

## Highly Skilled Overcomers

### Deliberate Practice and Deep Work

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Most of you heard my last sermon, which I modeled on the principle found in the title of a book by a man named Cal Newport. His book is titled, *So Good They Can't Ignore You*. And for those of you who may not have heard the sermon (there are probably very few of you), but even if that is the case, if only just one of you have not heard it, then I want to do a little bit of review. That will help all of us get a running start into this sermon.

I spoke about the author's premise that the "follow your passion" career advice that is often given today is bad and perhaps even dangerous counsel to give. Because at some point, people find out that following their passion does not give them the satisfaction that they desire. Oftentimes, it leads to anxiety and to job hopping because nothing seems to satisfy them wherever they go. And eventually that leads to psychological problems, depression, and that sort of thing; that they feel like they cannot measure up and they will never be happy.

Most of those that are held up as an example of following their passion (and I used Steve Jobs as the primary example of that), only came to that point once they paid their dues in hard work and in chasing opportunities and finding that niche for themselves. So what Cal Newport found was that being able to pursue one's desires is a result of a great deal of time and effort. And the key word in that whole sentence was *result*, being able to pursue your passions is an end product, not a beginning point.

What did he say that we should do? Newport instead advises that we follow the example of comedian Steve Martin. Remember, I mentioned that PBS interview with Charlie Rose where he was asked, "What advice do you give people trying to break into the entertainment business?" And he said that entertainers should become so good at one's chosen field of work that employers and consumers and whatnot cannot ignore the excellence that they see and they will give the pay and the creative control that will provide what

Newport calls "career capital to follow one's passion." So be so good that they cannot ignore you. That was what Steve Martin said, "Be so good that they can't ignore you" and people will just pay to have you do what you do because you do it best. That was his advice.

And it really does not matter what kind of work we do, we could dig ditches. If we are the best ditch digger out there, somebody is going to want us to dig his ditch for him. If you are a steel worker or what have you, if you work in an office, if you are somebody who works, let us say, for an academic institution or a bank (like around Charlotte) or whatever it happens to be, if you do the best in what you do, people are going to come knocking at your door and want you to do it for them, and they will be willing to pay you for it.

So no matter what kind of work we do, if we do it with increasing skill we will advance, we will increase our pay and our control over our work, and that will help us to derive great satisfaction from what we do. And as the doors open, we can begin pursuing our passions more fully.

Now, the main part of my sermon last time was an attempt to make that kind of career advice applicable to our Christian lives, to make it spiritual so that we can apply it to our lives. And in short, if I can sum up what that sermon was trying to do, we, as sons and daughters of God, have been called to become the very best in the world, the very best people in the world at Christian living. That is what God has called us to do. That is our vocation, as it were. It is our calling; that He has called us out of the world to be like His Son Jesus Christ; and to be salt of the earth, the light of the world, so that other people can see through our examples what that way of life is like, what it produces, all those good things that His way of life produces.

And then we can also by doing so please Him because that is what He wants us to do. He wants us to live like His Son lived and learn all those lessons, lessons that we can then take into the Kingdom of God. So our lives, then, since we are supposed to be making this witness out there as salt and as light, are supposed to be lived in the world. He tells us specifically in John 17 that He does not take us out of the world. He has left us in the world. He has actually sent us *into* the world to be His witnesses and we have to then show His way before the world.

So we are not to be living in a monastery somewhere or go out all by ourselves in some remote area where your nearest neighbor is 35 miles away. You are not supposed to do that because you are supposed to have other people being able to see the life that you live. And of course, we live that life through our normal way of doing things. You know, you get up in the morning, you eat breakfast, get your shower, go to work, and you go through your day normally. And it is those people you come into contact through your normal activities and the normal things that you do, not just for work, but, you know, the entertainment you pursue and that sort of thing, that people are going to notice you in those things, in just real living, and see what you produce.

