



"Always make a total effort, even when the odds are against you."
—Arnold Palmer

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Diligence in Practice

Outliers: The Story of Success by Malcolm Gladwell examines how some people have become successful. Using case studies, the author shows how family and friends played significant roles in the success of the individuals he spotlights. As John Donne wrote, "No man is an island"; there are no truly self-made men. The apostle Paul writes similarly in [Romans 14:7](#): "None of us lives to himself." *Where* we were born, *when* we were born, to *whom* we were born—all have roles in the outcomes of our lives. Certainly, our own efforts are added to this mix, but Gladwell makes a convincing case that none of us succeeds solely on the basis of our own efforts.

Outliers are those people whose achievements fall outside normal experience. A dictionary defines an *outlier* as a thing "situated away from or classed differently from a main or related body." Could that be we, the church? Are we different, "situated away from or classed differently from a main or related body"? Certainly. Of outliers, Gladwell writes:

People don't rise from nothing. We do owe something to parentage and patronage. The people who stand before kings may look like they did it all by themselves. But in fact they are invariably the beneficiaries of hidden advantages and extraordinary opportunities

and cultural legacies that allow them to learn and work hard and make sense of [the world](#) in ways others cannot.

This is powerful when applied to the church. We are "the beneficiaries of hidden advantages and extraordinary opportunities . . . that allow [us] to learn and work hard and make sense of the world in ways others cannot." Using a term coined by sociologist Robert Merton, Gladwell calls it the "Matthew Effect": To whom much is given much is required. This is not to say that hard work is not mandatory for success in life; it is. He means that before our hard work can produce, we are put into position for success by circumstances beyond our control.

We should consider our own lives for a moment. If we were blessed to grow up with both parents at home, what would life be like for us now if there had been only one? If we grew up in a single-parent home, what would life be like if we had been orphaned? If we were orphaned, what if someone had not taken us under his/her wing and taught us right from wrong? And where would we be if [God](#) had not called us out of this world? From such examples, it is easy to see that, first, we are put into position to succeed and *then* hard work comes into play.

Experts researching success have discovered what they call the "10,000-Hour Rule." Certainly, innate talent exists, but some believe it plays less of a role than previously thought. A study done in the early 1990s at Berlin's elite Academy of Music shows this.

Researchers had the professors divide the school's violinists into three groups. The first group consisted of the stars, those with the potential to become world-class soloists. The second group was made up of those judged as merely "good." The third group was composed of students unlikely ever to play professionally and who intended to be music teachers in the public school system. Participants were all asked the same question: "Over the course of your career, since first picking up the violin, how many hours have you practiced?"

The violinists had all started playing around age 5, and in those first few years, they all had practiced roughly the same amount of time, about two to three hours each week. However, around age 8, real differences had begun to

emerge. The students who would end up the best in their classes had begun to practice more: six hours a week by age 9, eight hours a week by age 12, sixteen hours a week by age 14, and by age 20, they were practicing well over thirty hours a week! By age 20, these elite performers had each totaled 10,000 hours of practice. By contrast, the merely good students had totaled 8,000 hours, and the future music teachers had logged 4,000 hours. A study comparing amateur pianists to professional ones found similar results.

Interestingly, this study also found no "naturals," that is, musicians who had made it to the top without the same effort as their peers. The research suggests that, once a musician has enough ability to get into a top music school, what distinguishes one performer from another is how hard he/she works. And those at the top do not just work harder or even much harder than everyone else. They work much, much harder! The author points out, "Practice isn't the thing you do once you're good. It's the thing you do that makes you good."

This is an apt description of our spiritual walk as well. Living God's way every day is our practice for the life to come. In [II Peter 3:14](#), written shortly before the apostle Peter's martyrdom, he urges us, "Therefore, beloved, looking forward to [God's Kingdom], be diligent to be found by Him in [peace](#), without spot and blameless." "Diligence," from the Greek *spoudazo*, is having the sense of urgency and even haste in all that we do to be industrious, hardworking, zealous, and thorough. Wikipedia.com defines it as "a zealous and careful nature in one's actions and work, exemplified by a decisive work ethic, budgeting of one's time, monitoring one's own activities to guard against laziness and putting forth full concentration in one's work."

How many years of Bible study, prayer, and meditation does it take us to total 10,000 hours? If we average an hour and a half of prayer and Bible study each day, it would take over eighteen years to hit 10,000 hours! However, we are actually on guard every waking hour against the attacks of [Satan](#). Being a Christian is a full-time job. Subtracting eight hours per day for sleep and dividing 10,000 hours by the remaining sixteen hours a day brings us to almost two years of constant effort. Remember, this is just the *practice time* to learn our "trade." Professionals of all kinds still practice continually. They do not bury their talent—they try to increase it!

Notice this example of diligence in the life of [Jesus Christ](#): "Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed" ([Mark 1:35](#)). The context shows that this took place on a Sunday morning after an extremely busy [Sabbath](#). Jesus had probably been up late the previous night healing the sick and casting out demons, as "the whole city was gathered . . . at the door" (verse 33). Yet, the next morning, He is up "a long while before daylight" to pray. This is the kind of diligence to aspire to!

God has blessed us in myriad ways, not the least of which is that He has put us in position to achieve the ultimate in success—life in His Family! However, we will not hear the words "Well done, good and faithful servant" ([Matthew 25:21](#), 23) unless we are diligent. As Peter advises in [II Peter 1:10-11](#), "Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent . . .; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

- Mike Ford

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Giving All Diligence!](#)

by Martin G. Collins

II Peter was written from prison during a time of intense persecution and a time of false teachings which condoned a virulent sexual permissiveness and moral relativity. This epistle was used to bolster those individuals with flagging faith. Through God's grace we have been given His virtues, gifts which we must strengthen and develop. The recipients of Peter's epistle were having difficulty holding on to their faith, having succumbed to fear as a result of lack of discipline and laziness which had led to a massive deterioration of their faith. Faith needs to be supplemented and activated by diligently exercising it, adding to it virtue (excellence, resolution, Christian energy), knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and developing Christian love. Peter prescribes discipline, diligence and effort, using our time productively and efficiently, putting

spiritual priorities before worldly or mundane priorities. When we add these spiritual supplements to our faith, we will be protected in the great tribulation and receive the name of God, our ultimate entrance into glory.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Christian Fight \(Part One\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Despite the many blessings God bestows upon His saints, real Christianity more resembles a running battle against persistent, hostile forces than a leisurely stroll down the path of life. John Ritenbaugh uses the example of ancient Israel in the wilderness to illustrate that God prepares us for spiritual war against the enemies that would keep us from His Kingdom.

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