THE PURSUIT OF ACADEMIC DILIGENCE AND EXCELLENCE

Pursuit of excellence is both an article and a mark of spiritual maturity. Spiritual growth is a quest for the character for which there will be a little progress without the pursuit of excellence. Devoid of shadowing an exceptional performance, life would remain bland (Revelations 3:15-16). The expedition for excellence fuels our fervour and zeal thus keeps us from just drifting downstream gathering debris. Undeniably, Jehovah has an indispensable role to play in our achievements for success without God is temporary, but a victory by God is eternal. Those who acknowledge and submit to God’s will are like efficient surfers who ride above the waves and as eagles rise above mayhems. Their experiences are analogous to that of King Uzziah of whom it is recorded that “as long as he sought the LORD, God made him to prosper (2 Chronicles 26:5).” And those who refuse God’s plan discover like Saul that “it is hard for you to kick against the pricks (Acts 9:5).”

We are living in the culture of mediocrity. God expects us to go beyond the normal and surpass what is required of us. This is the kind of the lifestyle that God blesses. When we do more than expected, we honour the instruction of Christ, “If someone demands that you go one mile, go with him two miles (Matthew 5:41).” When we render a second best performance, we do not have an appropriate concept of the LORD of excellence. Therefore, our second best does not honour and please God. A performance that gives nothing, costs nothing and suffers nothing, is worth nothing. The ladder of excellence is best climbed by stepping on the rungs of opportunities. “Desire is the key to motivation, but it is determination and commitment to an unrelenting pursuit of your goal, a commitment to excellence that will enable you to attain the success you seek (Mario Andretti).”

Our pursuit of excellence is grounded in God’s glory and is accomplished through God’s power working in us. We do not pursue excellence in our own strength, but we trust in assurance that God’s power working in us will produce the fruit of excellence in our lives. There is a greater blessing in search of excellence, but unfavourable outcomes in indolence. A virtue we ought to pursue in the moral realm is wisdom. True wisdom is rooted in the fear of God and it is more than mere knowledge or erudition. It entails discernment, prudence and a sanctified common sense. The pursuit of excellence is a continuous tradition, a lifetime practice and a commitment that must be renewed continually. “For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith virtue (excellence) and to virtue, knowledge (2 Peter 1:5).”

No matter what a challenge is, prayer is an armament in which we express and specify to God what our needs are. Prayer is the power that pulls everything together exquisitely fruitful and this is a great privilege to every believer, a Christian. It may not be fashionable to talk about in academic circles, but the divine power released through prayer can overwhelm daunting issues that have no scientific solution. Nehemiah started with prayer, continued with prayer and ended with prayer. He turned every problem into a prayer point and obtained results for each. We also ought to turn our academic challenges into prayer points and behold how God overcomes on our behalf. Prayer transforms the storms of life into a peaceful calm that provide a suitable atmosphere for prolific and profitable aspirations. No wonder Jesus taught “his disciples always to pray and not to sleep (Luke 18:1).” A common blunder some of us make is to adopt the tendency of thinking that prayer is the only preparation needed for success. In as much as prayer is the foremost precondition and prerequisite, the LORD still expects us to put in our best efforts as well.
The victory and accomplishment of Daniel who was taken to serve under King Nebuchadnezzar as a teenager challenges our limitations, fears and doubts that no matter the barriers or difficulties that may look formidable, God promises us that when we are unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the LORD, our labour shall not be in vain. It is only when we limit ourselves to what we see physically with our eyes that our progress slows down (Exodus 4:10). Moses did not recognize the potential he possessed until he accepted God’s commission. Until and unless we rise up and get to know who we are and recognize what God has invested in us, we will face every situation in our lives with boldness and confidence. Despite being a Jew amongst the Chaldeans in a foreign land, Daniel rose up above those challenges and was and is still an inspiration to many generations.

