

Deliberate Practice

In order to develop strength and abide in God's Word, it's crucial to develop a regular practice. Star athletes develop their inborn talent through a regular exercise regime fit for their uniqueness in their sport. It's not easy for an athlete to rise early, work hard, and say no to outside influences that undermine effectiveness. They have a fading prize in mind; we an unfading one (Philippians 3:14).

Of course, we have heard "*practice makes perfect.*" Not always true! Practice simply grooves the way we are doing something. If it's *in*correct, the more practice the farther away from our target. We simply groove our error more deeply into our lives.

"*Deliberate practice*" differentiates those who do anything well from those who plateau or dropout according to more recent studies by Dr. Anders Ericsson (google: "Dr. Anders Ericsson deliberate practice). Even without any special aptitude, "*deliberate practice*" aims at continuous improvement to avoid getting trapped on learning plateaus. This continuous improvement happens best under the watchful eye of *Coach Spirit* and our small group of peer coaches. Natural learning powerfully impacts us when we all come as both learners and teachers.

I've gleaned three ideas from Dr. Ericsson. An intentional shift toward consistently practicing the three following responses brings about continuous improvement.

1. *Focused Effort*: I know groups of Christians who pray and wait for instantaneous change. Thank God He can and at times does do this. However, look at nature to discover God's pattern for growth. The norm is incremental growth over time, often with a season of growth followed by a season to solidify that growth, like with an oak tree. We like to read stories of overnight success yet forget that the results brewed within over time. Michael Phelps reminds us, "*My 'overnight' success came from hard yards and tough work.*" Dr. Ericsson says it takes one thousand hours of deliberate practice to learn a skill well.
2. *Reflection & Feedback*: Without reflection on how we are learning, we will get stuck on a plateau. And we need honest feedback. Have you given any specific person permission to give you honest feedback on *anything*, even if it feels like a gut-punch at times? Begin with your SmallGroup since such relational openness is essential to a natural learning culture. The Holy Spirit is also a great mentor to help us see ourselves clearly, if we ask. Once we become open to correction, then all the world becomes a "*living feedback loop*" gain insight from watching the responses of others to our lives.
3. *Higher Challenge*: If we desire to be lifelong *life*-learners, we need to keep increasing the level of challenge. Don't settle but keep setting the bar higher. This will mean we may experience 'failure' from the perspective of others, yet success in God's economy is "*faithfulness*" (1 Corinthians 4:2).

All three elements together, when marinated with consistency, have a remarkable payoff.

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Let's start where we are. Is deepening your life and impact in this arena important enough to *you* to invest *ten to twenty* minutes per day for the next three months? This is a total of only *fifteen to thirty* hours, less time than most people surf on their phones. This is a start to deepen your hunger for God's Word in you.

Let's begin here and see what the Spirit of wisdom and revelation does. Many admire the level at which others operate. Yet are we willing to invest the time, energy and grit to grow personally? Yes, study God's Word, but not as a manual. What I mean by "abiding" in God's Word is much more of a relational connection. Get in touch with the God who repeatedly communicates His heart with you. It's about feeling God's heartbeat and responding to His revelation, God's Word, His love-letter to us. Whole-person faith-responses to Scripture outfit us for life and for battle.

How can we respond practically? Take incremental "ant-steps."

Have you ever seen one of those glass ant farms that come in the mail? Throw the dirt and ants in and chaos breaks out. After a few days order is restored out of chaos as tunnels form under the surface.

How?

One ant takes one grain of sand and carries it one ant-step after another to the far end of the ant farm. The ant then comes back for one more grain of sand. **One** ant taking one "ant-step" hardly seems significant. In the change process, we often overstate the conspicuous and understate the continuous. When change is needed, grab onto one grain of the solution. Then take one "ant-step" in the right direction. Action learning is crucial to develop an authentic natural learning culture.

A weekly group functioning in such a manner provides the ongoing environment of support and structure over time for such consistent, incremental growth. Recent studies on how our mind works also support this consistent, incremental change. Our thinking brain can comprehend a fact after a single hearing or reading. By contrast, skills...

"are best learned through motivation, extended practice, and feedback....The limbic brain...is a much slower learner— particularly when the challenge is to relearn deeply ingrained habits....It needs lots of practice and repetition."

Let's focus on a few healthy factors in spiritual growth, all well within the reach of any of us with a yearning to follow Jesus. This is certainly not all, yet all four seem to me to be essential.

1. Nurture a choice to experience a daily conversational relationship with God as you do everyday life.
2. Invest enough time in the Bible to nourish our hearts with spiritual nutrients, especially the Gospels and the rest of the NT. Please don't become malnourished spiritually because of past experiences with engaging the Bible. I developed the *DiscipleMaking Companion* series to be **companions** to help you experience joy with Jesus.
3. Practice quick obedience as we partner with the Spirit in what we see of God's heart.
4. Keep short accounts with God and with others so we walk with others in reconciled relationships.

What a difference between a person (1) who engages Scripture to fit the Bible into his/her life and (2) one who responds to God's Word by changing his/her life to align with God's heart revealed in the Bible.

This group is also your group, so take personal ownership to cultivate such a learning culture. Develop a group where every member is more than a passive stenographer of an expert teacher's store of knowledge. A listening heart prepares an understanding mind! The only time we cannot learn is when we forfeit our listening hearts as lifelong **life**-learners.

Our attitude towards learning is crucial, nowhere more important than towards the Bible. God invites us toward fullness of life. Will we dive into His Love-Letter to us, the Bible, with an eager desire to do it? Since God designed us as learners, learn joyfully because everything He does is good! Fortunately, a fresh wind is blowing today in how we learn. Let's rethink to reactivate our God-given, intrinsic motivation to respond to the Bible.

Think "*BIG-small-BIG*" to grow through the Word of God over a lifetime.