to think about it, I still do! An island is any piece of land, surrounded by water, separated from other land masses. On my island, I knew I would be isolated and insulated from all of life’s negatives—poverty, a dysfunctional family, abuse, confusion, and inferiority—to name a few. Islands seem so peaceful stuck out in the middle of nowhere disturbed by no one. At the edge of our property was a large river that separates Canada and the United States. In the middle was a tiny island. I imagined I would escape to that little island, become its king, and live happily ever after. Unfortunately, there were flaws in my thinking. I would become a lonely king to a community of one. And no matter where one goes he still manages to take his problems with him. I’m still fascinated by islands, and get energized when I catch a glimpse of one along the coastline. However, instead of moving to an island, I’ve decided to create one of my own. I call it my *island of excellence*. You can craft one too. This lesson explains how.

Not an Island unto Yourself

John Donne wrote the often quoted statement, “No man is an island unto himself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” This captures the nugget of truth that we are all connected; part of the brotherhood of all mankind. All men are created equal. There are no lone rangers (around here we call it the Mister-I-Walk-Alone attitude) in the Body of Christ (Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27). We are a building fitly framed together (Ephesians 2:21). A person who cuts himself off from everyone else will soon be wandering lost. It isn’t good to be alone (Genesis 2:18; Proverbs 18:1; Psalms 133:1). One *can* be an island, just not *unto* himself, encompassed by selfish thinking and massing benefits only for ourselves. We are all interconnected, and have individual responsibilities and functions. In speaking of an *island of excellence* I am referring to doing your work—and conducting your life—according to a high standard of distinction, despite or regardless what others do.

An Island unto Others

The sense of community permeates African life, and is one of our enduring, crowning achievements. It can also be seen in other areas of the world. Here, we foster *communalism*, not to be confused with *communism*. We advocate the worth and importance of the community. The group is the focus of its individual members. As we create an island of personal excellence we receive a double blessing—one for ourselves, and one for the community at large. Kwame Gyekye said, “The people hold that the

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welfare of each individual is dependent of the welfare of all.” Communalism and individualism are both encouraged. He provides the following proverbs. See if you can discern those that speak of a sense of community, individuality, or both.

“The clan is like a cluster of trees which, when seen from afar, appear huddled together, but which would be seen to stand individually when closely approached.”

“Life is mutual aid.”

“Walking alone is a pitiable condition.”

“One finger alone cannot lift a thing.”

“The left arm washes the right arm and the right arm washes the left arm.”

“Life is as you yourself make it.”

Gyekye also states, “The individual is responsible for the life he or she fashions for himself or herself.” We can’t lazily sit back and expect others to do everything for us. That’s a good quotation, but there is one word I especially like, “responsible.” Each is responsible for creating an island of excellence. Stephen Covey plays on that English word when he speaks of being “response-able.” Each individual is response-able of making a positive impact in the community? We are more than willing to receive—prosperity, blessings, gifts—but what are we willing to give? John F. Kennedy, in his presidential inaugural speech said, “Ask not what your country can do for you—rather ask, what you can do for your country.”

We are encouraged to excel in everything we do.

“Just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in earnestness, and in your love—see that you also excel in this grace of giving...it tests the sincerity of your love” (2 Corinthians 8:7, *TLB*).

Notice the word “sincerity” in that Bible verse. In ancient times Roman sculptors would cover flaws in their work in order to deceive the viewer. Potters covered mistakes in pottery with wax. The happy buyer would take it home, pour in hot water, the wax would melt, and the pot would leak. So, honest potters would hang a sign *Sincerus* being interpreted “without wax.” That act of deception would never happen today, right? Wrong! What about the tomato seller who places the best product on top of the basket, and the nearly rotten ones on the bottom, hoping the shopper will never realize; at least until she gets home. Or consider furniture makers who cover defects or use cheap materials. You may live in the midst of corruption and where dishonesty is the daily special. Doing your best is a personal decision.

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Create an island of excellence regardless of what others do, or whether they even notice your good deeds.

What is Excellence?