The manner in which Daniel portrayed himself illustrates a good self-esteem, the conviction that one is competent to live and is worthy of living in pursuit of the fulfilment of the purpose for his life. The divine excellence is underpropped by hard-work, determination, steadfastness, boldness, conviction, prayer, commitment and a sacrifice without unnecessary leisure, discipline, versatile studying and diligence in detail. The life of Daniel also demonstrates determination. He had a purpose for his life, it might have been time of great distress for others following Jerusalem being besieged, but for Daniel, it was time to maximise his potentials. He had to learn to cope with the new environment, new language, new culture and new life-style. Daniel made God his number one priority in life and God gave him number one success. Giving God His rightful place in our lives is one of the secrets to success as Jesus Christ once delineated, “But seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you (Matthew 6:33).”

Another quality in Daniel was focusing (Hebrews 12:2). This is a challenge to every one of us. Are we focused on our priorities? Do we have a purpose for our lives? Have we set goals for our lives and pursue them till they are accomplished? Are we studying for a purpose? What about our conviction? Is God central in our lives just as He was in Daniel’s life? Is the environment we are living in having adverse-effect on our lives or are we overcomers over those circumstances? Daniel sought God with all his heart (Matthew 6:33) and God responded by blessing him abundantly as He had promised in Deuteronomy 28:13 and 31:6. God honours hard-work and censures the idleness and laziness. “Sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening (Ecclesiastes 11:6).” Excellence calls for an extra-mile for there is no crown without a cross.

On learning about the devastation of Jerusalem and the plight of the remnants, Nehemiah was so burdened about changing the situation that a project was born. Nehemiah’s preparation for the execution of the project started with prayers, a potent tool for gaining relevant insight that is capable of sustaining progress. Planning is the roadmap to success as good plans makes for clarity of thoughts and prompts progress. Without plans, good purposes and intentions lead to unnecessary depletion of time and ultimately ending in frustration. “Those who fail to learn from the past are doomed to repeat it (Sir Winston Churchill).” Nehemiah vigilantly planned his project with target completion dates in view. He envisaged likely challenges and had contingency plans for every eventuality. Proper preparation prevents a poor performance.

A plan can be likened to a ladder to a desired fruit on a tree. “If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail (Benjamin Franklin).” Having a ladder alone will not pluck the fruit. We must first climb the ladder carefully and persistently to reach the fruit before applying the required effort to pluck it. Similarly, plans must be implemented to achieve the desired result otherwise they become merely tools for
decoration. God created us with innate potentials not only to master but also to unravel challenges. The challenges are normal in life, but they provide the opportunities or stepping stones to success. The onset of challenges should generate the power to overcome and the creativity to find a viable solution. Nehemiah pursued his ultimate goals without vacillation at the onset of challenges and achieved historic breakthroughs, meaning we must persevere beyond all odds in giving a way to beyond belief outcomes. Success requires rugged determination and undeterred resolution for failure cannot cope with persistence.

A successful man is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at him. Therefore, success is not final and failure is not fatal, but it is the courage to continue that counts. Success is not measured so much by the position that one has reached in life, but by the obstacles which he has overcome, by the opposition he has encountered and the courage with which he has maintained the struggle against overwhelming odds. Success may not be a good teacher for a failure makes one to be humble thus realizing his shortcomings and pitfalls accordingly giving him a chance to work towards rectifying them. Happiness does not come from a task, but from the afterglow of satisfaction that comes after the accomplishment of a difficult task that demanded our best.

Definiteness of purpose is the starting point of achievement. The translation of a thought into reality is the original source of all wealth, success, great discovery and of all achievement. Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement for nothing can be done without hope and confidence and it is the foundation of true courage and true progress. Without a continual growth and progress, such words as improvement, achievement and success have no meaning. "The greatest achievement was at first and for a time a dream. The oak sleeps in the acorn, the bird waits in the egg and in the highest vision of the soul a waking angel stirs. Dreams are seedlings of realities (James Allen)." Those who improve with age embrace the power of personal growth and achievement and begin to replace youth with wisdom, innocence with understanding and a lack purpose with self-actualization.

