Message 1: Embrace Excellence.

Main Passage: Daniel 1

**INTRODUCTION**

[Tell a personal story of when you strived for excellence in spite of the obstacles]

[In October 2016, I released my first spoken word album - thirteen tracks originally written and professionally mixed and mastered, available on iTunes (3:13 AM - smiley.jason). The entire process took over six years - from concept development to album debut. Throughout this undertaking, I recorded each spoken word poem multiple times in a professional studio with producers who composed a soundtrack for each piece. Even after much planning and revising, some poems didn’t make the album. Other poems were added later. It would have been easy to settle for personal recordings made on my phone. The album would have been ‘good enough’, but would not have been excellent quality. As an artist, producing something excellent takes resources and tenacity. Therefore, I strive to live by the advice my dad always taught me: “Never settle for mediocrity.”]

In his book, *Good to Great,* Jim Collins states, “Good is the enemy of great… Few people attain great lives, in large part because it is just so easy to settle for a good life.”

*Turn in pairs and share:* In what areas have you settled for mediocrity because certain aspects of your life were “good enough” when they could be great?
On campus? In America? In the world?

**TRANSITION**

When looking at the racial injustices in America of historic oppression, racism, police brutality, mass incarceration, etc., how do we achieve excellence in spite of the obstacles we may face?

What prevents us from taking action and standing against these injustices? Maybe the perspective that racism isn’t ‘as bad as’ or ‘as violent as’ the late 50s. Maybe the feeling that we’ve achieved a ‘good enough’ race relations where we can get by but have lost hope that this world could ever actually be excellent.

Negative environments expose the limitations of what we have and what we can do, which battles against our ability to achieve excellence. Scripture gives us a model of individuals achieving excellence despite their own limitations. We will take some time over the next few weeks to look at the characteristics of a person of excellence in the Bible who was held captive as a slave, lived as a minority, forced to submit to the majority culture yet, through his broken world, brought hope to an oppressor nation. I’m referring to Daniel.

**BACKGROUND**

The Babylonian army crushed the Egyptian army at Carchemish (Jeremiah 46:2)

1. The Babylonian army was led by Nebuchadnezzar II

2. Nebuchadnezzar quickly conquered the whole region

3. Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem. (Daniel 1:1)

a. As a result: Jehoiakim surrendered his allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar

b. The first Hebrews were deported to Babylon

c. A generation of young Hebrew leadership was taken away

d. Babylon’s agenda was to erase the importance of the Hebrew God and culture

 *Read Daniel 1*

 **SUMMARY OF DANIEL 1**

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and, Azariah were given three years to learn about the culture and customs of a foreign nation. They were taken out of the comfort of their community of faith and placed into a setting where they were forced as slaves to eat, live, and work in a culture that was completely different than their own. (Daniel 1:3-7)

Minorities in America have a similar experience. College students are given four (maybe five... or six) years to learn new culture and customs throughout college. Minority college students also are often taken out of the comfort of their community and placed in a setting where they are forced as students to eat, live, and work in an environment that may be different from home.

Daniel and his friends used this experience as an opportunity not to merely blend in, but to excel beyond their peers. The king found “none equal” to them (Daniel 1:19-20).

How were they able to achieve excellence?

**MAIN POINTS**

1. Excellence depends on God (v.17) *“To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning…”*

Maybe you have tried to achieve excellence within your own power. Maybe you have tried and failed. If you struggle with perfectionism, you may become extremely self-critical.

The bad news is… the standard of excellence *is defined* by the One who is supreme - God.

The good news is… the source of excellence *originates* from the One who is supreme - God.

Therefore, achieving excellence does not depend on your personal ability but rather on the empowerment of God. This privilege reminds me of the origin of a superhero.

Example: After a nonathletic teenage nerd named Peter Parker was bit by a radioactive spider, he eventually turned into one of the most powerful super-heroes of all time. The world of Peter Parker contained villains with evil powers desiring to destroy his neighborhood with violence and crime including the murder of his Uncle Ben Parker. It was not the radioactive bite but the powerful words from his late Uncle Ben, “With great power, comes great responsibility” that empowered Peter to achieve excellence ultimately becoming the Amazing Spider-Man.

The powerful Word of God can transform you to achieve excellence even in the midst of this broken world.

**TRANSITION**

*As we depend on God, it is important that we also stand up for what we believe in.*

2. Excellence requires tenacity (v.8) *But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission...*

Daniel decided to stand firm on his beliefs, even in the midst of opposition.

**EXAMPLE**

 [Tell of a personal story about ‘standing firm’ in your beliefs or refer to introduction story]

[Certain elements for my spoken word album were non-negotiable. I wanted to release the completed album on my 30th birthday. The post production phase required major editing by the producer. Despite the obstacle of limited time, I *purposed in my heart* to meet that deadline with excellence, which demanded that I stay up late editing, pay extra fees, etc. ]

In the same way, Daniel faced obstacles against what he believed. The authorities already changed his name and wanted to continue to assimilate him. Though he found himself like a fish out of water, Daniel *purposed in his heart* to be successful in Babylon but not to defile himself. *He showed those in authority that he didn’t have conform, in order to be successful and to even have influence.* (Daniel 1:15-16).

Despite the fact that being in school means being surrounded by a culture that is contrary to Christlikeness, *we don’t have to run away from the world to be holy and we don’t have to become like the world to be influential*. Despite the fact that this world is full of racism, we do not have to conform to the divisive racists agenda, but rather live transformational with excellence like Daniel. (Romans 12:1-2).

**ACTIVE RESPONSES**

1. God calls us to excellence in all aspects of our lives just like Daniel. Think of a specific area in your life (school work, relationships, campus involvement, ministry) where you have settled for mediocrity in the past. Write out a plan for excellence in this area. *\*please feel free to put this on a slide or a handout* (1.What is your vision for this area in your life? 2. What elements are needed to accomplish this vision? 3. What would you start this week to help achieve this vision? 4. How will you depend on God?
2. Missional Activity. Think of ways to strive for excellence in a cross cultural relationship. Start praying for someone who has a different culture than you. Invite them to eat their favorite meal this week. Use this time to learn about who they are and share more about who you are. (Sometime during your meal consider asking these questions to go deeper. 1. What events in your life has shaped who you are? 2. What gives you hope? Be ready to share about how you have been shaped and what gives you hope as well. )
3. Invitation to Faith. We cannot achieve excellence on our own. It comes from God. And God cares about all aspects of your life. Some of you are already following Jesus. However, you know there are areas of your life where you have tried to achieve excellence on your own yet have fallen short. This first invitation is for you to step into a deeper dependence on God. Some of you are not following Jesus. You have tried to achieve excellence on your own yet have often fallen short. This next invitation is for to to take that initial step to follow Him. (You will have to write out the rest of the call to faith. How will you have someone respond? Examples can be found in the evangelism toolkit.)