

Pursuing Excellence (Gloria Dei)

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[0 : 0 0] Hopefully by now you've got a Bible, you're in Psalm 8, and we're in the middle of a series where we have been talking about the vision and the values of the Table Church. We have this vision statement that says that we want to be authentic and thoughtful followers of Jesus, and then we've got values in terms of how we're going to do that. And so a couple weeks ago we talked about loving God, we talked about the agape and the eros and the philia love of God that God has for us, and that God is on a mission, the Missio Dei, God is on a mission to save the world, to reboot, to launch creation. And then last week, Pastor Richard, he talked to us about loving people, and that we are called to love lots of kinds of people, including ourselves, even when we don't want to love ourselves, including our enemies, people that might be difficult to love.

If God is a God of love, and if we want to love that God, then that means we need to love people. It's one of the primary ways that we love God is through loving people. And this week, we're going to talk about one of kind of our practical values, and that is to pursue excellence. Now, we'll talk about excellence, but I'm going to kind of push this off to the end of the sermon. And we've been kind of matching up our values with these Latin phrases. And so today's Latin phrase is the Gloria Dei, the Gloria Dei, the glory of God. And that takes us to Psalm chapter 8. So this is what it says. We're going to go through this verse by verse and talk about God's glory. It says, Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. You have set your glory in the heavens. So the psalmist is beginning this song about God, about God's glory, God's majesty, about where it is and what it's like.

And we're introduced to this word glory. How majestic is your name in all the earth. You have set your glory in the heavens. So what is glory? Let's talk about that. So again, if you have a Bible, we're going to flip over to Exodus chapter 24. Let's talk about glory for a second. Because this is where the glory of God really begins to make its debut in Scripture. Now, if you're going to Genesis, you'd see the word glory. It's the Hebrew word kavod. If you're here with me, let me hear you say the word kavod. There, there's people. They're listening. That's good. Kavod. And one of the first definitions, if you look it up in a dictionary of kavod, is like weight and heaviness. And the idea, if you were to follow the history of this word, is that as people grew in authority and wealth and power, they were weighed down with riches. And this was a good thing. It was a good thing that they were, had heaviness about them. They had kavod about them because they had riches and wealth and honor and dignity and power and all these kinds of things. So if you read through Genesis, you'll see, you'll read about people being wealthy, about people having this like fame or honor, things like that. It's the word kavod. Which, quick aside, quick aside, like scripturally speaking, heaviness, like largeness, like being a person of size, was almost always a good thing, by the way. Like it was almost always seen as like something that like God was blessing you and therefore you physically grew. It was always, almost always seen like that. And like skittiness, like being thin, like not having fat on your bones, was almost always seen as like a sign of like God not necessarily being on your side. Which is just an interesting thing about how scripture actually talks about that. So like if you have ever been told that like God doesn't love you because of your size, like that's bull. And if the church has ever told you that you don't belong because of your size, that's also bull. So anyway, that's a quick aside.

Genesis chapter 4, or Exodus chapter 24, we see this word kavod start to be used again, but now we're talking about God and God's weightiness, God's gravity, that God has some, adds some weight to the room when God walks in. So this is what Exodus chapter 24 says. It says, Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and 70 elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. So the Israelites, they have left Egypt. They have been redeemed from slavery. They are now at Mount Sinai, and they have been called up to the mountain of God.

And they see God. And under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky, this precious gemstone. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites.

[4 : 47] They saw God. And this is the reaction, which I love. They saw God and they ate and drank. Which is just like, awesome. Like, your response to seeing God, creator, the Lord of the universe, your response is like, let's have a meal, I guess. Like, that's what you do. You see God and you have a meal with God.

And the Lord said to Moses, come up to me on the mountain. Stay here. And I will give you tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction. So, you know, this is the Ten Commandments, Prince of Egypt stuff going on here. So Moses sets out with Joshua, his aide, and Moses went up on the mountain. And he said to the elders, wait here for us. Verse 15, when Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days, the cloud covered the mountain. On the seventh day, the Lord called Moses from within the cloud.

And to the Israelites, the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. So, God has called the Israelites out of Egypt. He's called them to Mount Sinai. He's called some of the elders of the elders of the community up. They see God. He looks like this beautiful blue gemstone. They have a meal. God calls Moses further up and further into the mountain. And the rest of the Israelites, they see the glory of God, the *kibbutz* of God. And to them, it doesn't look like a beautiful gemstone. It looks like a consuming fire. Which has interesting implications, by the way, for like how we perceive God, depending on like our perspective and where we're situated in life.