And, of course, I ended that sermon drawing our attention to Jesus Christ—first to the apostle Paul and then to Jesus Christ, who is our sterling example of the way to live in the world. He lived it all the way to the end and never, never once gave in to any other kind of way of life.

That was the last sermon in a nutshell so we know where we are. And that was really only the first half of Cal Newport's book. I want to concentrate for a little while on the second half of Cal Newport's book, which is devoted to the kinds of habits that successful and satisfied, skilled people have or do, things that they just normally do. And he found that over the interviews that he did (and some of those he interviewed he kept in touch with them over a period of time), he found that the top tier of successful people had certain habits in common. And we want to go into two which he highlights in his book. Stephen Covey had *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Well, Cal Newport selected essentially two.

The first one (This is a major part of the sermon. If you are going to write anything down in your notes, get this one), he calls "deliberate practice." Now, he took this term from a psychologist. The psychologist's name was Anders Erickson and Erickson defined deliberate practice as "activities designed typically by a teacher for the sole purpose of effectively improving specific aspects of an individual's performance." That sounds like something a psychologist might say.

Now, the essence of deliberate practice is continually stretching an individual just beyond his current abilities (maybe that is an easier way to

understand it). Those who master their craft, whatever their craft may be, spend a lot of time practicing what they do and of course, engaging in what they do—not just practicing it, but actually engaging in it.

Most of us have probably heard of the 10,000 hour rule. Mike Ford gave a sermonette on that a few years ago. He talked about the book *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell. And it was in this book *Outliers* that this 10,000 hour rule was popularized. Gladwell wrote, "In any kind of cognitively complex field, for example, playing chess, writing fiction, or being a neurosurgeon, we find that you are unlikely to master it unless you have practiced for 10,000 hours. That's 20 hours a week for 10 years." 20 hours a week for 10 years makes about 10,000 hours. That is a lot of practice. And of course, having practiced that much, having done one specific thing for that long, you would tend to get pretty good at it, would you not? Just by the means of doing it so often it becomes very almost easy for you. It should be, whatever that the thing is.

Now deliberate practice adds to the principle of the 10,000 hour rule. It is not practice alone that makes perfect, says Cal Newport in this idea of deliberate practice, but *perfect practice* makes perfect. We have probably all heard that before. The 10,000 hour rule just says that you have to do a certain thing for 10,000 hours. But the deliberate practice idea is that you are not just doing it for that long, you are actually trying deliberately to do it better every time. You are not just going through the motions of practicing it, you are actually doing something deliberately to make you more skilled at it. So if you ride a skateboard for 10,000 hours and you do tricks and all those things, that is fine. But if you really set up a regimen so that you would deliberately practice certain skills on the skateboard, then you would become very good at those certain skills and you could then add on as you go to those skills. (I know we have a lot of skateboarders in the audience so I thought I would use that example. \*laughter)

In other words, only challenging practice done well will produce real mastery. So when we are talking deliberate practice, we are raising the bar here pretty high. Only *challenging* practice done well will produce real mastery.

In a 2005 study of chess players, published in *Applied Cognitive Psychology* (that is a journal), the people who were conducting this study interviewed two large samples of chess players and they were chess players of various skills. They were not all grandmasters, they were not all beginners, they were a mixture of chess players that would normally play chess in a certain area, a certain region. The researchers found that the concept, as they called it, "a serious study," which is very similar to deliberate practice, they found that serious study, which is the difficult task of reviewing past games of better players and trying to predict each move in advance. This is how it is applied in chess. It is this serious study, the difficult task of reviewing past games of better players and trying to predict each move in advance, that was the strongest predictor of skill in chess.

What they would do is they got these very many chess players and they had them fill out surveys—very extensive surveys—where they had to tell them how much they practiced, how they practiced, and a lot of other things too. But what they were really getting at was, what is it about a certain chess player that would make him a grandmaster? And what they found was this concept of serious study. The chess players that went back and spent good amounts of time every week reviewing chess games from the greats, you know, Bobby Fischer, Kasparov, and others, and then trying to play the games alongside, anticipating every move, those were the ones that they could say "that kid is going places" because he was doing serious study, he was deliberately practicing to become better. And if he continued on this trajectory, continually challenging himself, continually stretching himself and his ability to play the game, then he would eventually become a grandmaster.

