

Pastor Jim Lloyd

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Title: The Edge of Excellence (“The Edge” Series)

Text: Proverbs 23:12

There are two things that I’d like to make clear at the beginning of this sermon. One is that the preacher is never exempt from his own sermon. Many a time in sermon preparation, I am taken to task. This one takes me to task, in that, I know that I’m nowhere near to excellent. I have plenty to work on. And if I have plenty to work on, why should I call you to excellence? Don’t think of it as ME calling YOU to excellence. Rather think of it as The Word calling US to excellence. Secondly, I don’t think any of us are excellent in EVERYTHING. Furthermore, I don’t think that God calls us to excel in EVERYTHING. Some things aren’t worth excelling in. In fact, some things are to be avoided. I, as most of you, have many and varied responsibilities – husband, father, brother, uncle, pastor, leader, boss, teacher, student, friend, accountant, musician, entertainer, children’s worker, and a host of other things. Don’t forget these two points.

I’m guessing most, if not all, have heard of B.B. King and know that he was an incredible guitar player. He died this past year, just a few months short of his 90th birthday. He gave his final performance – at the age of 89 – just a few months before he passed away. Not only was his guitar playing legendary, his WORK ETHIC was legendary. His passion and dream was to be a musician. When he had barely turned 20, he left his hometown in Mississippi and moved to Memphis, Tennessee to pursue his dream. He was told that he wasn’t good enough. He couldn’t find work, but he didn’t let that stop him. He went back to Mississippi and spent two years working at a radio station and practicing scales and sharpening his skills. When he returned to Memphis in 1949, he was able to get a recording contract – but his record DIDN’T sell! He didn’t let that stop him, either. He kept playing, kept working, and kept getting better. By the end of the 1950s he had become a major player among the Rhythm & Blues crowd, and his music has entertained millions in the decades since. B.B. King NEVER stopped playing, NEVER stopped recording, NEVER stopped performing, AND, most significantly, he NEVER stopped practicing AND he NEVER stopped getting better. Just a couple of years ago, in an interview with a Harvard psychology professor, King said, “Any day I don’t hear or learn something new is a day lost. I don’t think of my age as a shut-off valve. I do everything I can every day to make sure I have a good performance that night.” I don’t know where B.B. King stood spiritually. Rumor has it that he accepted Christ, but whether he did or didn’t, we can learn something here from his attitude about his life’s work: Any day I don’t hear something new or learn something new is a day wasted. His attitude reminds me of a similar quote about Sam Walton, founder of Walmart. The quote was from David Glass, the former Walmart CEO. He said this about Sam Walton: “There’s never been a day in his life, since I’ve known him, that he didn’t improve in some way.”

We’re in week three of a series called “The Edge.” We’re looking at principles from Proverbs that will give you an advantage in every situation – habits that will place you a cut above the rest. Today we’ll look at a verse in Proverbs 23. *“Apply your heart to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge”* (vs. 12). There is a malady that I have encountered in people of just about every age, from just about every walk of life. It’s a disorder that pulls you down and keeps you down and holds you back and does everything it can to make sure that your life is as MEDIOCRE as it can possibly be. What’s the malady? COMPLACENCY. It’s an attitude that says, “I know all I need to know. I’m as good as I need to be. I’m fine the way I am. I can coast the rest of the way.” I wish I could say that it only happens when people reach a certain age that they become complacent with life – but, I see it sometimes in people much younger than I. It’s an attitude that says, “I’m as good as I need to be, and good enough means good enough, and that’s all right with me.” That attitude ensures, more than any other, that you will never stand out, that instead you’ll blend in with the crowd, and that you will always make your home right in the middle of mediocrity. This begs the question: Who wants to make their home in the middle? Who wants their life to be average? When we’re called to follow Jesus, we’re called into a life of potential greatness. We’re called to a life of infinite joy. We’re called to a life of victory, and abundance, and meaning. Nowhere in the Bible, and especially not in the Book of Proverbs, do you ever get the idea that “good enough is good enough” and “coasting is okay.”