What is excellence, anyway? It is doing something in which one excels; an outstanding feature or quality; and speaks of one who exceeds in his actions. John Gardner said, “Excellence is doing ordinary things extraordinarily well.” Excellence is not only a skill; it is an attitude. It is about being; not merely doing. A poster at the Lake Williamson Retreat Center defines excellence as the ability “to surpass others or be superior in some respect or area; do extremely well.” It went on to say, “Excellence can be obtained if you *care* more than others think is wise; *risk* more than others think is safe; *dream* more than others think is practical; *expect* more than others think is possible.”

Creating an island of excellence is not about competition—trying to be better than someone else. Brian Harbour in *Rising Above the Crowd* says, “Success means being the best. Excellence means being your best. Success, to many, means being better than everyone else. Excellence means being better tomorrow than you were yesterday. Success means exceeding the achievements of other people. Excellence means matching your practice with your potential.”

“We're not, understand, putting ourselves in a league with those who boast that they're our superiors. We wouldn't dare do that. But in all this comparing and grading and competing, they quite miss the point” (2 Corinthians 10:12, MSG).

J. Hampton Keathley adds, “The pursuit of excellence refers to pursuing and doing the best we can with the gifts and abilities God gives, giving our best to the glory of God.”

“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be firm (steadfast), immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord [always being superior, excelling, doing more than enough in the service of the Lord], knowing and being continually aware that your labor in the Lord is not futile [it is never wasted or to no purpose]” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Excellence is considered to be a core value in many organizations and educational institutions—including ours. Remember, core values describe what matters most and how we go about our lives and responsibilities.

How does one achieve excellence? Thomas Watson encouraged, “stop doing less-than-excellent work.” That is a great place to begin.

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Don't you detest it when people are racist, sexist, or tribalistic? Oprah Winfrey said she grew up being taught, "Excellence is the best deterrent to racism or sexism." If one achieves high level excellence, another will not care if he is black or white, male or female, or from this place or that. Excellence breaks through barriers!

One of the biggest problems today is people excuse themselves from doing their best because of their circumstances. No one can stop you from creating an island of excellence, doing your best, and reaching your God-given potential except *you*.

Dr. Benjamin S. Carson, Sr. is the Director of Pediatric Neurosurgery at the esteemed John Hopkins Hospital. He shared his story in a series of inspiring books which explain his rise from poverty, hopelessness, and a single parent home in the poor section of Detroit to become one of the world's top brain surgeons. Like his other books, *Think Big: Unleashing Your Potential for Excellence* shares Ben's philosophy that it is not where you come from that matters, but where you are going, and how you plan to get there. His mother, Sonya, was an enormous influence in his life. She only had a primary three education, was married at thirteen and had heart problems. She found out that her husband, a minister, already had a wife and five children. But, she determined that her two boys would excel and worked untiringly toward her goal. She stressed that education was the only way they would ever escape poverty. She insisted that if Ben achieved excellence, it would overcome and surpass any concern anyone would have with the color of his skin or his ethnic background. Ben is living proof that we are more than products of our surroundings; that we can build an island of excellence.

Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery. It was certainly not an ideal situation. However, Joseph did his best and God was with him. He still used all of his talents and abilities for God's glory. Eventually, he was thrown into prison. Even there, Joseph did his best, and applied himself. Ultimately, Joseph rose to the second most powerful in all the land, next to Pharaoh himself. The pit couldn't stop him. Slavery couldn't stop him. Prison couldn't stop him. He created an island of excellence in each pitiful situation he found himself.

"The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did" (Genesis 39:23, *NIV*).

An Island unto God

Excellence in the ministry is all about serving others in the same way that Christ served us. We serve Jesus Christ. He is our real Master.

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“In all the work you are doing, work the best you can. Work as if you were doing it for the Lord, not for people” (Colossians 3:23, *NCV*).

The pursuit of excellence is an appropriate response to the first and second great commandment. “Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 22:38-39).

According to J. Hampton Keathley in his lesson “The Pursuit of Excellence” these verses show that God wants us to excel in both what we *are* (our inward character) and what we *do* (our behavior). Pursuing excellence is a goal and mark of spiritual maturity. It must be motivated by the right values, priorities, and motives. Otherwise, the pursuit of excellence can become a mark of spiritual immaturity as man is possessed with his own significance.

How to Create an Island of Excellence

Value it: Make the decision that excellence is one of your core values.