Grandmasters, they found in this study, spent about 5,000 hours in this serious study, deliberate practice. Among their 10,000 hours of practice, they spent at least half the time doing deliberate practice. They found that those who were intermediate chess players would go play games, they would go, let us say, into the local park as practice and they would set up 20 chess sets and then they would have just whoever come in and play against them and they would go around and they would play each of the games, and that is fine practice.

But the people that they were playing were not as good as they were. It was not challenging. They could go up to a board and immediately see what was going on, play their move, and go on. It was not anything that was challenging. The potential grandmasters played better players, they challenged themselves. They did not mind losing if they were going to learn a new skill on the board. But if they figured out a gambit that they could do that would work, that other people would not be noticing, would not figure out beforehand, and they would stick it up in their brains and they would become better players.

So the grandmasters were the ones that stretched themselves, that challenged themselves. The potential grandmasters spent about five times the average amount doing serious study, doing this deliberate practice, than mid-level players.

Now, they found similar findings in other fields too. It is not just chess playing. They found that to become exceptional in anything, not just games, not just playing, but in work, in having a serious field of study, a person has to put in a lot of hours. Of course, that is a given. But of equal importance to putting in the hours, these hours must be dedicated to the right type of work. It just cannot be any old work. It cannot be anything that you could do with your eyes closed. It has to be something that you have to focus on and think about and be challenged by. They found that a decade of serious chess playing will earn a player an intermediate rating, maybe somewhere in the thousands in their rating scale. The chess playing rating scale is kind of infinite. It will go as far as it will go. But let me just tell you that Kasparov, I believe, has the highest chess rating ever and it was 2800. So if you are in the 1000s somewhere, 1500-2000, you are an intermediate player. So playing chess for 10 years, seriously, will put you in that range. That is not bad. It is not bad at all. (I cannot play the game at all. I just do not have the mind for it.)

But a decade of serious study or a decade of deliberate practice of chess games can indeed make one a grandmaster. You will be up in the 2500 range soon enough and you could play on the international circuit. But it takes 10 years of deliberate practice where you are stretching yourself, hours every day, to become a grandmaster.

Similar findings appear in other fields, as I have said. So we do not have to apply this just to chess. This can also apply to whatever you do, you know what you do and if you set yourself aside some time every day to do something that is challenging to you, but will increase your skills in your specific field, then that is a good thing. You will start improving. People will notice, and you will begin having some career capital to play with.

So deliberate practice, if we are going to put this all in a nutshell, is taking time on a regular basis to tackle difficult exercises with focused attention, with the idea of expanding one's skills and reaching some predetermined goal of improvement. This has to do a lot with setting goals, setting out a plan, and knowing what you want to do. But it is taking the time (that is the first hurdle you have to get over) and then the other one is focusing your attention, which is hard to do these days with all that is going on in the world and computers beeping and you have got mail and this and that, and then making a plan to do the things, do those exercises that will expand your skills.

That is enough on the first habit. Now, let us go to the second habit that Newport talked about.

The second habit is very similar to deliberate practice, but he calls this one "deep work." And if I may say so, deep work is deliberate practice on steroids. Newport defines this as "doing cognitively demanding activities that utilize our training to generate rare and valuable results and that push our abilities to improve continually." This is a step beyond deliberate practice. This is attempting some skill, some specific skill in your field that we think or that we believe is far beyond us.

Let us go to car racing. Let us say you mastered the ovals, you can turn left and you can you can hold your line and all that. But you know a road course is beyond you. Turning right is difficult. Left, right, going the right speed. It is actually something that even the NASCAR guys have trouble with. Some of them grew up on road courses and they can do it okay. They can do it fine, but a lot of them grew up on ovals, you know, racing oval tracks, and all they can do is go left and go left and go left. But when they come to a road course, they have trouble. Left, right, all the ups and downs. That is different from what they are used to.

