

Practicing Good and Evil – September 21, 2014

Hebrews 5: 11-14. *11 About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. 12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, 13 for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. 14 But solid food is for the mature for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*

- About 2 ½ years ago I shared a 2 part series on *God's Will and Christian Liberty*. This series can be found on the Covenant Church web page under the Sermons link.
- Review the "Boundaries Model" diagram (at the end of the notes).
- During this 2 part series, I made a comment several times that, instead of constantly praying to "hear God's leading" we could keep ourselves busy (in regards to seeking and doing God's will) by simply discovering and applying the admonitions of scripture to our everyday lives.
- The problem that the writer of Hebrews is discussing is this...his audience had become "dull of hearing." They had become "unskilled in the word of righteousness." He likened them to little children who lacked maturity and who needed to partake of milk and not solid food.
- Mature Christians, according to the writer, "have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil."
- I'd like to explore this concept of "constant practice" and what it means to us as believers. Hopefully we all want to become mature Christians so we can bear good fruit in our lives.

The Benefits of Constant Practice.

- Tell the story of my botched landing in our taildragger airplane, and my taking lessons from an "old timer" at the Fairfield County airport. Key points:
 - The first time we landed during my lessons, another airplane was landing at the same time on the opposite end of the runway, headed toward us. He took the controls, put the plane down, cross-controlled on purpose, exposing our wings and making us very visible. I asked him if he did it on purpose.
 - I had only about 100 hours of flying time, and only 2 hours of that were in a taildragger. My instructor had over 11,000. He was not only an expert, he was a virtuoso.
- Malcolm Gladwell, in his 2008 book *Outliers: The Story of Success* looked at people who were highly successful, who had become virtuosos. These are the people who we instantly recognize (Michael Jordan, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates) or even know by first names: Tiger, Oprah, the Beatles (Paul, George, John, and Ringo). In his book, Gladwell notes that, among highly successful and talented people, few could attribute all of their success to the idea that they were "naturally gifted." Instead, Gladwell demonstrates that the old maxim "practice makes perfect" comes into play. These people put in long hours of repetition, application, and practice toward their areas of skill.
- The magic number of hours appears to be right around 10,000. If you want to be really good at something to the point where the world takes notice, to the point where you are a "virtuoso," it requires about 10,000 hours of practice.
- Doug sent to Steve, and Steve shared with some of us a video of guitarist Phil Keaggy, a true virtuoso and Christian believer who demonstrates well the fruit of countless hours of practice. His skill is absolutely astounding! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EuZ0hXlah8>
- Can look at it two ways:
 - What do you want to be really good at? Aim towards 10,000 hours of practice. Or
 - In what areas have you already put in 10,000 hours?

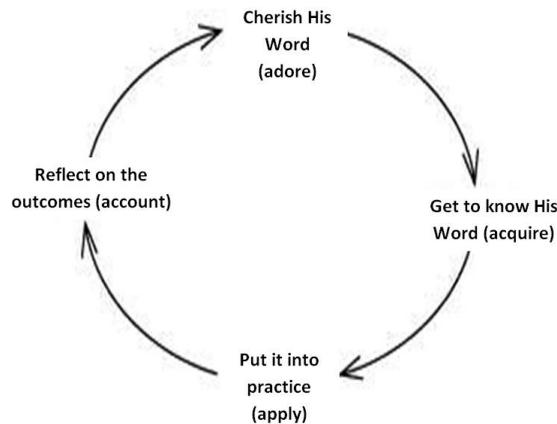
- Before I discuss some positive applications in regards to our Christian walk, this point needs to be made...too often we put in 10,000 hours in areas that are not beneficial:
 - According to a Nielsen study recently reported by the New York Daily News, the average American watches 5 hours of television a day. Given the amount of unredeemed trash that is common fare on the TV, is it any surprise that we, as a nation, are becoming “virtuosos” at immorality and godless attitudes?
 - In addition Americans spend an average of an hour each day browsing the Internet on a computer, an hour and seven minutes on a smartphone, and two hours, 46 minutes listening to the radio. Some folks spend an inordinate amount of time playing video games, many of which are violent and lewd. While some of the content in entertainment is good, much of it is negative or simply a waste of time in regards to our desire to becoming “mature” and “those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” as the text from Hebrews encourages.
 - Someone may say “Well, I mainly watch the news and sports.” My question is, at what point do you become a glutton on these things? How much is too much? What could you be doing otherwise that might bear more eternal fruit? Remember, milk is for immature children...
 - **Ephesians 4:17-19:** *Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. 18 They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. 19 They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.*
 - developing callouses – as I watch the Phil Keaggy video, I thought about how calloused his fingers must be. When practicing evil, callouses can develop on their hearts which desensitize evildoers to right and wrong.
 - Have we, in our constant exposure to godless ideas, entertainment, reasoning, and practices become calloused to evil? It’s a scary thought...

How can we sharpen our powers of discernment through constant practice?

Psalm 1:1-3: *1 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; 2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. 3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.*

- The “short form” prescription is:
 - Taking delight in the law of the Lord, and
 - Meditating on it day and night
- The promise is, when you walk, stand, and sit uprightly you will be blessed, you will yield good fruit, and you will prosper in all that you do.