Failure is a figure post on the road to achievement and a wise fails forward toward success. The final wisdom of life requires not the annulment of incongruity, but the achievement of serenity within and above it. The greatest achievement to the human spirit is to live up to our opportunities and to make most of our resources. Triumph belongs to the bravest. "Resist fear for fear will not lead you to a positive end (T.D Jakes)." Those who are brave, their performance transcend their challenges and is proportionate.

We have probably come across the adage that, "Time waits for no one." Everyone on earth is allocated precisely the same amount of time every day. It is how we manage or mismanage our time that distinguishes us one from the other. Indeed, it has rightly been pointed out that time management is life management. This attests to what Nelson Mandela once endorsed, "We must use time wisely and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right." Ecclesiastes 3:1 states that there is time for everything and a season for everything under the heaven. We should not then be surprised why God punished His people for not acting promptly on His time. God attaches so much importance to timing that He does not hesitate to appropriate reprimands when we fail to meet the deadlines or to carry out His instruction when necessary. Saul lost his kingship by failing to abide by God’s timing and the five unwise virgins (Matthew 25) missed the marriage supper for coming late.

When God asked the children of Israel to move (Numbers 14), they grumbled and God brought His wrath on them. They later repented and moved when God was not with them and as such they fell
into the hands of their enemies and some were killed in the cause. In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Angels that God sent to destroy the two cities were working on time, they urged Lot and his family to depart hurriedly, but Lot’s wife became a pillar of salt as she looked back. Genesis 1 established the creation on earth and puts into perspective the day-to-day programme plan of God in terms of creation and God rested on the seventh day after the completion of this creation. Before God started the whole exercise, He divided the job by the day, He did each one in turn and this means that He had a starting time, finishing time and thereafter, He rested.

God created time and He owns it. “My times are in Thy hand (Psalm 31:15).” Thus it is essential that we make the best possible use of our apportioned time. A wise living involves using our time wisely accordingly motivating us to deplete it in fruitful ambitions especially when knowing that we have to account to the LORD who gives us His precious time to live it in His glory. “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom (Psalms 90:12).” We are to undertake and achieve as much as we can with the time He has given us. We shall be crowned eternally for capitalizing on and investing our time in good labour (1 Corinthians 3:14). Therefore, we should live as if each minute counts because it truly does. Time is one of the treasurable gifts we receive from God.

We are the creation of God and our time belongs to Him. He expects us to use His time in industrious works and He has endowed us with divine principles on how to do this as faithful stewards. Most of the time we fail to recognize that the time we have is God’s time and as such we spend less time in God and place a high value on family, professional and leisure compulsions. “God is only pleased by our faith in Him. A parent is pleased to see his or her children having faith in him or her. There is nothing painful as seeing your children having lost faith in you. It is through faith that we are alive. The righteous are faithful, when one is full of faith, he trusts and obeys God. That is what marks a righteous man (Professor C. Nongqunga, 2016 TACC Annual Greeting).” We are like trains, always on move, always in a rush and always late and always busy, but with less achievement for time without God bears no sustainable fruition. Since God is proprietor and titleholder of our time, we cannot be unconcerned about how we use it. In using our given time, when we put our faith in God for every matter, He shall endow us with the spirit of discernment and revelation for an elucidation needed in every encounter and happenstance.

Excellence is also underpinned by interdependence. Interdependence is a vital ingredient for the accomplishment of true scholarly excellence. The notion of the self-sufficient, autonomous scholar who works in complete isolation from others in producing great works of scholarship is not borne out by the reality of the demands placed on scholars contemporarily. Not only is interdependence required for greater excellence and major influence in our work. It also reflects the reality of scholarly nature for we truly need each other. It means that scholars should pursue collaborative work, allowing others with different expertise to supplement their knowledge base. This suggests becoming a channel of blessing to others. This propels a cohesion, a coherence and oneness among brethren which acts as a provision in meeting our academic needs amply and adequately. “Since the Word God, the Word therefore, was given to his Apostles, it stands to reason therefore that the instructions will come from the Word in them, not from them as men, but from them as one in Spirit. This means therefore that the Apostles had no right to oppose each other, but to be of one mind. What we receive from one of them is the same with what we receive from all of them. It is the Word of God, but not the words of God. The Word of God can never differ, for it is the same and one from one mind and produces people of the same mind (Professor C. Nongqunga, TACC 2016 Annual Greeting).”
Interdependence calls for an enlightening fellowship which includes holy affection and disposition found in true worshipper of God and with tender compassion for fellow brethren, who are the children of the same Father, stewards of the same Master, members of the same Family, branches of the same Trunk, travellers to the same Destination and heirs of the same Inheritance. This corresponds to the insight of King Solomon that, “Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their labour (Ecclesiastes 4:9)” and that, “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken (Ecclesiastes 4:12).” Where two are closely joined in holy love and fellowship, Christ shall by His Spirit show himself in them, then there is a threefold cord, a sign for a power of victory.