So deep work for a NASCAR driver then would be thinking, "these road courses are well beyond my skill level. I better put aside so much time every day to become a master at that particular skill of driving on a road course." And he would then give himself a series of goals, probably in this case times that he would have to reach to go around the course and improve his skills. Or he may have problems with just one turn that is tricky for him. It is very tight. You have to slow down, you have to come off the turn fast, and he would then spend hours just doing that particular thing until he got the groove that he needed, and taught his muscles and all of that, his mind, to make that turn. That would be deep work to a race car driver.

You can apply this to any other skill. Cal Newport, the author, is a mathematician by trade. He went through school and became a very, very, very good mathematician, but he found that he needed in his field, he went into the computer field (actually, he is a teacher now), but computing was one of the ways he wanted to apply his math and he knew that there was a study that had been done that had been quoted a lot in the journals. And it was just way beyond mathematically what a lot of people understood. And people said, I cannot understand the whole of what these people are trying to say with their math. But it is right, everybody knows that it is right. And it is giving us a quantum leap into the next level of math as applied to computing.

And so Newport looked at that and he could understand some of it and he could see why everybody was all excited about this because it was already making a difference in math, in computing. But he did not understand all of it. So he decided that that would be his deep work project. He would deconstruct this study that had been done, this paper on math that you and I would just say, that is not addition or subtraction, that is something else altogether. And so what he did, he decided that he would devote about an hour, an hour to three hours depending on the time he had every day, to taking just a small part of that paper, a paragraph, a couple of paragraphs, a formula, whatever it was, and he would study it until he understood it completely. And he said it was not easy. Normally he took an hour to do it and he would have to force himself to get through the first 10 minutes because that was the hardest; to get over the hump of actually doing it and



forcing his brain to try to grapple with these complex mathematical formulas and figure out what was going on and what this symbol meant and how it was working with all these other things and was all coming together.

He said that he wanted to stop just about every day before he reached that 10 minute mark because it hurt his brain. He felt a pressure in his brain that it was excruciating to him almost. But he pushed through. And he said, once he pushed through that first 10 minutes and got to the other side of it and was able to then get in the flow of this deep work, then it was very fulfilling to him and gave him kind of even a rush of euphoria because all the synapses were going and he was learning and growing and doing all these things that he knew was helping him.

You know what? By the time he finished his deep work project on that paper, he had found two flaws in it. And it just so happened as he was finishing his project on that, that the authors, or one or more of the authors was coming to a symposium of some sort near him. And so he went to them and he took one of them aside and said, "Do you know that there are two mistakes in here?" And the guy looked at him because he is a young man (28 or something like that) and said, Wow! He was impressed! This kid, as he saw him, had found the flaws. And he said, "You know, there is only one or two others in the whole world who have found these flaws?" And he was one of them. But they said, yeah, they were fixing them. But this shows you the level of the deep work that he did to the point where he became, through that work, one of the top five or six mathematicians in the whole world that could understand this concept thoroughly, so that he was one of those people who could read the paper and not be confused.

But that is the kind of deep work that he is talking about, where you agonize and struggle over one particular problem and you work at it and you work at it and you work at it and you push through all the barriers until you solve it. This is a step, as I said, beyond deliberate practice and where we force ourselves to understand and master a concept or overcome a problem and master the solution over a specific period of time.

I have another example of this. Newport interviewed a bluegrass guitarist; and actually this this was another kid. He was about his same age, maybe a little bit younger and he had already risen to the point where he was winning

awards as the best bluegrass guitarist in the country. Everybody wanted him on their studio when they were recording and he was getting all kinds of accolades. This particular award winning guitarist wanted to master one particular difficult solo, which was I guess about a minute long or so in a song. The problem was that this part, this solo, was exceptionally fast.

