

## Pretty Good Slacker August 16, 2009

The staff of Pacific Palisades High School in California instituted a policy requiring students and parents to be responsible for their children's absences and missing homework. The school and teachers were sued by parents who wanted their children's failing grades to be changed to passing grades, even though those children were absent 15-30 times during the semester and did not complete enough school work to pass the classes.

As a result of the outrage from parents, the staff of the school voted to put a message on the school's voice mail, giving select options to parents who were calling. I'm not going to share all of them with you, but of the 10 options callers could choose were the following:

Hello! You have reached the school's voice mail system. In order to assist you, please listen carefully to all your options before making a selection:

-To lie about why your child is absent, please press 1.

-To make excuses for why your child did not do his work, please press 2.

-To ask why you didn't get information that was enclosed in your newsletter and flyers mailed to you, please press 5.

-If you want us to raise your child, please press 6.

-To request another teacher for the third time this year, please press 8.

-If you realize this is the real world and your child must be accountable and responsible for his/her own behavior, class work, homework, and that it's not the teachers' fault for your children's lack of effort, please hang up and have a nice day.

Now that may sound a little farfetched to you, and perhaps it is, but on the other hand, there's a point being made here. It seems to me quite clear in the last option that said: "It's not the teachers' fault for your children's lack of effort." This school, whether you agree or not, decided not to tolerate children who were "slacking off," not doing their work, just getting by, and whose parents were endorsing that lack of effort. Without knowing all the facts, I'm guessing that this radical move was precipitated by kids just simply not being invested in

learning, not doing what it took to pass, let alone to pass with flying colors. There was evidently a mindset that said it was OK to just get by, that good enough was good enough.

We see many examples of workers, students, parents, who are "slackers." I don't know if this is an adequate definition, but when I hear the word "slacker," I think of someone who tries to avoid work, and take the easy way out, someone who's content with mediocrity.

Mort Crim, in one of his books, talks about mediocrity becoming the norm in the United States. This is what he had to say:

"Excellence used to be one of our core values. Teachers taught it. Parents encouraged it. Skilled craftsmen practiced it, often raising a trade to the level of an art. Somewhere between the Industrial Revolution and the Information Age, it seems we lowered our aim. We compromised quality in the name of efficiency. For growing numbers of us, average became an acceptable goal. Just getting by was okay. Being good enough was good enough."

I think Crim was absolutely right; we have compromised quality and excellence for the sake of just getting by and taking the easy way out. Like Billy Crystal in *City Slickers*, and like much of our society, I think we've allowed ourselves to get dulled on life, worn down and worn out, and we are no longer willing to invest our energy into doing not just a good job, but going the extra mile and trying to do a GREAT job! We've lost our work ethic and our passion for doing something as well as we can do it.

I don't think that's the way God would have us live our lives. One of our Bible passages as much as says that. The writer Paul wants to let the people in the church in Corinth know the importance of giving every effort their best shot and full energy. Paul writes this: "I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me!"

"No sloppy living for me!" No half-hearted effort. No slacking off. No quitting before we're through. No just getting by. It's clear that Paul believes that we're to give every endeavor in our lives our best effort, our best selves—not necessarily doing something to perfection, but to do the best we can. Paul wants us to understand how God wants us to live: with enthusiasm and investment. In fact, I find it interesting that the word *enthusiasm* comes from the Greek, meaning "filled with the spirit of God."

If we are filled with the spirit of God, then we're going to give life the very best we have to offer. That's what God wants for us and from us; God wants our lives to be filled with enthusiasm and joy, for us to be fully invested in everything we do, for us to use all the abilities we have to the fullest extent possible, to live up to our potential.

Joel Barker, in a book entitled *Paradigms*, talked about the importance of doing it right the first time. He talked about striving for excellence, saying, "The quest for excellence is a way, without a compromise, to bring the spirit of God back into the workplace." And I'd say not just the workplace, but our schools, our homes, our churches, our government, our businesses and organizations, our relationships. Every facet of our lives could well benefit from questing after excellence and embracing God's spirit, God's enthusiasm.

We each have a role to play in such an undertaking, because we have to begin with ourselves. If we're not invested in our job, find a job that will bring us alive again, and let's not be content to go through the same routine day after day, bored out of our minds, giving it half-effort, at best. If we're not invested in our families, then it has to start with our renewing our commitment to our life partners, to our kids, to our parents. We have to be striving for excellence if we want to see anyone else take that kind of step. We can't ask it of our kids, and not ask it of ourselves, plain and simple.

School's just started, or is about to start, and teachers, students, administrators, staff members all have an incredible opportunity to reach for excellence, to give it that extra bit of effort, to go the extra mile. It doesn't matter whether anyone around us is doing that, or not. Someone has to be first, and it might as well be you, or me. We need to learn not to accept mediocrity, and to strive for something better, to keep improving, to be all we can be. And we need to expect the same things of others—our co-workers, our teachers, our students, our friends, our family. Let's invest ourselves in something higher, something that lasts, something that's meaningful, and give it our full 100%, and nothing less.

We can model and we can encourage the sense that good enough isn't good enough, that we have to try harder, that we have to do better. I have never forgotten a story Dr. Ron Jensen told in his book, *Make a Life, Not Just a Living*. He said that, years ago, a teacher was assigned to the roughest class of boys in the

worst area of Harlem. One day she accidentally saw a listing of the boys' IQ's, and she was astounded. These guys were brilliant!

That changed her whole perspective on those young men, and she began treating them as brilliant, capable human beings with incredible potential. Her encouragement of them worked miracles, and every one of them graduated from high school and succeeded in great measure throughout their lives.

Yet there's a twist to this story. You see, the teacher hadn't actually seen the boys' IQ scores. She had misread the paper; it was their locker numbers that she had seen! Yet because she thought the numbers reflected their IQ scores and treated them that way, she dramatically changed the way those young men lived. And they responded because they began to believe that they had the potential to be more and to do more.

We can do that for one another; we can look for the abilities and potential within each and every person, and then we can do our best to encourage and help others develop into all they can be. At the same time, we can become more passionate, more invested, more enthusiastic about every parcel of our lives. When we do that, we'll be coming a lot closer to living the way God would have us live.

That's really what our second Bible passage is trying to say to us. Again, it's Paul, writing these words: "You'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst, the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into most excellent harmonies."

If we commit ourselves to living that way, then we'd better start tuning up, because there will be some incredible harmonies coming from us and around us!

Closing:

Someone has said, "Excellence means when a man or woman asks of himself more than others do." I am hoping that each of us will ask of ourselves more than others do, and live into our God-given potential. And I pray that the words of theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, ring true. He said, "If I were to wish for anything, I should not wish for wealth and power but for the passionate sense of the potential." As we leave

here this morning, I hope and pray that each of us knows that passionate sense of the potential.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.  
Amen.