Care about it: It all starts with caring about what you are doing. Refuse to have an I-Don’t-Care attitude. Eric Liddell, known as the Flying Scotsman, and a 1924 gold medal runner once said, “I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.” He cared that he pleased God.

Decide it: Set the standard. Know what you want. Set goals and rules of conduct. Know the main thing. Do the main thing. Be committed. Be passionate. Decide today, I will create an island of excellence. I will, with the help of God, do my best!

Henry Kissinger in his book *The White House Years* tells a story of a university professor who gave an assignment. Students handed in their papers, and days later they were returned. One student searched his paper for a grade or a comment. The only remark was, “Is this the best you can do?”

The student pondered the question, looked for ways to improve his paper, and returned it to the professor. It came back again after a few days with the same comment, “Is this the best you can do?”

He knew it was better than the first, but he could add a few quotes, and even make it a bit longer. He rewrote the paper again and passed it in. When returned the comment remained, “Is this the best you can do?”

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This went on ten times. Finally, the student was exasperated and went to the professor and said sternly, “Yes, this is the best I can do!”

The professor responded, “Good! Now I will read it!”

That story highlights two things. We should work until we reach a high standard of excellence. And, then, and only then, have we earned the right for someone to sit up and take notice of what we have done. When you create an island of excellence, believe me, people will notice.

Repeat it: Form good habits. Right decisions that are done repeatedly over time compound success.

Aristotle said that excellence is not an act, but a habit. Excellence is a result of what we repeatedly do. I might add; what we repeatedly do *correctly*. They say, “Practice makes perfect.”

A professional athlete or gifted musician spends more time in preparing than in performance. A preacher spends more time in preparation than in preaching (hopefully). Excellence requires repeated practice and discipline.

Pray it: God is able to help. Pray, “Lord, help me be all I can for your glory. Without you I can do nothing of any lasting or eternal value.” Prayer is talking to God concerning what He wants. It is an attempt to be pleasing to God. What made Abel’s sacrifice a more excellent one? Abel was trying to please God and to be obedient to what God instructed.

“This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. *For then* you will make your way prosperous, *and then* you will have good success” (Joshua 1:8, *NKJV*).

Deliver it: Do what you say. Make promises and keep them. Deliver more, and deliver it sooner. Go beyond the expectations of others. Be realistic about telling people when you will have something done. Make promises based on your current capacity to fulfill.

Learn it: Find continuous improvement opportunities. Grow through acquiring new knowledge. Research. Become an expert in your field. And don’t be afraid to teach others. Pass on what you know to the next generation.

Review it: Allow for positive feedback and input from your peers, your students, or your followers. Permit evaluation by others and conduct self-evaluation yourself. How am I doing? How can I improve? Am I staying true to my God, my family, and my clients or customers? Ask, what am I doing that is not excellent? If you were the recipient of your work, would you be satisfied and/or impressed? Find ways to improve.

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Specialize in it: Determine your gift mix and how it can be best used for the kingdom of God. Put the accent on strengths. People notice negatives first, and become captured by them. Determine your strengths, and allow them to open doors to freedom to do what you want for God's glory. God expects us to use what we have been given to its fullest potential. Remember Paul said, "This one thing I do" (Philippians 3:13).

Focus on it: Keep your mind on your priorities and goals. Those that chase two rabbits end up catching none. Doing a little of everything usually means ending up with a whole lot of nothing. We don't need a Jack-of-all-trades. He's usually master of none. Be careful of how you manage your time.

"But only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42, *NIV*).

Expose it: Be willing to serve others. Give your excellence away. Be helpful. Hang around or be exposed to other people of excellence. This will challenge and encourage you to excel.

Finish it: Begin by doing your best in little things. Follow through. And remember to finish well. It is not only important how you begin the race, but how you finish it.

Colin Powell said, "If you are going to achieve excellence in big things, you develop the habit in little matters. Excellence is not an exception, it is a prevailing attitude."

"Whatever work you do, do your best, because you are going to the grave, where there is no working, no planning, no knowledge, and no wisdom" (Ecclesiastes 9:10, *NCV*).

One company advertises, "If it must be done; it must be done well."

It is often said, "If it is worth doing, it is worth doing right." It's worth creating an island of excellence.

Rest from it: Take time to rest and reflect. This refreshes and restores.