The Wisdom Cycle



The Wisdom Cycle

- Illustrates the cycle of growing in maturity as we cherish and apply God's word
- Can be seen in numerous places in scripture, but especially in the opening chapters of Proverbs
- Look, for example, at **Proverbs 2**

Cherish His Word (adore)

1 *My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you,*

Get to know His Word (acquire)

2 *making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding;*

3 *yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding,*

4 *if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures,*

5 *then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.*

6 *For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;*

Put it into practice (apply)

7 *he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity,*

8 *guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints.*

Reflect on the outcomes (account)

9 *Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path;*

10 *for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;*

11 *discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you,*

12 *delivering you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech,*

13 *who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness,*

14 *who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil,*

15 *men whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways.*

16 *So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words,*

17 *who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God;*

18 *for her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the departed;*

19 *none who go to her come back, nor do they regain the paths of life.*

20 *So you will walk in the way of the good and keep to the paths of the righteous.*

21 *For the upright will inhabit the land, and those with integrity will remain in it,*

22 *but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it.*

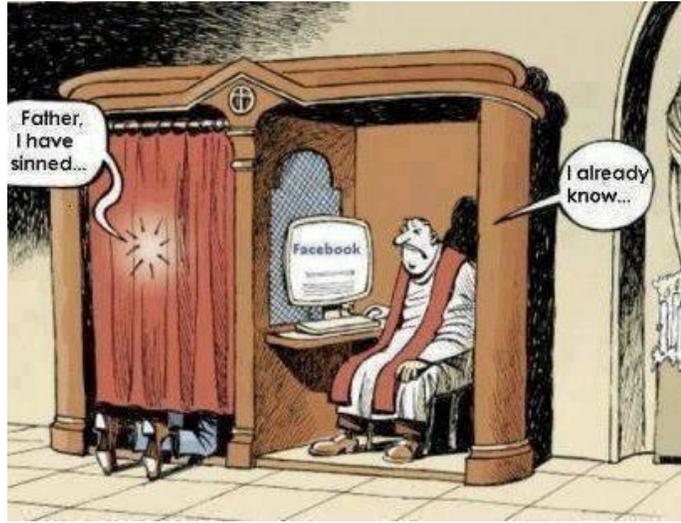
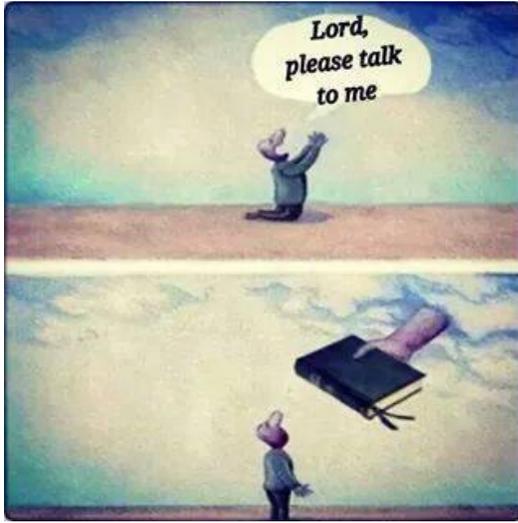
Reflections and recommendations

- If we continually applied this cycle to our Christian walk, how soon would we acquire 10,000 hours of practice?
- With this in mind, other commands in scripture come more into focus:
 - *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.* (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 ESV)
 - *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.* (Philippians 4:8 ESV)
 - Some other benefits of practice
 - automation – what you practice becomes automatic
 - your skills please others, especially those who have some measure of authority over you
 - becoming a virtuoso give you an unusually recognized and influential voice (ex: my nephew Anthony) *Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings...* (Proverbs 22:29)
 - when something becomes automatic, in some sense it also becomes effortless, giving you rest and peace. *Come to me...I will give you rest* (Matthew 11:28-30).
- Practical suggestions on how to practice to discern good and evil:
 - Read the Proverbs. Choose a proverb on which to meditate, for example:
 - *Desire without knowledge is not good, and whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way.* (Proverbs 19:2)
 - *A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.* (Proverbs 18:2)
 - To apply the cycle: Recognize and cherish the proverb as the Word of the Lord, think hard about each phrase, memorize it, think about how to apply it to your life, and consider the outcomes of times in your past when you did/did not follow it's advice.
 - Choose recreational options where you aren't so "insulated" from God's creation and God's people. Which would prove to be more beneficial way to spend 2 free hours:
 - A meditative, reflective walk in a beautiful park, or playing a video game?
 - Time spent fellowshiping with other believers, or hanging out in the local coffee shop where God's name is blasphemed and people are insulted?
 - Reading a wholesome book, or reading random Twitter feeds and Facebook posts?

In conclusion...

- My 8 year old granddaughter is an inspiration to me. She practices hard at her gymnastics. She's taken lessons for over 2 years, and has just been accepted to train at a high-end gym in Columbus, one that prepares athletes for national and Olympic competition. She trains 4 hours a day, and then comes home and practices on her own equipment. Sometime next year she will begin training up to 8 hours a day. She is highly committed and she loves gymnastics.
- But her spiritual sensitivities inspire me even more. When we are together, without being prompted by me she talks about her relationship to God and how she prays all day long. And she does! They are simple prayers (she even prays before she rolls the dice in a game), but she is practicing nonetheless. She will have no trouble reaching 10,000 hours relatively early in life.
- Closing prayer...

Extra resources:



- 10,000 Hours of Practice – A brief summary of Malcolm Gladwell’s book *Outliers*
<http://www.wisdomgroup.com/blog/10000-hours-of-practice/>
- Phil Keaggy video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EuZ0hXlah8>
- By This Time You Ought To Be Teachers by John Piper
<http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/by-this-time-you-ought-to-be-teachers>
- A Failure of Worship by Tim Challies
http://www.challies.com/articles/a-failure-of-worship?utm_content=bufferb9c01&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

The Boundaries Model of Decision Making

