In the spring time of 1945, C.S. Lewis was invited to Wales to address a small gathering of young clergy and youth leaders and speak on the subject of apologetics. “Apologetics” literally means “the defense of the faith.” The word is found in 1 Peter 3:15, where we are told, “always be ready to make a defense (apologia) to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” Lewis said many things that day; but one of the most surprising things he said was that what our world really needs is “not more little books written about the Christian faith…but more books written by Christians on other subjects – with their Christianity latent [implicit].” The problem, according to Lewis (and I paraphrase) is that in our efforts to gain a hearing for Christ, if we only use the direct approach and speak of our faith in explicit terms, we’ll have limited success at best. We might have someone’s attention for a half an hour or so, but the moment they’ve put down their coffee, or gone away from our lecture, or put down our article, they’re plunged right back into a world where the opposite position is assumed.

On the other hand, if whenever someone wanted to read a popular book on science, or law, or leadership or politics…if whenever someone wanted to read such a book they found that the best work was always done by a Christian, now that would begin to trouble them, to prompt them to want to look into the connections between the Christian faith and the world they live in, to draw them into looking at what it means to follow Jesus Christ. Of course Lewis himself was a great example of this, having written what is still considered the authoritative text on 16th century English literature; still used in universities today.

I ask you, what if it were known that the best work in any given field - economics, business, law, leadership, military strategy, environment, health sciences, politics – what if it the best work was always done by a Christian? Would it change things? Would it contribute to a defense of the faith? Would it draw people to
consider more deeply what it means to follow Christ? Would it lift up the claims of the Christian worldview and invite a greater hearing for the Gospel? I think...yes. And this isn’t far-fetched. In fact, for most of Western Civilization it was Christians who provided the definitive voice on these subjects.

For example, Blaise Pascal, mathematician and inventor of the calculator, was the father of probability theory. He was perhaps the greatest Christian apologist that’s ever lived. Nicholas Copernicus and Galileo were both devout believers who saw their pursuit of truth as nothing less than their sacred duty to God. John Calvin, great Reformer of the Church, made great strides in the realm of western law. In politics, John Locke whose social theory framed much of our nation’s founding, was a believer, who wrote, among many of his great works, a little known book, entitled *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures*. Thomas Aquinas, doctor of the Catholic Church articulated the philosophy that laid the foundation for natural law, a concept that gave rise to such ideas as “we hold these truths to be self-evident.” Even the military tradition that we prize in this nation finds its basis in the body of just war theory, a concept born from Christian thinkers reflecting on the book of Romans and the obligation to defend and protect the innocent. And the list goes on and on and on. I share this just to remind us that when it comes to these great fields of inquiry that capture our intellect and shape our society, we as Christians should be the leading voices, as we once were. Sadly though, it seems we wring our hands in frustration instead of being spokesmen on these matters. But these matters concern truth. And if all truth is God’s truth we have nothing to fear; in fact we have everything to stand upon.

C.S. Lewis understood this. Lewis understood something that our generation has forgotten: the power and influence of a life marked by excellence! I’m talking about the commitment to doing our very best with every gift God has given us in the field in which he has set us. It’s one of those truths that’s implicit in Scripture. Ecclesiastes says “whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.” Colossians says that “whatever we do, in word or deed, do it all for the glory of God,” and again, “whatever you do, do it heartily as unto the Lord and not to men.” And yet we don’t often think of the Christian life as it relates to excellence…and how God uses excellence to make his appeal through us. But He does. In fact excellence is one of the greatest apologetics for the faith. Proverbs 22:29 says, “Do you see a man skillful [excellent] in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men.” It’s this very thing that I hear the Apostle Paul alluding to in our epistle for today. In 1 Corinthians 1:4 Paul says:

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I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— even as the
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testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ…”

It’s unusual for Paul to speak this way. It’s almost always the case that when Paul begins his letters he does so by praising in his hearers qualities that are of a decidedly moral or spiritual nature. He praises their love and partnership in the gospel, their faithfulness, charity in giving to the saints, hope and joy. But here Paul praises qualities that have an almost professional ring to them – speech and knowledge. The word for speech in the Greek is the word “logo” which means the ability to articulate oneself - but more than that - to convey with power and depth the logic or pattern, the logos behind one’s argument. The word for knowledge is the word “gnosis” which implies one’s grasp of truth…one’s appraisal of the wider world, one’s understanding into the nature of things as they truly are. And in these things, the Corinthian believers are not lacking. Paul is praising their excellence! In their speech, their knowledge and understanding, their ability to articulate God’s truth, their growth in their giftedness, they lack nothing. And so we’re not surprised that their example and testimony are being reported widely. We hear an echo of this in Paul’s encouragement to young Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:12-15.

“Let no one despise you for your youth, but set…an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity…Do not neglect the gift you have…Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that your progress may be evident to all.”

The point is, excellence in the life of the Christian is one of the most powerful arguments for the faith. When a Christian is excellent in that field or discipline to which God has called them, it causes people to ask important questions, “What’s behind them?” “What makes them tick?” “What causes them to do what they do with such skill and attention to detail and effectiveness?” “What worldview could produce such an admirable and articulate life?” Excellence speaks to people. It makes a case. It argues for the life and the faith of the one who’s excelling.

