

Living Above the Level of Mediocrity

by Chuck Swindoll¹

Excerpts by William Gross

The greatest waste of our natural resources is the number of people who never achieve their potential... If you think you can't, you won't. If you think you can, there's a good chance you will. Even making the effort will make you feel like a new person. Reputations are made by searching for things that can't be done and doing them.

If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.

Henry David Thoreau

Life is a leaf of paper white
Whereon each one of us may write
His word or two, and then comes night.

Greatly begin! Though thou have time
But for a line, be that sublime ---
Not failure, but low aim, is crime.

James Russell Lowell

It starts in your Mind:

"For as he thinks within himself, so he is." Prov. 23:7 The secret of living a life of excellence is merely a matter of thinking thoughts of excellence. Really, it's a matter of programming our minds with the kind of information that will set us free.

"We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are **taking every thought captive** to the obedience of Christ." 2 Cor 10:3-5

Perhaps the speculations represent the reasonings, the thought patterns, the traditional habits of thinking built in by the enemy for many, many years. In order for the Truth of God to win, those speculations that encompassed our mind have to be penetrated. Once the Lord [by the power the H.S.] breaks through the wall-like fortress and speculations, He encounters those "lofty things."

Let's call these "lofty things" the mental blocks we've erected against spiritual viewpoints. You and I are prompted to go back to carnal habits when under pressure, when under attack, when undergoing a test, when doing without, when persecuted, when maligned, criticized, or done wrong. Our tendency is to rely on those traditional "lofty things" --- those established thoughts that were passed on to us by our parents, our friends, and our colleagues. Like what? Try these one-liner mental blocks:

The right answer. That's not logical. Follow the rules. Be Practical. Avoid ambiguity. To err is wrong. Play is frivolous. That's not my area. Don't be foolish. I'm not creative.

God's ultimate goal is to take "every thought captive." His plan is to transform old thoughts that defeat us into new thoughts that encourage us. There is hope beyond such **mediocre mindsets** as battling lust, or envy, or pride, or jealousy, or extreme perfectionism, or a negative, critical spirit. HOW?

1. **Memorize** Scripture. Get hold of the Bible, read it thoughtfully, and when you come across a statement that addresses some issue you're struggling with or some area of need in your life, write it down and spend part of your day tucking it away in the folds of your mind.
2. **Personalize** the passage of Scripture by substituting 'I, me, mine, my' for general terms.
3. **Analyze** your motives. Take charge! As soon as you catch yourself responding negatively or defensively, think! Analyze the situation and then ask yourself, "Why am I getting so hot and bothered by this?" or "Is there something I'm afraid of?" or "Is there a reason I'm behaving or reacting this way, or am I just doing it out of habit?" [Intellectual analysis overcomes primal emotion]
4. **Visualize** yourself as you want to be and how God wants you to be. Act out your vision.

¹ Swindoll, Charles R., *Living Above the Level of Mediocrity*, (1987, 1989, W Publishing Group)

Live life above the **mediocre level** where you push and shove to get your own way. See through the clutching greed of our times.

Simon the Magician was described by Peter as being in the gall of bitterness, the bondage of iniquity. ["Gall of bitterness" means an attitude of arrogance, impudence, and brazenness]. It indicates our basic motivation is for selfish gain, carnal merchandising, and it too is **mediocre**.

If you are greatly gifted, you may be able to do marvelous things that would cause the public to be swept up in your skills and in your abilities. In the process of your growing, you will find great temptation to make a name for yourself, to make a big splash, to gain attention, to get the glory, to strut around, to increase your fees, to demand your rights, and to expect kid-glove treatment. You're in authority now! People are talking about you. But instead, remember Simon. Realize, as well, the ministry of small things.

"But in the small corners of life, in those areas of service that will never be newsworthy or gain us any recognition, we must hammer out the meaning of obedience."

Richard J. Foster
Money, Sex and Power

Every time you make plans to acquire a sizable possession – you must deal with it before God, and ask: Is this His will? Would this honor Him? Would this glorify Him? And before you hang onto something for a long, long time, you have to ask yourself: Is this worth hanging onto? Is this the kind of thing that honors His kingdom? ... that helps me seek His righteousness? Soar above **the greedy, grubby level of mediocrity**.

Committed individuals live with shallow tent pegs. They may own things, but nothing owns them. They have come to terms with merchandise that has a price tag and opted for commitment to values that are priceless.