And do we see God as a source of beauty, as a source of condemnation? God's *kavod*, God's glory might actually look different to us depending on what our mindset is. Anyway, different topic.

[6 : 35] So, God's *kavod*, God's glory settles on the mountain. The word that's used in verse 15, the glory of the Lord settled on, is the Hebrew word to *skein*, which keep that word in mind, *skein*.

It's going to show up later in the sermon. So, God settles *skein*. It's the word used for tabernacle. He makes a dwelling place on the mountain. That's where God's glory is. And whenever we see the word glory used throughout the book of Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy, whenever it's talked about like the mountain of Mount Sinai, the tabernacle, the temple, it's always about God's presence, where God has shown up in some sort of manifest way where we can see and experience something about God. God's glory is God's manifest presence. Okay, so if you're taking notes, write that down for a good definition of glory. God's manifest presence. Back to Psalm 8. The psalmist says, how majestic is your name in all the earth. You have set your glory in the heavens. So, we can know something true about what God is like, what God looks like, what God's presence.

When we look up at the heavens. Psalm 19 talks about this later on. The heavens declare the glory of God. The psalmist continues. Verse 2. Through the praise of children and infants, you have established a stronghold against your enemies to silence the foe and the avenger. Now, this is interesting because now all of a sudden our expectations are turned a little bit. The heavens, the sun and the moon and the stars and the galaxies and the vastness and the hugeness of the universe. Of course, that declares God's glory. Of course, that says something true and wonderful and magnificent about what God is like.

And the praise of children and infants have established a stronghold of God. God's strength is established by some of the lowest unexpected things. Because back then, and I don't know if it's all that different now, children were seen as the lowest cast of society. They were seen as the lowest class that they were, you wouldn't expect that God would make his glory known through them.

But that's what the psalmist is saying. In the heavens, we see God's glory. And even in the praise of infants and children. Verse 3. When I consider your heavens and the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, then we get this question, this kind of ultimate question.

[9 : 09] What is humankind that you're mindful of them? Human beings that you care for them. So the psalmist is going back and forth. Lord, your name is majestic in all the earth. You've set your glory in the heavens.

Even through children and infants, you have established your stronghold. I look at your heavens. I see the work of your fingers and the stars that you've set in place. And then the question, what is humankind that you're mindful of them? Human beings that you care for them. This is one of the big questions. If there is a God of glory, if there is a God who flings stars into place and sets the

galaxies a spinning, if there's a God like that, how can that God possibly care for even us? Doesn't always seem like God does. So we are reminded of Genesis chapter 1. Verse 5 says this, you have made them. What is humankind that you're mindful of them? That you care for them? You have made us. Genesis chapter 1 and 2, we get this reminded of this image of intentionality that humanity was not created by accident. That's what all the other pagan religions said, that the Babylonian gods were like in a wrestling match and as their sweat dropped into the dirt, they whoops, accidentally created life. No, no, no. The image in Genesis is that God leans down, forms us, shapes us with God's hands, and then breathes God's very spirit into our beings. So we become a living soul. There's intentionality and intimacy and closeness between the divine and the human. This was on purpose. God has us in mind because God made us. Verse 5 continues, you have made them a little lower than the, and your translations may say different things here, the angels, a little lower than the gods, a little lower than God. The Hebrew word is Elohim, which you may have heard before, a word for God. It also could refer to angels or the divine counsel. The point being, no matter what, is that God has made us, formed us, bent down into the dust and breathed life into us, and has made us a little lower than the divine itself.

[11 : 35] It continues, you've made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them, here's this word again, with kavod and honor. And so now we see this connection, that God, the God of heaviness, of weightiness, of gravity, of wealth and honor and dignity, of the God of beauty, the God who shows forth his glory in the heavens.

God has now crowned us with that same kavod, that same glory. God calls us glorious. Friends, this is my conviction. Every sin, every mistake, every transgression, every failure that you've ever had in your life, or anytime that anybody has ever failed against you, sinned against you, trespassed against your life, your rights, your boundaries, has ever hurt you, anytime that has ever happened, sin is not because we have thought too highly of ourselves. My conviction is sin is always because we have thought too little of ourselves. Scripture reveals the truth about us, is that we were made with glory, crowned with glory, that God made us, bent down into the earth and breathed life to us, that God has made us a little lower than the angels, that human beings, we are, we are unique and special and beloved, that we are crowned with glory and with honor, and that the glory, the kavod, that God has, God's self, God gives to us, to you, and to me. That is the glory of God. So what do we do with this glory? What do we do with this responsibility? If sin is not because what we have thought too highly of ourselves, but rather sin is because that we have thought too little of ourselves, too low of ourselves, what are we meant to do with this glory and with this honor that God has given us? The psalmist continues, you, God, made them rulers over the works of your hands, and you put everything under their feet. So we get this idea of our being and our doing, our character and our vocation. Genesis 1 reminds us of this, that God created humankind, male and female, and every gender in the spectrum. God created them and then granted them a vocation to rule and to reign creation with God, that we are co-regents with the divine, that God created this earth and then said, now co-rule and reign with me. And oftentimes we get this backwards, that we want to put our vocation ahead of our character. We want to put our doing ahead of our being, but that's not how scripture tells the story. First, God declares, you are made in my image. You are made in my likeness. I have crowned you with glory, kavod, and honor. And so first we are given the character. First we are called human beings. We are given a sense of who we are meant to be.