James Michener said, "One who has mastered the art of living simply pursues his vision of excellence at whatever he does, leaving others to decide whether he is working or playing."

Creating an Island of Excellence in the Classroom

Now it's time for specific applications.

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It is registration day. Students step into the classroom with a heart to learn. You feel it as you look over the class. You see it in their eyes. What will you teach them? How will you go about teaching it? Will you create an island of excellence in the classroom, or flounder in the muddy, murky, waters of mediocrity?

1. Use plain language. If people do not understand what is being said, the lack of understanding prevents the seeds from taking root. Clarify hard words to increase understanding. Keep it “simple.” The real test of intelligence is the ability to come down to the level of the students/learners.

2. Use good questions to deepen understanding. These should not only be recall questions that ask, “What do you remember?” but questions that ask, “What do you think?” Asking questions will allow you to know whether the student has understood what has been taught. Students enjoy answering questions if they know the answers. It builds confidence and motivates them to learn more. It also convinces them they can learn what is being taught. Teachers can also check and see if students are paying attention through asking questions. Let your students learn by asking questions. The only foolish question is the unasked question. When a student asks a question do not punish him (or the rest of the class) by saying, “That is a good question. For an assignment I want you to find the answer.” Many times this is a cover-up for not knowing the answer yourself. If you don’t know the answer, admit it. Tell the student that you will find the answer and bring it to the next class.

3. Make your teachings “relevant.” We should teach things that are applicable to life. Jim Rohn once said, “Don’t let your learning lead to knowledge, let your learning lead to action.” Students must be encouraged to practice what they have learned. Check out the Epistles. They have more application than content.

Howard and William Hendricks in their book *As Iron Sharpens Iron* wrote, “One of the fundamental laws of education: people only learn what they can use. If information has no use, people won’t learn it. They may write it down, they may file it, they may be able to regurgitate it on an exam; but that doesn’t mean they’ve learned it. Learning involves change.”

Look for truth in the lessons you teach. Reinforce truth! Determine life principles in your lessons. This provides students with teaching they can apply to life situations.

4. Focus on learning and not just covering the content. “More” is not always better. Teach those things that are important and let your students know what is important. Ted Sizer says, “Less is more. Thoroughness counts more than coverage.” Jesus said, “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear” (John 16:12). Choose the main points and teach them.

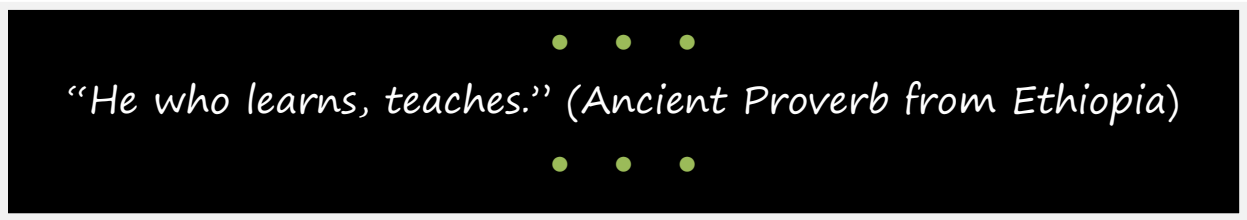
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Arlo & Jane Moehlenpah in *Teaching with Variety* said, “There is a great difference between covering a subject and teaching it. It is much better to cover less and teach something than to cover much and teach nothing. If the students fail to learn, the teacher has not taught.”

5. Make your subject interesting. We are teaching from the most exciting Book in the world. Don’t be boring. Be an expert in your subject. You cannot teach what you do not know. People learn best when they enjoy the process.

Howard Hendricks has said, “If you stop growing today, you stop teaching tomorrow...If you don’t know it - truly know it - you can’t give it out.” We must learn first before we can teach it to others. The best teachers possess a teachable spirit. There is always a striving for excellence and continuous improvement in the life of a teacher. Before we can expect others to learn and grow, we must first grow ourselves. There are five teachers in life to glean from - family, school, media, peers, and church.

6. Prepare well. Know your subject matter. You become more confident when you have prepared properly. Don’t be caught pulling out your notes fifteen or thirty minutes before your session and rushing to class. Rodney Shaw in his article, “Striving for Greatness” advises that we should treat each classroom encounter as another opportunity to connect with your students and with those to whom you minister.



