
The Writer's Inkhorn

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Continuing Reflections on the Word for Your Personal Growth in Christ

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Back-to-School Issue



PERSISTING IN MY WORK SO THAT GOD MAY COMPLETE HIS WORK IN ME

Expanded from a closing devotional for a
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Development Workshop given 28 Jul 2012,
in Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia

Scripture text: St. John 21:1-19

On a Thursday morning, 26 July, of my first week in Malaysia, I had a rather small dilemma: I just wanted to know how many ounces of water were in the bottles of Spritzer water that we were drinking. Measurement on the bottle was in milliliters (mL). Unlike most of the rest of the world, the United States still uses the English system of measurement. Mostly everyone else uses the metric system. Hence, I think in ounces and pounds and miles, and I do not naturally think in mL or grams or kilometers. I just wanted to know how many ounces were in the bottle of water.

So I posed (to myself) what seemed like a straightforward problem to *me*: I set up a direct proportion, calculated it *exactly* in three different ways. I also did one *estimate* to check the accuracy of my hand calculations (no Google at my fingertips).

Here is what happened. *Each* time, I got three different *exact* answers and one *estimate*! The *exact* answers were 600 mL = 20.28 ounces, 600 mL = 20.48 ounces, and 600 mL = 21.48 ounces. For the estimate, I

said 500 mL is about 17 ounces, so 600 mL is less than 20.5 ounces. By this time, I am laughing almost hysterically. How can this be? Which answer is correct? How do I know? How do *you*

know? You *don't*, **do** you? What is going on here? I know that more than teaching me to do math all over again, God is doing something else; this is clearly a set up. So I asked Him, "What is the lesson in this for *me*, the teacher? What are the take-aways?"

Here is what God showed me: **first**, no matter how long one has been practicing one's craft, one never reaches perfection. Excellence, *yes*! Perfection, *no*! Diligence to persist, *yes*! Perfection, *no*! God *alone* is the perfect One. God only expects that *we* do our best, and He **does** expect that, and that is what we are to expect from our children and/or our *students* – excellence, not perfection! We are **not** to set them up for failure by expecting them to meet the impossible standard of perfection. We are to allow them room for error *and* growth, just as our heavenly Father allows that for us.

Choose something you do now fairly well and let me ask you this question about it: were you as good at that thing when you started it as you are now? If you happen to be a teacher or were a teacher, would you say that you were as good a teacher the first day that you walked into your classroom as you are today? If you can say, "Yes, I was; I was *that* good," then you are also saying that you have not grown **one bit** since the day you started out. If, on the other hand, you have to say no, you were not, then you must also realize that someone allowed *you* the room to grow.

Have you extended that same grace to your *students*? Your children? Your co-workers? Have you taught them, shown them, modeled for them, allowed them to practice in your presence, provided support for them in their learning all along the way? Do you *daily* extend grace?

If you are not or have not been a teacher in the classroom, but have children and have been their first teacher in your home (you *are*, you know), have you extended grace to your children in the same way that Christ has extended it to you? Or have you set up impossible standards, and then get angry when those standards are not met?

If you work in some managerial or supervisory capacity on a job, ask yourself the same question. Are you demanding and are your expectations unreasonable? Do you know how to extend grace in that work space while still holding workers accountable in a godly manner?

And what about for yourself? We often say that we can be our own worst critics. Do you know how to set reasonable expectations for yourself? When you do not reach the goals you desire, do you accept your shortcomings in stride, then reset and continue to move forward with grace? Or, do you beat yourself up over the least disappointment or imperfection?

Let us step aside to a biblical character's example. Jesus, the most excellent Teacher in all of time and eternity, had a student named Simon Peter. Peter's previous vocation was fisherman *par excellence* – of *fishes*, though, and not of *men*. He knew his trade as a fisherman of *fishes*, but had no clue about being a fisherman of *men*. The first two disciples Jesus called (Matthew 4:18-20) were Peter and his brother Andrew and they were *both* fishermen. So Peter, as a fisherman of *fishes*, had at least a master's degree, perhaps a Ph.D. in his trade, but as a fisherman of *men*, not so much. Maybe he was in the equivalent of *this*, a year one – *middle* school student.

Jesus called Peter into an intensive and extensive accelerated learning program with eleven other guys, and Jesus was their Instructor for three years, living with them, teaching them, training them, sometimes being frustrated with them, but not giving up on them or sending them home to their families for holidays or when they messed up. He was committed to their success. He worked with them diligently in the short time He knew that He would have them in His class because soon He would be gone. They would “graduate” and would need to be prepared to take their places and carry on the work of His ministry in the kingdom of God in His physical absence, although He promised to “never leave them or forsake them” in *Spirit*.

Jesus poured Himself **daily** into the lives of the others, *and* Peter, teaching him for the three years, and now it was time for their examination. Do you know where that first exam takes place?