The person who shares to contribute in the success of his brethren, relies on the wise words of Jim Elliot, the great missionary in Ecuador, when he noted that, “He is no fool who gives away what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Sharing for the betterment of others is the behaviour of the devout Christian which comes out of the devoted heart. It starts with commitment, devotion and love for the LORD and His creation. God does not expect us to give what we do not have, but what we have. It is not probably individualism that makes the world go around, but rather the mutually supportive fellowship through which brethren recognize their dependence on each other for the achievement of shared and private goals. Great achievement is usually born of great sacrifice and is never the result of selfishness. Fellowship is the fertile soil from which advancement and prosperity in real life result and flourish.

Ecclesiastes 9:10 commends, “Whatsoever your hand finds to do, do it with your might.” Solomon exhorts the wise and pious to put their cheerful confidence in God, in whatever noble mission to be attained. The believers have to prove their faith, adorn the Gospel, exalt the LORD and serve their generation. The sterling service is coupled with the promise of recompense. The conscientious sowing is rewarded with the great harvest. What God has given us, project academia, has to be undertaken with divine wisdom that vintages incomparable and exceptional fallouts. “It shall be when these signs come to you, do for yourself what the occasion requires, for God is with you (1 Samuel 10:7).”

While admonishing Timothy, his son in the faith, Paul made reference to people who are, “Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 3:7).” Such fits the proverb of “people who have gone to school, but the school has not gone through them.” In other words their education has no impact on their lives and performance which could be the outcome of ineffective study skills. Successful studying depends not only on ability and industry, but also on effective means of study.

**BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE STUDYING (DISCIPLESHIP)**

The barriers to effective studying entails the following,

- Reading without a definite goal or purpose (1 Corinthians 9:26)
- Insufficient preparation, disorganization and anxiety (Matthew 7:26-27)
- Bad posture, poor lighting and poor ventilation (Luke 15:8)
- Limited vocabulary and inadequate background (John 3:3,4 and 9)
- Vocalization, sub-vocalization, hand and neck movements (Acts 8:28-35)
- Lack of self-confidence emanating in regression while reading (Philemon 4:13)
- Lack of concentration, day-dreaming and listlessness (Proverbs 10:4)
• Excessive attention to simple words rather than concentration on ideas (John 2:18-22, Mark 14:58 and Matthew 26:61)
• Isolated readings of different parts of a reading material (Matthew 15:4-6)
• Bad eyesight (Mark 8:24)

EHANCING OUR LEARNING (STUDY/DICPLESHIP) SKILLS

A good head and a good heart are always a formidable combination. “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language that goes to his heart (Nelson Mandela).” The following are some of the reasons for acquiring effective study skills,

• Ability and intelligence alone are not sufficient for success (John 21:3)
  Peter and other Apostles were professional fishermen, they had ability and skill. They were intelligent for they knew that the prime time for fishing was at night when all was calm and dark and the fishes would come to the surface. Yet they failed in the fishing venture. But when the Lord came to their despondency in the morning, with his instruction, they caught many fishes. This coincides with what Apostle M.H.Y Zungula once conveyed, “God uses people not because of their ability, but because of their availability (2013 TASA Symposium).”