The guitarist did not want to just play it through. He knew he could do that, he knew he could play it through because he was the best, or among the best. That was not the problem. But, this was the kind of mind he had, this is kind of the way he set up his goals, he wanted to make sure that not only did he play it and play it at the right speed, but he wanted to make sure each note was distinct and true. He did not want to just strum through it. He did not want to just fake it. He wanted to make sure that every little bit was right on—perfectly timed, perfectly struck. So he set himself up a regimen. He would practice it for a set amount of time each day. Like I said, this was only a minute long so it did not take long to get through, especially because it was so fast. But he would set aside an hour or so to play this little bit over and over and over and over and over through the course of this deep work that he was doing. This took place over more than a month, I believe it was, like six weeks or so.

As the days progressed, he would slightly increase the tempo every day. Just a little bit, just an increment as he got toward the speed that it was supposed to be played, toward the goal. That was the ultimate goal; to play it at tempo, distinctly, every note perfectly struck.

So when the author, Cal Newport, was there talking to him, he played it for him and Cal Newport was kind of, you know, blown away. "Hey, that's great. That's a fast piece though." And the guy looked at him and he said, "I'm only about halfway there. That's half speed." It was fast when he heard it, it was supposed to be twice as fast, and the guy was going to do it because that is just the way he was. He had set himself this goal to push through and play this piece that was almost impossible to play, perfectly. He had to teach his muscles how to do it and that was the way—to play it over and over and over again until he got it absolutely right.

With those examples in mind, we are going to be doing the same thing that we did last time. And we are going to apply these principles to our spiritual

life. So we are going to take these ideas of difficult, deliberate practice and deep work and we are going to apply them to our Christian walk with God because it has profound application to our spiritual work of overcoming and growing. And that is a primary theme of the Feast of Unleavened Bread where we are today. So if we would include something like deliberate practice and deep work into our overcoming strategy, we will go a long way toward developing the character of Jesus Christ.

As we normally do, we need to touch base on the day, so let us go back to Exodus 12 and get a running start into this.

**Exodus 12:15-17** "Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses. For whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. On the first day there shall be a holy convocation [here we are], and on the seventh day there shall be a holy convocation for you. No manner of work shall be done on them; but that which everyone must eat—that only may be prepared by you. So you shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this same day I will have brought your armies out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall observe this day throughout your generations as an everlasting ordinance."

Now, let us notice there in verse 17 that it specifically ties the Feast of Unleavened Bread to coming out of Egypt.

**Exodus 13:3** And Moses said to the people, "Remember this day in which you went out of Egypt [that concept is brought out again], out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the Lord brought you out of this place. No leaven bread shall be eaten."

So you tie the Days of Unleavened Bread, specifically the first one, with the day that they left Egypt. God brought them out. God affected their release from bondage and had them come out, walk out.

**Exodus 13:17-18** Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by the way of the land of the

Philistines, although that was near; for God said, "Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt." So God led the people around by the way of the wilderness of the Red Sea and the children of Israel went up in orderly ranks out of the land of Egypt.

These are the original basic commands for the Days of Unleavened Bread. And as I said, there is a very clear assertion in both chapter 12 and chapter 13 that they came out on the first day of Unleavened Bread, that God brought them out of Egypt at that time on that specific day. And we memorialize it every year. It is an annual occurrence or annual commemoration of that day that Israel came out of Egypt.

Now, these former slaves now released from bondage by God's direct intervention through the plagues and all that happened there, they literally walked out of Goshen and toward the Egyptian border. Their part in coming out of Egypt was to trust God and walk. God said, you follow Moses. They saw Moses up ahead. Moses was going this way. They went this way too. They followed him out, they trusted God through Moses. Their work was to walk. And this is a major foundation for the biblical metaphor of walking being equal to working—the walk/work metaphor. That is all throughout the Bible.

