

Strive for Excellence
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As we approach a new school year, the idea of getting students to strive for excellence is often in the forefront of teachers' minds. However, two questions relating to this should be examined before setting this as a goal. 1) What kind of excellence should the students be striving for? 2) Does the Lord really want us to strive for excellence?

When we think of urging students to strive for excellence, immediately there are warning bells that go off. For often, students striving to excel, fall into the trap of striving for superiority. Of course, this attitude of superiority is not what we want to instill in them. A poignant example of this superior attitude is captured in a parable from the Gospel of Luke, where the Pharisee in the temple offered this prayer: "God, I thank You that I am not like other men; extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector" (Luke 18:11). Often there is a subtle distinction between striving for excellence and striving for supremacy, so we must be careful to make sure that it is excellence our students are striving for.

The kind of excellence we want our students to strive for is typified by the prophet Daniel. King Beishazzar of Babylon recognized it in Daniel when he said to him, "I have heard of you, that the Spirit of God is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you" (Daniel 5:14). And later under the reign of Darius the Mede, we know Daniel continued to excel because it says, "Daniel distinguished himself above the governors and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him; and the king gave thought to setting him over the whole realm" (Daniel 6:3).

The excellent spirit that Daniel had in him was the Spirit of God. He excelled in understanding and wisdom and distinguished himself above the other governors because he always sought the Lord's guidance in all that He did. Not only that, but Daniel continually demonstrated humility by attributing all the knowledge and success he had to the Lord.

Similarly, we are told that the angels in the Other life who "excel others in intelligence and wisdom are also so humble that they ascribe the whole of their power to the Lord and none whatever to themselves. Therefore they find no glory or joy at all in dominating, but only in serving... For the Lord flows in with power with those who are humble, but not with those who are puffed up" (Arcana Coelestia 9039:3, cf. Apocalypse Explained 1131:3).

So as we encourage our students to excel in intelligence and wisdom, we must at the same time constantly teach them to be humble and not place themselves above others in the class. The Lord explicitly taught this in the Gospel of Matthew: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12). And further we are told that "so far as any angel excels in wisdom, so far he acknowledges that he is not above men, but like them" (*Apocalypse Revealed* 818; cf. *Heaven and Hell* 408).

The other important element when considering the pursuit of excellence is what the end goal is that a person seeks to achieve. Is the student trying to score a 100% on the test so that she can be the smartest and gain top honors in the school? Is the athlete honing his skills only so that he can be the best and be named captain? Is the musician putting in countless hours so that she can be the leader of the school band?

None of these pursuits of excellence are necessarily bad if the end in view is useful service. Pursuing knowledge for the sake of knowledge or positions of honor for the sake of honor is what ultimately pollutes the pursuit of excellence. The Lord teaches us that “it is otherwise when uses are regarded as the end, and a man does not attribute glory and honor to his own person, but to the uses themselves, according to their excellence. Then honor, rule, and super-eminence are the means, and they are esteemed only so far as they are serviceable to uses as means”(Apocalypse Explained 1010:2).

So if the student is striving for excellence for the sake of being of greater service to their classmates, the school, and the larger community, then it is a worthy pursuit. And it is appropriate that they be rewarded accordingly for their efforts, and take satisfaction in their accomplishments. In fact we are told that “such a person rejoices also in the proportion that he is exalted to high posts of honor, not, indeed, on account of the posts of honor, but on account of the uses which he is then able to perform in greater abundance, and of greater excellence” (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 72).

From this it is clear that the kind of excellence we want our students to achieve is ultimately in being of useful service to their neighbor in this life and in the next. Indeed, this has been a hallmark of New Church Education right from the beginning. Bishop Willard Pendleton’s foundational work, *Education for Use*, lays out in wonderful detail the importance of having useful service be the focus of our educational efforts.

The next question then, that should be considered, is whether or not the Lord wants us to have our students strive for excellence. Consider this weighty teaching from the gospel of Matthew: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you... For if you love those who love you, what rewards have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same...? Therefore, you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:43-48).

This seems to be an incredibly high bar that the Lord has set for us. However, there are a couple of things that stand out from this passage. First is that the Lord is calling for the people. He is addressing to hold themselves to a higher standard than was expected of them in that day and age. He was urging them to be better than the average worldly person, meant by the tax collector.

Second, the Lord puts out the idea of reward as a possible motivator. Interestingly, the Writings for the New Church seem to indicate that reward as a motivator to excel is not necessarily a bad thing. “If anyone loves himself more than others, and from this love studies to excel others in moral and civic life, in memory-knowledges and doctrinal things, and to be exalted to dignities and wealth in pre-eminence to others, and yet acknowledges and adores God, performs kind

offices to his neighbor from the heart, and does what is just and fair from conscience; the evil of this love of self is one with which good and truth can be mingled” (*Arcana Coelestia* 3993:9).

Notice that the impure and selfish love of excelling others and receiving recognition mentioned here, is one that can be mixed with good and truth. It can serve as a temporary motivator to get someone to achieve excellence and perform useful services at the same time. However, a qualifying passage points out that this love of excelling others and pursuing worldly rewards that is found in children must eventually be purified and become a love of pursuing truth for the sake of good in adulthood (cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 3518:2).

This other wonderful teaching also suggests to me that the Lord really does want us to pursue excellence: “The Lord, from the Divine love or mercy, wills to have all near to Himself; so that they do not stand at the doors, that is, in the first heaven; but He wills that they should be in the third; and, if it were possible, not only with Himself, but in Himself” (*Arcana Coelestia* 1799:2). We can see that the Lord’s will is not for us to just barely claw our way into the lowest heaven, but rather that we should dwell in the highest heaven and even in the highest part of the highest heaven, as near to Him as possible. In this sense, the Lord does will that we be perfect, just as our Father in heaven is perfect.

New Church education has a vital role to play in this effort. In our schools we provide the natural truths of the world in the context of the spiritual truths which they descend from in order to develop a student’s rational mind from the light of heaven. By helping our students think beyond just the appearance of the natural senses, we are giving them “a greater capacity than others to understand and perceive” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6598).

Specifically, from the truths of the Word, we are enabling them to clearly understand and perceive “that good is good, and truth truth, consequently that evil is evil, and falsity falsity,” and this is the sign of a person who excels in rationality (*Arcana Coelestia* 4156:3). This concept of genuine rationality is beautifully captured in Solomon’s prayer for wisdom when he asked the Lord, “Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil” (I Kings 3:9).

When we help our students develop this kind of rationality and wisdom, we are helping them to develop a conscience for what is just and fair so that they may serve their neighbor far more usefully. They will now be able to practice their charity “*intelligently*,” using prudence and discrimination (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 85). When we educate our students in the truths of faith and encourage them to excel in both learning and applying them, then they will continue to have a clearer perception of how to be truly useful and will develop a more perfect conscience (cf. *True Christian Religion* 666:3).

So in this new school year, let’s not be afraid to set striving for excellence as a goal for our students. For even if their motivations for excelling are impure and somewhat selfish in the beginning, we can nevertheless work with that desire and gradually turn it into something good.

All we need to do is continually teach that the real excellence they should be pursuing is excellence in useful service to their neighbor. If we can at the same time help to instill a spirit of

humility in them, then in time they will come to see that the real reward of this kind of excellence is the delight it brings to those around them.

As we help all our students make the most of their native gifts from the Lord, may our humble prayer be that they excel in the most meaningful way, by becoming angels of the Lord's highest heaven as He intended for them. So that when they leave this world and enter the next life, their Lord and Maker will say to them, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord" (Matthew 25:21).