And out of that, our vocation, out of that our calling, out of that our work, out of that our doing happens. The other way around, friends, is legalism. When we try to do, do, do, so that we can be, be, be, that's legalism. That will kill you from the inside out and from the outside in and every other way. But when we first begin to understand that God has called us glorious beings with kavod, that we are called image bearers. When we understand that the holy God has called us holy, then out of that our vocation and our calling can spring forth. So our task, verse six and verse seven, you've made us rulers of the works of your hands. You've put everything under their feet, all flocks and herds and the animals of the wild and the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. So we are called glorious beings, a little lower than the gods, made in the image of God, and we are given our beingness and our vocation and our calling.

This world, we're meant to take care of it. And friends, like if the glorious God has crowned us with glory and we're meant to take care of the world, I would imagine we're meant to do it, we're meant

to do it with a certain amount of excellence. We're meant to do it with a certain amount of care and consideration and thoughtfulness. That means that as we pursue God's glory, as we wish to give God glory, that means that things matter that maybe we didn't think mattered before.

[16:31] Because the ultimate goal is that God's glory, God's kavod would fill the earth. I'm going to flip ahead to Psalm 72. Psalm 72 says this, all nations will be blessed through him. This is talking about the king. This is a messianic psalm.

And they will call him blessed. Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name forever. May, listen, the whole earth be filled with his glory.

If you want to do some like Bible roulette with me, head to Hebrews or Habakkuk chapter 2, because who on earth knows where Habakkuk is? I use my ribbon to flip there quickly. Habakkuk chapter 2 says this.

Chapter 2 verse 14, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. God's glory is not meant to be this thing that we keep in a box, a thing that we keep in a church building, a thing that we keep private just between me and God.

No, God's glory is this thing that's meant to spread. It's meant to be everywhere. It's meant to fill the world. It's meant to cover everything, which gives us a sense of the largeness of our vocation, of our calling, of what God is asking us as image bearers. If we are meant to see God's glory all over the world, that means lots of things matter more than just like church services and worship and preaching and like all of the things that we typically put under like a spiritual header because the whole like spiritual secular thing is a lie. In God's economy, everything is spiritual.

[18:27] Everything matters. Everything counts. And so if we are given God's glory and we are given this vocation, that means things like creation care counts.

That has to do with God's glory. When we see wildfires burning for days and weeks on end, filling this planet with ash and smoke because of the decisions that we have made to ignore the warning signs, climate change, that does not give God glory. When we see that the immigrant and the stranger and those who are like meant to come here and be accepted and that our calling and vocation is the beloved of God is meant to extend that love to all. And then when we see instead that we'll just give them mass hysterectomy so they can't have any more children. Instead, that has to do with God's glory and God not receiving glory. That's just because it's not spiritual doesn't mean it does not take away from the glory of God. When we participate and are complicit and do nothing and stay silent about systems that make sure that people of a certain color or people of a certain class or people of a certain economic station suffer and are killed and are shot and are imprisoned in larger numbers than some other class or group or race or color, that diminishes God's glory. There's a whole theological spectrum out there that says that everything has to be about God's glory. What they specifically mean is like get your theological systems in order and do like your fancy Bible studies and spread out your picnics and all of that kind of stuff that all like fits under the spiritual realm while ignoring a literally burning world. That is not kavod kind of stuff. Psalm 8 says God's glory fills the heavens. God grants his creation, his created children, you and me, with glory, and then it gives us a vocation to care.

So when a church like ours has a value that says pursue excellence, yes, absolutely. That means like choose legible fonts, buy decent cameras for good live streams, have good music so that people can lift their voices and lift their arms, lift their voices and their arms, study the words so you can preach a decent sermon. Sure it means that, but that cannot be all it means or we have rejected 99% of what actually matters. Now let's flip to the New Testament for a second. Remember I told you in Exodus 24 that word skene matters and I'll tell you why. When we go to the book of John chapter 1.