• Have a relationship with Christ (Haggai 1:6-13, John 15:5 and Matthew 6:33)
  Many students study but God blows upon it because they have not built His Kingdom in their hearts (Haggai 1:9). In John 21:3-5, they caught no fish all the night until Jesus came in the morning to help them. It is unrighteous that debar God from helping us (Isaiah 59:1-2).

• Most students use ineffective learning and study skills (Luke 5:1-5)
  The cry of most students is “I have burnt the mid-night oil, but I am not better off.” Research reveals that most of us use ineffective and poor study skills. Perhaps, we could be one of them.

• Prevention of unnecessary expenditure of effort (Ecclesiastes 10:10)
  A sharp tool cuts well and better than a blunt one with the same effort applied. Meaning we ought to realize our full potential and obtain the greatest benefit from our studies by employing effective study skills.

• Realize your need of effective study skills (Luke 18:13-14)
  The Pharisees did not realize their sinfulness. They said they were not blind hence they remained in their sins. The publicans realized their sinfulness and obtained a pardon.

• Desire for improvement and passion for excellence (Philippians 4:13-14)
  Excellence is not automatic. Growth is a consequence of positive input. Desire for improvement is a foundational milepost on the road to effective study skills.

• Practice all you learn in spiritual conference (John 2:5 and Proverbs 12:27)
  We grow by what we learn and not by merely what we hear. Learning is real and profitable when we have put to practice all the acquired things and we are spurred to positive living and action (Matthew 7:24-27).

• Seek counselling from seasoned teachers (Proverbs 11:14, 12:15, 15:22, 19:20 and 20:18)
A single word of wisdom may save us hours of fruitless study. Advice on time management, study skills, note taking, revision, and preparatory techniques etcetera may be of great valuable benefit.

Whatever is done towards rendering the word of God is like bringing a stone or an ingot of gold towards erecting the temple. “Now set your heart and your soul to seek the LORD your God, arise therefore, and build you the sanctuary of the LORD God, to bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD and holy vessels of God, into the house that is to be built to the name of the LORD (1 Chronicles 22:19).” This should encourage us to press forward and not to grieve with bleakness when we fail. We must not be weary of well doing. The work is in the hands of Christ. As he, the Author and Finisher of the work, is pleased to employ us as his instruments, let us arise and be doing, encouraging and helping one another, working by his rule, after his example, in dependence on his grace, assured that He is with us always and that our labour shall not be in vain in the Lord, the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls (1 Peter 2:25).

We must labour to attain the assurance of our calling and election through faith and excellence thus always upholding it not to utterly fall. In Christ, all fullness dwells, knowledge and new prospering principles are allotted. “Unless the LORD builds the house, they labour in vain that build it, unless the LORD keeps the city, the watchman wakes, but in vain (Psalm 127:1).” The Spirit works godliness and produces excellence which no other grace in the soul can do. If God be not acknowledged, we have no reason to expect His blessings and favour and even the best-laid-plans fail, unless He crowns them with success. Our care must be to keep ourselves in the love of the LORD and place our academic aspirations absolutely in His trust for their triumph.

Professor C. Nongqunga retells us, “Doing the will of God and living by it yield a good life in every way. The righteous live by doing it and God keeps on increasing His blessings upon them abundantly. A blessing is that which we need most which pleases God in our lives. That which pleases God in our lives is unknown to us, but known to Him, hence blessings cannot be done by us, but can be given unto us by Him. The purpose of the product is in the mind of the Creator. It is only God that knows our blessings, for it is what makes Him to appreciate our existence, which is known to Him only. Blessings are only attained when He is pleased with us, hence we have to do His will to please Him (TACC 2016 Annual Greeting).”

Nelson Mandela once intoned, “In countries where innocent people are dying, the leaders are following their blood rather than their brains.” Excellence is the result of caring more than others think is wise, risking more than others think is safe, dreaming more than others think is practical and expecting more than others think is possible. There is no easy walk to excellence and as such we shall have to pass through the valley of upheavals before we reach the summit or mountaintop of our aspirations.

Evolving in excellence through Christ

Tankiso Relebohile Ramatshiso Maxwell Phakane, TASA Alumni

“Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farmworkers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another (Nelson Mandela).”