Notice what it says though in chapter 3, verses 17 and 18. The quickest way to Canaan from Goshen was to go the way of the Philistines. Now, if you flip back to the back of your Bible and look at the map most of the ones that talk about the Exodus will have the way of the Philistines marked. The way of the Philistines skirts the coast of the Mediterranean up there to the north and it goes up northeastward toward Canaan and eventually ends up in Gaza, down there in the cities of the Philistines in the southwestern part of Canaan. It was a road, it was a clearly marked road. It was the road that most people used to go from Canaan to Egypt and Egypt to Canaan. So it was well beaten. There were places to stop along the way, even though it was desert, you know, they had the the coast there, the beach and all that right next to them. So it was not that bad. It was a well marked, well trod route.

God, though, says very clearly He did not want them to go that way. So He led them south and mostly east and south toward the Red Sea, not toward the

Mediterranean Sea, but toward the Red Sea and Sinai. The text very clearly says that He did not want to discourage them by making them fight their way out of Egypt. And then having to fight again when they got into Canaan, they would have had to fight the Philistines. That is where they would have come out, right there at the Philistine cities, and what would the Philistine cities have done seeing a couple million people on their doorsteps? They would have fought. And God did not want to discourage these former slaves who had no experience in that sort of thing. So He led them out of Egypt another way, to the east and south.

Now think of this spiritually. Consider only the fact at this point that God did not lead them by the logical route. You know, He was thinking, I want to get these people to Canaan so that they can inherit their land. The logical way to go would have been the *shortest*, the straight line is the shortest way between two points. Why not go that way? It was the easiest way. Also this route of the way of the Philistines was the *smoothest* road. It was the *typical* way that people went.

But God did not do that. Instead, He led them into trackless wilderness, physical privation, entrapment by the sea. He made Israel walk—remember it was work—He made them walk over rough terrain, exposed to the elements, it mentions scorpions and other things as well that they had to brave in their trek across Sinai. They were always on the edge of danger, whether it was danger from armies, whether it was danger of running out of water, whether whatever it happened to be, entrapment by the sea. You know, in danger of being killed and taken back into slavery by Pharaoh. And it seemed like every half hour they were being led into seemingly inescapable predicaments where they were either going to have to trust God or die. At least that is the way they looked at it.

So, do you understand what is happening here? Remember that very long introduction. God deliberately made the children of Israel do "deep work" as He led them out of Egypt.

Let us go to Deuteronomy 8. This is 40 years later. God is looking back over the wilderness time and here in chapter 8, He talks about that through Moses.

**Deuteronomy 8:1-6** "Every commandment which I command you today you must be careful to observe, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to your fathers. You shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandment or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. You should know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so the Lord your God chastens you. Therefore you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God, to walk in his ways and to fear Him."

Here, we find very clear evidence that God specifically led them into these problems so that they could solve them. He wanted to know certain things about them. So He tested them, He made them do deep work on certain things and the deep work often cost them their lives because they chose poorly. But He says here that He specifically wanted to accomplish three ends.

First, He wanted to humble them as slaves. You would have thought that they were humble but they were not. They felt pretty high and mighty most of the time. The second thing He wanted to do was to test them. He wanted to put them through the paces. And the third thing He wanted to know is whether they had it in them to keep His commandments.

Now, verse 5 tells us that this was part of God's chastening. That is what it says in my New King James, your Bible may say discipline or some other such thing. This is the Hebrew word *yasar*. It is better translated as discipline or instruct or train, and it has overtones of warning and correction and punishment. So it is not just putting somebody through the paces, it is

putting them through the paces with a finger saying, "Ok, if you don't do this right, you're going to get it." There were consequences, in other words, for doing things well or badly.

He wanted to see, in putting them through these paces, going through this deliberate practice or hard work, whichever way you want to look at it, so that He could see what would come out the other end. He wanted to have specific results. So God's way of working with the Israelites was a regimen of strict exercises to bring about growth toward a certain product. And He does the same thing with us.

Let us go to Hebrews 11. We will see the connection very clearly here. God puts us too through a regimen of strict exercises and He wants to bring out a specific product in the end, which is sons and daughters.