So today, I’m challenging you to commit yourself to the pursuit of excellence – a life of perpetual self-improvement. I’m challenging you to commit yourself to the idea that every day of your life you seek to get better in those areas of your life that matter the most. Which are the areas that matter most? Well, in many ways, that’s for you to decide. Part of the answer is obvious: your relationship with God, your relationship with your family, the kind of person you become, the way you do your job, the way you take care of yourself, and so on. When you commit yourself to a life of never-ending improvement, the areas that matter most make themselves obvious.

Today, as we consider gaining the Edge of Excellence, I want to challenge you to ask yourself three questions each and every day – and let these questions serve as a filter for the way you prioritize your schedule and your activities.

- 1. WHAT CAN I LEARN TODAY?** B.B. King said, “Any day I don’t hear or learn something new is a day lost.” He said that in his eighties, and yet there are people in their twenties, thirties, or forties, who think they know all they need to know about certain areas. I’ve known parents who think they know everything they need to know about parenting. I’ve known businessmen who think they know everything they need to know about business. I’ve also known Christians who think they know everything they need to know – if not everything there is to know – about how to interpret the Bible and how to live the Christian life. In the interest of full disclosure, I will tell you that there have been times when I have fallen into each of these categories. And I can tell you, that such know-it-all-ism never ends well for anyone. Proverbs says, *“Poverty and disgrace come to him who ignores instruction, but whoever heeds reproof is honored”* (13:18). It also says, *“Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning”* (9:9). The foundation of wisdom is a desire to grow in knowledge, to pursue a lifestyle of learning more every day. I recently came across some statistics published by Brian Tracy, based on research by the Jenkins Group. Here’s what it said: “33% of High School graduates never read another book after graduation. 42% of college graduates never read another book after graduation. 80% of the families in the US did not buy or read a book in the last 12 months.” When I hear statistics like these, I wonder: How can anyone expect for their life to get better if they’re not learning anything new? For the believer, this isn’t just about reading new books, but about spending time in the Word – learning something new from the Bible every day. You would do well to make time in the Word a part of your daily routine. This is the most important habit that a Christian can develop, because daily time in the Word means that you never stop learning and you never stop growing. This principle also applies to other areas of life. Ask yourself each day: What can I learn about being a better spouse? What can I learn about being a better parent? What can I learn about being more effective in the work that God has called me to do? What new thing can I learn today? Asking that question always leads to another question – it’s the second question I want to challenge you to ask yourself every day.
- 2. WHAT CAN I DO BETTER TODAY?** Proverbs says, *“Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men”* (22:29). I’m talking about the antithesis of the “good-enough-is-good-enough” mindset. I’m talking about the perpetual commitment to being better: Doing everything you do as well as it can possibly be done. The story is told of a young man. His New Year’s resolution the previous year was to “start doing everything better.” He was asked, “That sounds like a goal that’s difficult to measure. What exactly do you mean?” He said, “Just what I said. My resolution was to start doing everything better. To begin with, every morning I make my bed. When I wash the dishes, I make sure they’re actually clean. I fold the laundry. If I take something off the shelf, I put it back when I’m done. I arrive at work five minutes early instead of five minutes late, and while I’m at work I give 100%. Everything I do, I do better than I used to.” Then he was asked, “How would you grade your progress?” He said, “I have a long way to go, but I feel good about the changes I’ve made. It’s amazing how making your bed in the morning can made you feel better about yourself for the rest of the day.” In Paul’s letter to Titus, he said, *“Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned”* (2:7). What’s he talking about? He’s talking about doing everything with a spirit of excellence. You also see this in the Book of Colossians. *“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men”* (3:23). The Old Testament describes the prophet Daniel this way: *“Then this Daniel became distinguished above all the other high officials and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him. And the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom”* (Daniel 6:3). I’m challenging you to think about how you can do what you do with a spirit of excellence. Max Browning said, “I am thankful God does not accept the limitations we put on our lives. Mediocrity is never His will for us. He calls us to excellence and challenges us to be more than we thought.” If you did everything today 1% better than yesterday, can you imagine what the long-term results might be? This is what makes employees indispensable. It’s what makes relationships unbreakable. It’s what makes lives meaningful and usable in the kingdom of God. The spirit of excellence sets churches apart from just seeming like another organization with a group of members that get together once a week. When you make the commitment to do all that you do with a spirit of excellence, you make a difference in the world around you, because the world around you is able to see a difference in you. And so I’m challenging you to ask yourself every day: How can I do what I do better than I’ve done it before? This brings me to the third question we should be asking ourselves.
- 3. WHAT CAN I CHANGE TODAY?** Specifically, what can I change about ME, and about MY BEHAVIOR? The Edge of Excellence means not only that we do things better than we’ve done them before, it also means that we’re willing