7. Care about your students. It has been said, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

8. Set the example. Someone is watching you. We are walking Bibles. People learn least by what we say. They learn a little more by what we do. People learn most by what we are. Students are saying to us, “Don’t tell me, show me!” Teaching is not what you do, it is what you are.

9. Protect your teaching time through:

Study	You must learn first.
Specialize	Become an expert in your subject.
Prayer	Depend on the Holy Spirit to work.

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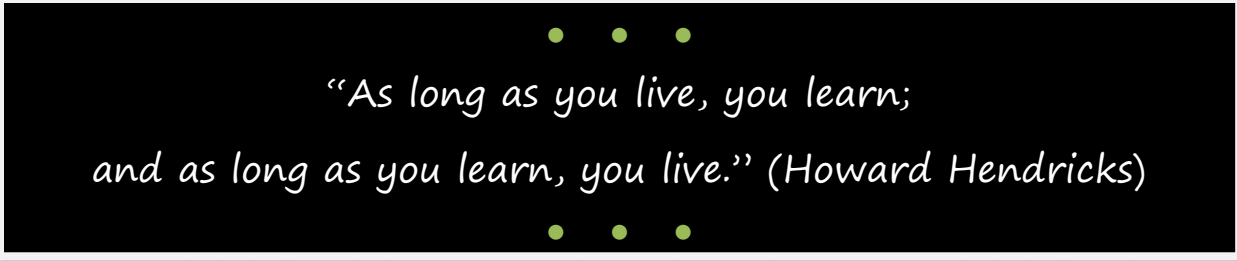
10. Start from where your students are. Take them from the known to the unknown. Take them into a deeper understanding. Effective learning builds on what the student already knows. Assume nothing. Your students may not understand the basics. A pre-test helps determine knowledge students bring to the course.

11. Allow the students to discover truth and answers. Encourage their creativity. Give them assignments that cause them to discover the lesson you want to teach. Students learn by doing. Remember, “Tell me and I’ll forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me and I’ll understand.” (Anonymous)

12. Make your teaching time a priority. Do not allow yourself to be distracted by telephone calls, knocks at the door, and other things that pull you away from your class. Be on time for class.

13. Give regular tests and assignments to encourage learning and to check learning progress. Use more than one type of evaluation method in your classes.

14. Practice what you teach. Teach what you practice. Bruce Wilkinson says, “The teacher of God is a living link between the Word of God and the people of God.” He states that communication of God’s Word can be choked in one of four ways: The *character* of the communicator can dull the impact of the application. The *conduct* of the communicator can hinder teaching if the teacher is guilty of sin or carnal behavior. The *communication* of the teacher or poor delivery can greatly diminish the message. The *change* in the communicator is important. If it transforms the teacher it can transform the students.



“As long as you live, you learn;
and as long as you learn, you live.” (Howard Hendricks)

15. Personalize the lesson material. Build a skeleton by finding the main points. Add personal illustrations, things you have found from study or experience, and relative scriptures.

16. Most teachers place emphasis on “what” instead of “why.” Content alone cannot be our focus. Aim for understanding. W. Durant said, “Woe to him who teaches men faster than they can learn.”

17. The first ten minutes of your class are most important for learning. Review is also important but should be done later in the class time. Review frequently: at the end of the class, week, and/or month. This reinforces learning.

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18. The most often used teaching method is the lecture; yet it is the least effective for learning. Follow Jesus' example. He used the lecture plus method; incorporate other teaching methods with your lectures.

Lesson in Review

1. What is referred to when the author writes concerning an "island of excellence"? _____

2. Prove using Scriptures we should excel in everything we do? _____

3. What is "excellence"? _____

4. According to the poster at the Lake Williamson Christian Center how is excellence achieved?

5. How is excellence the best deterrent to racism and sexism? _____

6. What did Ben Carson's mother promise him? _____

7. Explain five ways we can create an island of excellence? _____

8. How can one develop a specialization? _____

9. According to Howard Hendricks, what is one of the fundamental laws of education? _____

10. How can one (without money) show he cares for his students? _____

11. Outline ways you can make teaching your personal priority? _____

12. According to Bruce Wilkerson the communication of God's Word can be choked in what four ways?