We see this introduction to Jesus who John has called the Word. And this is what John chapter 1 verse 14 says. It says, the Word became flesh and made his, and this is the Greek, it borrowed the word from the Hebrew and used this word, made his skene, his tabernacle, his dwelling among us. And, and, and, and, we have seen his glory. So this is what we're being told, that when we look at the life of Jesus, that Jesus, the Word, who skene, who tabernacled, who made his dwelling with us, that reveals the glory of God, that what was happening in Exodus 24, when God came down on Mount Sinai and called Moses up and revealed his glory, and to some it looked like jewels, and to some it looked like fire, that same thing is happening when we look at the life of Jesus, that God's glory is being revealed.

Well, this has big implications, because when we look at the life of Jesus, what do we see? One of my favorite theological truths, like one of the best, deepest, theologically accurate things that you can say, is that Jesus pooped. I finally got some eyes looking at me in this room.

[22 : 56] Jesus was a human being. Jesus was born. Jesus had bodily functions. Jesus got scrapes and bruises.

scratches. Jesus bumped into people, had people bump into him. Jesus had a bad pot of chili, had to use the latrine out back. Jesus was a human being. It's a theologically accurate statement. And so when we imagine God's glory, it could be easy to flip to Psalm 8. Psalm 19, the heavens declare the glory of God, consuming fire on a mountain, all those kinds of things. But what the New Testament dares to say is that Jesus is showing us God's glory, even in the human stuff, even in the day-to-day stuff, and even, perhaps especially, in all the things that we might want to run away from. Jesus was born poor and brown and marginalized. And he was a refugee. He experienced rejection from his friends and from his family. He suffered. He had an unrighteous child. He experienced capital punishment at the hands of the state. He was seen as an enemy of the state, treated as a rebel terrorist. This means that God's glory, God's kavod, does not always look like what we might expect.

Any coffee snobs in the room? Anybody ever had a Kopi Luwak coffee? Anybody know what that is? Oh, good. Okay. So, like, pastors love this analogy because it's a really good one, so I was afraid that you'd all have heard it. So, Kopi Luwak is this \$250 per pound coffee that you can get. And it's out, grown out in, like, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, that area. And the way that you get Kopi Luwak is that this, like, raccoon cat-looking creature, a luwak, eats the coffee bean and then excretes it out.

And then you gather the beans and you wash them off and you have this, like, particularly nice, clean cup of coffee from these, like, pre-digested coffee beans. This is Kopi Luwak coffee. It's very expensive. I've had one cup ever. It's very good. But the lesson in, like, that kind of coffee is that sometimes you have to go through crap in order to get to the excellence. Are you with me?

[25 : 38] Sometimes you have to go through the equivalent of some weird creature's digestive system to come out the other side and be worth gold. God's glory, as revealed in Jesus, is the same way.

And so, when I, like, when we got to this sermon, this part of the sermon series, Pursue Excellence, like, I started out wondering what to say. Because it can be really easy to talk about excellence from a position of, like, privilege and easiness and, like, you know, let's pour the money in and let's, like, give and just, like, work hard and hustle. And, like, that's the same darn message that we're told every day. Pursuing excellence, yes, work hard, hustle when it makes sense. Pursuing excellence means, like, also, take a nap. It also means, like, you may be going through the equivalent of something's digestive system right now. You're going to come out the other side as something beautiful because God is working on you through that experience. Pursuing excellence means that we are a people of hope who know that even when we're going through one of the worst years that we can go through, we believe that there is a God who is on the other side of it, pulling us out, pulling us through, and that we will get through this even more sanctified and Jesus-looking than we did before.

So, I leave you with an invitation and a challenge. The invitation is this, a simple reminder that God is revealing God's glory through you. That's what God does. God very rarely, as far as I can tell, shows up in fires on mountains. Much more often, God shows up when you make yourself available to him, to be God's presence in someone's life, in the life of your community, in your city. The challenge is to choose one, and friends, I just mean one, not everything. Choose one thing this week, this month, that you can elevate, make better, pursue excellence in, so that God's glory is more brightly revealed. For some of you, that may mean taking a nap this week because you haven't done it in the past seven months, and you need a break. For some of you, that may mean picking up your room.

For some of you, that may mean getting outside and picking up some trash around the neighborhood. I don't know. That's up to you and the Holy Spirit, but my encouragement is just choose one. Not everything. Don't overwhelm yourself because that's just going to not just backfire. Just choose one thing where you can elevate it, make it better to reveal God's glory.

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[28 : 46]