**EXCELLENCE MATTERS (Excerpt from FDE Book)**

By Henry Kaestner

If you walk into your local American bookstore, past the bestsellers and new fiction, you'll find a section for Christian fiction. I've often wondered why Christianity gets its own genre of novels. There's no section for Jewish or Muslim fiction, yet our religion has its own marketplace-set apart from the general fiction you can find anywhere else in the store.

The Christian-specific market for Christian-specific products isn't a problem in and of itself. I've read great Christian books. I've bought great products from Christian businesses that were selling Christian-specific products. But having a separate market does create the potential for exploitation.

A market-savvy person can recognize that Christians represent a lot of buying power. If you can make a product tailored to their wants and preferences, you've got a profitable business on your hands. The problem is that this creates the opportunity for exploitation, and we'd rather see the Christian market be defined by excellence. Unfortunately, second-rate work has often become the norm, and in many circles, "Christian" is associated with poor quality.

Again, there's nothing wrong with creating something specifically for Christians. The issue arises when the Christian label becomes an excuse for less than stellar work.

My day-to-day life is now focused on investing, and there are plenty of people in my circle who are reluctant to invest in "Christian funds." Why?

Because they associate "Christian" with "second-rate." Of course, I've seen Christian funds that consistently outperform secular funds, but there's still a negative connotation because of a lack of excellence in some areas of the marketplace. My heart hurts for the faithful men and women doing incredible work who aren't getting the time of day from investors because others have spoiled the Christian name with shoddy workmanship

This is why excellence matters. Faith Driven Entrepreneurs represent more than just themselves and their businesses-they represent the God they worship. We reflect the faith community we've aligned with. It's this very idea that should propel us to go above and beyond when it comes to the quality of our work.

We believe that we were created in the image of a God who worked six days out of seven and whose work was good. Praise God he didn't cut corners when creating the plants and animals! What makes us think that we should be any different?

I once heard this quote from Jim Carrey that has always stuck with me: "I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer."

Talk about a bleak idea! You mean to tell me that at the end of this mountain climb, once I obtain the status and success I'm constantly striving for, it won't be enough? Hitting my financial targets, receiving the recognition I deserve, making the blockbuster sale won't satisfy me?

I think Jim Carrey is hitting at something profound here. Selfish accomplishments never satisfy. Hitting my goals, building my business, receiving my recognition won't do it. There's an emptiness in pursuing excellence purely for excellence's sake. When we're trying our best to boost our own self-esteem, we'll eventually find that our best isn't enough. Then, the results and the process of obtaining them become a burden.

When we're excellent for God, by contrast, we find joy in the process.

That's been my experience as long as I've been an entrepreneur and investor. I find joy, not always in the sheer energy required to work hard, but in the knowledge that my efforts serve a higher purpose than my own. And if we're honest with ourselves, I think we'll realize that while meeting our goals is great, there's only so much happiness that we can bring ourselves.

Serving ourselves is a dead end, no matter how good we are at it.

But Faith Driven Entrepreneurs have a different approach. We set goals, take action, and work through an efficient process to meet set standards. But none of that requires our best until we put God in his rightful place. He's both our reason for starting and our motivation for finishing well.

I am not the light at the end of my own tunnel. A luxurious retirement plan isn't my goal. My goal, as a believer, is to stand before God at the end of my life, knowing that I've placed my very best sacrifice at his feet, knowing that I will hear, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

The idea of standing before God and presenting what you have done can either terrify you or inspire you. If the former, remember that God is shown to be a Father running to meet his wayward son. He's excited to welcome you to your eternal home, to reward you for a job well done. We can be elated to go out every day and do great work for the glory of God, knowing that we don't have to earn his approval. He is a God worth working for.

If you're still not convinced, let me ask you this: If the god you worship

isn't worthy of your best, then how weak is your god?

My God is full of joy and life and grace and mercy and excellence and faithfulness and beauty and wonder and so much more. An awareness of who God is makes me want to do nothing less than serve him with every waking minute of my life.

Are there days when the work is hard and I don't want to do it? Of course. I'm a human. I'm sinful, and I fall short of this standard again and again and again. I can't achieve excellence for myself day after day. I just can't.

But I can do it for God. When I'm in tune with what God has called me to do, I can't see a better way of living and working than living and working for God.

Francis Schaeffer once taught that it's the degree to which we do our work well that we have an opportunity to witness and be heard. Think about that for a second.

For someone, you may be the closest they get to Jesus. You might interact with customers who will never step foot in a church their entire life.

They're looking at you and seeing the image of God. What does that image look like?

It's for this reason that Faith Driven Entrepreneurs shouldn't just meet the standard of excellence the market demands. They should exceed it. We aren't creating products and providing services solely for our customers.

We report to a higher authority. As Colossians says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters" (3:23).

If we're working for the Lord, then excellence is the base expectation.

Excellence is the bare minimum. There's no room for cutting corners, for settling for less than our best, because the God we worship never did.

It's hard to imagine wobbly chairs coming out of the carpentry shop in Nazareth. I don't see Jesus slapping an ichthus fish on the bottom of passable tables and selling them to anyone. Everything in his life reflected God.

That means his craftsmanship was perfect.

Praise God that expectation isn't placed upon us—our lack of perfection is the reason for our faith in Jesus. But also praise God that he gives us the chance to strive toward some form of excellence this side of heaven.

That's what you get to do every day. You get to wake up and think, How can I best reflect the image of God to the unbelieving world? Part of the answer to that question is doing a great job.

Look at how perfect this is when it comes full circle. Reflecting the image of a perfect God demands excellence, but that same God has already achieved perfection so that we don't have to. We then get to achieve excellence without the pressure of having to achieve perfection. Instead, we get to live and work out of a deep gratitude for who God is and a daily dependence on his finished work at the Cross.

It's hard not to get emotional thinking about that. Our God is amazing, and the fact that we get to give our best to him every day is an absolute gift.

Even better is the fact that he can take our efforts and turn them into a witness for his character.

Because when we're excited to work hard, we stand out. When we're working hard to do excellent work without the added pressure of needing some sort of perfection, we look different from the world. And people will want to know where that comes from.

The simple truth is this: God asks for our best work-not what our culture has come to define as the best "Christian version" of our work.

Christianity should be synonymous with excellence for two reasons.

One, we reflect the image of a perfect (not merely excellent) God. He has raised us up to the standard of perfection by sending Christ to live and die in our place, and we get to live in that freedom every day. Working hard and achieving excellence is a privilege.

And two, our perfect God can use our work to share his love with an unbelieving world. When people interact with us, our services, and our products, there's the possibility that they will notice something different, something that sets us apart. And we get to point them to God when that happens.

We're not doing great work to receive the glory, nor are we trying hard to achieve perfection on this side of heaven. We're working hard because there is great joy in giving our best to the God who has already given his best on our behalf.