Yes; it is in the Garden of Gethsemane. Enter, Judas Iscariot and the soldiers, and others. The writer, John the Apostle, says that Jesus asks them for whom they are looking. John does not mention Judas' kiss of betrayal but he does identify Simon Peter. Jesus again asks the soldiers who they are looking for, and Peter “answers” by taking out a sword and cutting off someone's ear! He was probably aiming to take the guy's *head* off, but the guy perhaps moved his head to the side like so.

Jesus immediately responded, in essence, saying, “Peter! *Put* that thing away! I did not teach you *that*! That **sword** is *not* the answer to **this** question/this dilemma that we are in.” Student Peter did not do well on this part of the examination. Peter was not ready to graduate to that Pentecost sermon just yet. Teacher Jesus picks up Malchus' ear, just sticks it back on the side of his head, and allows the soldiers to bind Him and take Him away. Student Peter follows.

Then came the next part of the examination; do you remember where they

were *this* time and the “question” Peter was asked? It was during the trial proceedings in the courtyard and something was said to Peter about identifying himself with Teacher Jesus; here, I state it as a question: “Are **you** one of this man’s disciples?” Peter answered, “**No**, I am *not*.” **Three** times Peter was asked (actually *accused*) and three times he gave the wrong answer.

How many times have you taught a lesson, tested a student, retaught the concepts, and re-examined the student, and he or she kept giving the same or a **different** wrong answer? How many times did **I** do the one problem I mentioned at the outset and got three different answers?

Jesus had previously warned Peter that this was going to happen. After the third time that Peter gave the wrong answer, Writer Luke said Jesus just turned and looked at Peter, and writer Matthew added, Peter *remembered* what Jesus had told him was *going* to happen, and Peter went out and wept bitterly.

This failure showed that Peter was still not ready for that Pentecost sermon that was to come. He was still learning and needed time to process all that Jesus had been trying to teach him. The **second** takeaway for you / for us – so *what* if our students or our children do not all get to the *same* place at the *same* time, neither do we; yet, our heavenly Father is patient with each one of us as individuals and allows *us* the time and space *we* need to grow into our *best* selves.

Teacher Jesus did not give up on His student. Even after His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus presented Peter with a **third** chance to pass his examination. Do you know where this part of the exam occurred and what was the question?

John said that a number of the disciples were all together: Simon Peter, Thomas the Twin, Nathanael, the *sons* of Zebedee, and two other disciples, when Peter announced that he was going fishing. So everyone else said that they were going with him. It was

after Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus appeared to them there, by the Sea of Tiberius and talked with them, having prepared breakfast for them as well. After they have eaten, the exam questions started, interestingly and specifically addressed to Peter:

Jesus said to Simon Peter,
“Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?”

[Peter] said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”

[Jesus] said to him, “Feed My lambs.”

[Jesus] said to him again a second time, “Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love Me?”

[Peter] said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”

He said to him, “Tend My sheep.”

[Jesus] said to him the third time, “Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love Me?” **Peter was grieved** because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?”

And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.”

Jesus said to him, “Feed My sheep.”

Three times Peter was presented with the same question, to the point of frustration, and three times he answered in the affirmative, but the Teacher was looking for more. He was looking for **evidence** that Peter had really gotten his lesson this time, so He gave Peter some homework: “Feed my lambs (my little ones); feed my sheep (my older ones); feed my sheep (all of God’s children need to be fed).”

I always feel like there is significance in the number of times Jesus asks Peter whether he loves Him. Since Peter denied Jesus *three* times, Jesus asks him *three* times whether

Peter loves Him, to restore his faith in Peter, hardly, but perhaps to restore Peter's faith and confidence in himself regarding who Jesus was / is.

Peter had listened intently and apparently had finally taken it all in. He later showed evidence of his learning when he preached that sermon explaining what happened on the day of Pentecost, and about **three** thousand people were added to the church after just that one sermon! On another occasion, Peter and John preached and the number who heard the word were about 5000.

Here, then, is one **final** take-away. No matter *how* long it takes, do not be so quick to give up on that student or child that seems to be stubborn and self-willed, or slower and a bit confused, or bright and undisciplined. God can use him or her in ways you may never even *begin* to imagine. In as much as our mission should always be to serve, it should also be to help prepare others to serve well.

***Whatever you do, do all
to the glory of God.***

So my challenge for all of us is to always serve *wherever* we are serving, with excellence. Let us make that our personal determination.

As you seek to individually and collectively impact the lives of all children and/or adults who will be placed in your care, know that God wants to multiply that impact many times over, through the lives of you, the children, and even their families, to make a profound difference in His kingdom and in this world. Persist in your work with diligence and a pure heart so that God may complete His work in you *and* in your students or your children and grandchildren for years to come. Amen? Amen!

Your Teacher and Sister,
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