**Hebrews 11:32-35** And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barack and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions [you see a lot of tests there, lots of problems, a lot of deep work], quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection.

**Hebrews 12:1-2** Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight [let us get rid of those things that are bogging us down], and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

So, Paul gives us an example of the One who did it right.

**Hebrews 12:3-11** For consider Him who endured such hostilities from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. [You see, there has been an example set by Jesus Christ. It can be done, so no need for you to get discouraged about this.] You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. [You have not even gotten to that point yet, so why are you getting all upset and discouraged?] And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives."

If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

This is a very nice summary of what God does with us.

First, Paul gives us the examples of what He did with people in the Old Testament, those heroes of faith that we have. They are examples in the Old Testament. We can see that they went through a lot, they went through a lot of training, they did deep work on certain things for God to move His plan along, but also to help them to be sharpened so they could be in His Kingdom as his sons and His daughters. And then we are given the warning, I guess you would say, or the reminder (maybe that is better), that the same thing is happening to us. We are going through this same regimen. He has not changed His ways. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He uses the same methods with us as He did back then.



Of course, I pointed out earlier that Jesus, of course, is shown to be our real example of that. And if we had gone back into earlier chapters of Hebrews, we would have found out that He learned a great deal by suffering, by the deep work that His Father put Him through. And then He had to go through that deepest of all works, the beating and the crucifixion that He took, and He overcame, as He says that we saw that at the Passover service. He says that He has overcome the world. So He finished—and finished strong. He did it right. And He, then, is our example of the way we are to be in this world.

So Paul says, let us not become discouraged because we have not reached that point yet. We have not had anything near that level of discipline. But God does discipline us as we have not reached that point where we are being disciplined to the point that Jesus was, but we still are being disciplined to the level that we can take. But He does it, Paul says, for our profit. He is doing it for our good. He is trying to get us to a point where we are able to enter His Kingdom and to live in harmony with Him and His Son forever. Even though that is the wonderful goal that we have, the deep work that He makes us go through now is grievous. It is hard. It is difficult. It is often painful, certainly emotionally and mentally painful sometimes, if not physically painful.

But that is the essence of deliberate practice and deep work. Stretching; stretching is painful. Stretching makes you uncomfortable because you are not used to it. And so a little bit of pain actually helps to make us better, to help us to grow.

Let us go to Philippians 2. And it is not just God doing this. This is why I came here to Philippians 2 because I want you to see that this is a *cooperative* work with Him. I want to read verses 12 through 18. We often do not read the whole paragraph, but it does hold together as one thought from Paul. Oftentimes we just read the first verse or the second verse and not read the rest. But it is very similar to what he says in Hebrews, except now the focus is on us.

**Philippians 2:12-13** Therefore, my beloved as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my

absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

And that is where we often stop but notice what he says. Think of it this way. You and God are both working on the same project together. And the project is you; the project is you making it into the Kingdom of God. Or to put it another way, the project is you coming into the very image of Jesus Christ.

**Philippians 2:14-15** Do all things without murmuring and disputing [this is part of the work that you have been given to do now], that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, . . .

Sound familiar? That was my sermon last time. He is making you into lights in the world and so do these things without murmuring and disputing because that is your job. That is what we are trying to reach here. So he gives us some advice:

**Philippians 2:16-18** . . . holding fast the word of life, so that [meaning doing what you have been taught, holding on to what you have been taught, the knowledge of God and all the instruction that He has given you] so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain. [he was their teacher, right? Paul] Yes, and if I am poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith [that was him doing hard work, deep work, deliberate practice; he was pouring himself as out as a sacrifice for them], I am glad and rejoice with you all. For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me.

Do you see what he is saying here? We have been all been put into this work with God. He is going to do his part being a living sacrifice, a drink offering for them. And so he says he gets a lot of joy in seeing the product that is produced because he gives himself so much for their benefit. He says, then, ok, you do the same, you pour yourself out as a drink offering, as a living sacrifice, and we will have the same joy. If we both come at this with the idea that we are going to give our all to this project of becoming sons and

daughters of God through this Christian life, then we will all be very happy because we will all be in joy forevermore before the face of the Almighty.