In our day, I think of a person like, Francis Collins, world-renowned scientist who led the Human Genome Project and essentially cracked the code on human DNA. He’s a brilliant man and without question one whose life and profession are marked by excellence in his field. He’s the Director of the National Institute of Health, at the pinnacle of his career, and in the forefront of research in the scientific world. How extraordinary his influence becomes when he hear that underneath all his scientific acumen and research, is a life marked by a thoroughly evangelical faith in Jesus Christ. It turns his whole scientific contribution on its
spiritual axis, informing it with a Christian worldview. It confronts scientists and others with their own presuppositions. If this man, knowing what he knows follows Jesus Christ, maybe there’s something to this faith.

In the military world I think about the influence of General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the Army in World War II, and the one for whom the Marshall Doctrine is named. Marshall was an extraordinary leader, who excelled as a statesman. He was the vision and architect behind the rebuilding of postwar Europe. He was a gifted communicator and one who inspired the loyalty of countless soldiers, many of whom gave the last full measure of devotion with their lives. But back of all that leadership and vision was a bedrock of belief as a Christian. I used to quote Marshall to my Marines to inspire them to think about their faith. Marshall said,

“We’re building…morale…not in reliance on things of steel and…guns and planes and bombsights. We’re building it on things infinitely more potent. We’re building it on belief; for it is what men believe that makes them invincible.”

Or go even farther back and consider a man like William Wilberforce, 18th century statesman and orator in England, and one appropriate for us to consider on this Martin Luther King weekend. Wilberforce became a Member of Parliament at the young age of 21. He was known for his incredible giftedness as an orator and the wit and wisdom with which he handled himself. He was called the “Nightingale of the House of Commons” because of his distinct and melodious speaking voice. Soon after joining Parliament, he began to identify with the cause of abolition. The slave trade run by England was massive and appalling, and Wilberforce saw the injustice that it was. In 1787 at the age of 28, Wilberforce gave a speech to Parliament that recounted, in agonizing detail, the horrors of slavery and the transportation of slaves. His speech ended with words that historians say changed history.

“Having heard all of this…you [Members of Parliament] may choose to look the other way, but you can never again say that you did not know.”

Year after year, for the decades, he went back to Parliament to decry the evil of slavery. He spent himself to exhaustion and near-death in his fight against the abomination of the English slave trade. And finally after 46 years and the campaign of a lifetime, on July 29th, 1833, the House of Commons voted to abolish the slave trade in English lands forever. Wilberforce died two days later. He was 74. The following month 800,000 slaves were freed.
How extraordinary it is to find out that what fueled this great man in his mission to end slavery was his fervent faith in Jesus Christ. Wilberforce came to faith while a Member of Parliament. As a new believer, he began to wrestle with the call of God upon his life. He went back and forth between the decision to remain in Parliament and fight for the cause of abolition or abandon it all and enter the church as a minister. During this season Wilberforce confided in John Newton, a former slave-ship captain who had renounced that life after coming to the faith. John Newton wrote what is the most well-known hymn in all of the Christian faith, *Amazing Grace*. In a private and prayerful discussion together, Newton suggested to Wilberforce that perhaps God had raised him up for the good of the church AND the nation…and that who knows that but for such a time as this God has brought him into public life for [this great purpose of abolition] Wilberforce made his decision. He would use all his gifts, muster all his efforts in the great work of fighting for the abolition of slavery across the British Empire.

Were he here today, Wilberforce would tell us that freedom and true equality come from Jesus Christ. It was Jesus who first reached out to women. Paul who said there was “no Jew no Greek, no male or female, no slave or free man, but that we are all one in Christ Jesus.” It was the Christian faith that gave us men like Wilberforce and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and so many others. When we fail to see these figures in light of the faith that produced them, when we abstract the civil rights movement from the Christian faith that informed it, when we concede the great truths of science and economy and environment, law and politics to the wisdom of this age, we give away our stewardship as Christians – the right and obligation to speak to these issues about which God has something to say.

The question becomes, what about us? Where do we start? I’ve mentioned some admittedly bright lights in the constellation of the Christian faith. But where does a life of excellence begin for us? We alluded to it a few minutes ago when we read Ecclesiastes 9:10 - “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.” I imagine that if we survey our lives, we will find that there is always some task at hand, some work that God has us laboring at, something needing to be done. Maybe it’s mundane in nature or not glorious, maybe its quiet work or behind the scenes, but it’s the work to which God has called you, in the place where God had put you. Perhaps it’s raising children in the home, or being put in charge of some administrative duty. Maybe it’s taking care of an infirm or aged loved one, or meeting the daily grind of academics. Maybe it’s a new demand of leadership that’s requiring more than you’re used to, or a duty to which you’ve been called that requires great attention to detail. Whatever it is, it is there where excellence begins.
Jesus said, “If we are faithful over a few things, He will put us in charge of many things.” That’s the secret – that whatever God gives us to do, we do it excellently as unto the Lord knowing that by our excellence, our faithfulness, we’re being prepared for greater service here and in the life to come. So if you want to be a true apologist for the faith, one who’s prepared to give a reason for the Hope that is in you…be excellent! Be excellent! For by excellence, God is making his appeal through you to a watching world.

They that have ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Amen.