to eliminate once and for all that which does us no good, or that which holds us back, or that which prevents us from fulfilling God's calling on our lives. There's a Bible word for that which holds us back – and that word is SIN. And there's a Bible word for the process of eliminating it from your life – and that word is REPENTANCE. Repentance is an essential element in the quest for excellence. Repentance means that every day you evaluate your thoughts and your attitudes and your behaviors, and you invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you concerning each of these. When He draws attention to those things in your life which are displeasing to God and those which are hindering your spiritual growth, you make the courageous decision to CUT IT OUT! *"Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy"* (Proverbs 28:13). We can't achieve excellence if we're going back every day to the same old destructive habits. And what do we know about turning over a new leaf? Once we've done it twice, we are back where we started! DESTRUCTION is what sin is, and DESTROY is what it does. Sin messes up your life. You need to understand that sin is not just an item on an arbitrary list of things that God decided He doesn't want you to do. He doesn't want you to do these things because these things tear apart your life and the lives of those around you. Think about the sin that you struggle with right now. Think about the harm it can do if you let it go unchecked. That's what sin does and that's all it's capable of doing. It causes problems wherever it goes. It destroys everything it gets near. That's why you must be ruthless in your determination to eliminate those things from your life that stand between you and the person God called you to be. Do you know what I would like for each of us to be able to say? "I will never be worse than I am today. I will never be more disobedient than I am today. I will never sin more than I sin today – because every day I'm getting better. Every day I'm confessing and forsaking the sin in my life and every day I'm moving in the direction of holiness and obedience. So tomorrow I will be better than I am today." Here's what I've noticed. Once we get past the really BIG sins, the ones everyone considers to be the worst sins, it's tempting to become complacent with that lesser subset of sins, the ones that people typically consider to be small, such as gossip and bitterness and greed and jealousy. Do you know what? Those sins aren't small at all. They are displeasing to God, just like the others. They'll wreak havoc in your life, just like the others. And, they have the power to hold you back and they keep you mired in mediocrity for as long as you entertain them. And so I'm challenging you to ask yourself every day: What sin do I need to abandon today? What do I need to change about ME today?

- 4. CONCLUSION.** Excellence is not easy to come by. It's hard work. It takes determination and persistence. It takes daily effort. It's much easier to remain complacent, to reach a certain level and try to coast the rest of the way. But the problem is that you can't really coast in life, because much of life is an uphill journey. When you try to coast, you end up sliding backwards. For this reason, we need to be diligent in our daily pursuit of excellence – always learning – always growing – always changing. When Paul wrote his letter to the church in Philippi, he said that this was his prayer for them: *"And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ"* (Philippians 1:9-10). This prayer can become reality in your life if you will ask yourself these three questions every day: 1. What can I learn today? 2. What can I do better today? 3. What can I change about myself today? These questions will help you gain the Edge of Excellence, as you heed the words of Solomon: *"Apply your heart to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge."*