Using Joshua and Caleb as examples, we can say the following:

1. Age has little to do with achievement, and nothing to do with commitment.
2. A Godly walk is basic to a positive life. You've got to know who's on your side.
3. Convictions are a matter of choice, not force. Lead by example, not by threat and they will follow.

Never use age as an excuse. Never take your cues from the crowd. Never think your choices obligate anyone else (or you'll be a self-appointed martyr). Never quit because someone disagrees with you.

THE WORLD NEEDS MEN...

who cannot be bought
whose word is their bond
who put character above wealth
who possess opinions and a will
who are larger than their vocations
who do not hesitate to take chances
who will not lose their individuality in a crowd
who will be as honest in small things as in great things
who will make no compromise with wrong
whose ambitions are not confined to their own selfish desires
who will not say they do it "because everybody else does it"
who are true to their friends through good report and evil report,
in adversity as well as in prosperity
who do not believe that shrewdness, cunning, and
hardheadedness are the best qualities for winning success
who are not ashamed or afraid to stand for the truth when it is unpopular
who can say 'no' with emphasis, although all the rest of the world says 'yes'

Ted W. Engstrom
The Making of a Christian Leader

Daily Attitude Adjustment

The World:

We live in a negative, hostile world. Face it my friend, the system that surrounds us focuses on the negatives: what is wrong, *not what is right*; what is missing, *not what is present*; what is ugly, *not what is beautiful*; what is destructive, *not what is constructive*; what cannot be done, *not what can be done*; what hurts, *not what helps*; what we lack, *not what we have*. The result: **fear, resentment, and anger**.

Charles R. Swindoll
"Rising Above the Level of Mediocrity"

But we are sojourners in this world. It has no hold on us. The Kingdom of God is where we abide, and in the Kingdom there is a different set of values and a different attitude:

The Kingdom:

Finally brothers, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - **put it into practice**. And the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4:8

The Cost:

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it... **No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God...**

Luke 9:23-24,62

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters --- yes, even his own life --- he **cannot be my disciple**. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me **cannot be my disciple**... Any of you who does not give up all his own possessions **cannot be my disciple**.

Luke 14:26-27,33

Seeking the favor of men, the preference of self, and the security of things negates discipleship. Rather, seek the favor of God, the preference of others, and the contentment of God's grace.

The Choice:

But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. **But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.**

Joshua 24:15

Determination

The Dream:

A God-given idea, plan, agenda, or goal that leads to God-honoring results. You have God-given drive because you have God-given dreams. What are your dreams for this year? What are your hopes, your agenda? What are you trusting God for? The kind of dreaming that results in character-building, the kind that cultivates God's righteousness and God's rulership in your life.

Dreams are specific, not general. Dreams are personal, not public. They're intimate images and ideas. Dreams can easily appear to others as extreme and illogical. Dreams are often accompanied by a strong desire to fulfill them. And they are always outside the realm of the expected. This is the stuff of which leaders are made. If you don't dream, your leadership is seriously limited. Set aside one day every month to do nothing but pray and dream.

If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.

Henry David Thoreau

Priorities

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

Matt 6:33

To identify 'these things' that will be added unto you, go back to verse 24: "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

I asked God for strength that I might achieve.
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked God for health that I might do greater things.
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy.
I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of men.
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for ---
but everything I had hoped for...

Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am among all men most richly blessed.

Unknown Confederate soldier

"I've learned that we must hold everything loosely, because when I grip it tightly, it hurts when the Father pries my fingers loose and takes it from me!"

Corrie Ten Boom

If you cannot let it go, it's a priority to you. It is impossible to be a slave to things or people and at the same time be a faithful servant of God... Everything created was through Christ and His power, and furthermore, it was created for His honor. That includes everyday things today. You have a good job? It's to be enjoyed for Him. You have a nice salary? It's to be enjoyed and invested for Him. You have good health? It is for Him. You have a family? The family members are for Him. You're planning a move? It's to be for Him. You're thinking about a career change? It needs to be for Him. That is true because He's the ruler of our kingdom. He is Lord. And that's not simply the title of a chorus Christians sing; it's a statement of faith ['No, Lord' is an oxymoron]. He has the right to take charge of our decisions so that He might be honored through them. Every day I live I must address that.

Our choice of priorities determines at which level we soar. Stated another way: Whatever is in first place, if it isn't Christ alone, it is in the wrong place. Life is a lot like a coin; you can spend it any way you wish, but you can spend it only once. What are you spending it on? [How you spend your spare time and money is a strong indicator of where your treasures are - **where your treasures are is where your heart is also** (Matt. 6:21) - are you storing them in heavenly or earthly realms?]