But it takes hard work. It takes the cooperation of the person doing his utmost, God doing His utmost, and the preacher doing his utmost. And if we all do our utmost, if we all do the deep work, if we all participate in the deliberate practice, then we are all going to be very happy one day, if not now. But we all have to be in this together. Hold on, endure, hold fast to the good things that we have been taught and we can all make it.

Back a couple of pages to Ephesians 4. Paul talked about this a lot. This was a great deal of his exhortation in just about every book that he wrote, trying to get people excited about living this way of life. Almost every book he ends with exhortations about doing things, doing Christian living, living the way God wants us to live. Doctrine is fine, but it can be static if it is not lived. It only becomes dynamic when we do it, when we live it. We have got to have the right doctrine because that will inform how we actually do what we do. But the doing of it is what actually forms the habits, forms the character, so we need to do that.

Ephesians 4. Here we normally go to the first half of this. We do some in the last half. But I want the last half this time because that is about this deep work we are supposed to do, or this deliberate practice.

**Ephesians 4:17-24** This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to licentiousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness.

Now notice that this paragraph, back in verse 17, begins with therefore, "This I say, therefore. . ." What he is saying is that he is now starting a new paragraph. That is a conclusion based on what he has said before. So what he had said before was a partial listing of gifts that had been given to the church for its growth. If you go back to verse 7, "to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift." And then it says verse 11 "and He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers."

So he is talking about not only were we given grace, but we were given teachers, apostles, and others to guide us, and those people that he gave as gifts, as teachers, were to equip the saints for the work of ministry, it says there, to edify the body of Christ, to bring them all up into the image of Jesus Christ, to help them grow so that they could be strong against the winds of doctrine, as he calls it, and being able to spot false teachers and such so that they will make it into the Kingdom of God, and become one body.

Having said that, he says, what do we do with this? What do we do with these gifts that God has so graciously given? Well, therefore, he says, let us not live like the Gentiles, let us not live like we used to live, which was totally apart from God and in rebellion against Him, but let us live differently. The way of God, the way Jesus Christ showed us. We have been taught by Him and the truth is in Jesus, he says. We have been taught the right way to live, so the only response that we should have to these gifts that we are given is that we change. He says that you put off that old man, and because now you have an entirely new mind, it has been renewed, it has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, now you look at things totally differently and in doing so, then you can change the way you live. You can put off those old habits and put on new ones.

And the new ones that we are supposed to be putting on are the new man, which is Jesus Christ Himself. That very character of God, which, as he says here, is righteousness and true holiness. We have the ability now because of the gifts that were given to do this. So we should change our way of living. We are told that we need to peel off the layers of the old man that have accrued on us, like skins on an onion, over our many years of the world as bad habits, ungodly habits. And with this new spiritual mind begin putting on the new man, which is the character image of our Savior.

Now, we have in the past described this process of putting off and putting on, that it is kind of like taking off dirty clothes and putting on new ones. And that is a fine analogy as far as it goes. But how difficult do you find taking off clothes and putting on new clothes? I mean, we may have to unzip something, untie something, unbutton something, but some of us are so good we can do it almost in one fluid, efficient motion and we are there for all the world to see.

But that is why I say the analogy is good as far as it goes. You get the idea of taking off dirty stuff and putting on clean stuff. That is good. But that is not rigorous enough an analogy to show what it is really like. Have you ever overcome a sin easily? "Yeah, no problem." I mean, maybe once, maybe there was something that you really did not do very often or whatever. And he said, "Oh, I don't necessarily need to do that again." So that might have been easy. But if you ever tried to get rid of a sin that you had done frequently, was that just one quick, efficient motion and they were suddenly new and clean? No, I do not think so.

In reality, putting off the old man is a rigorous and difficult process. It is hard work. It is hard work to undo or unlearn decades of accumulated habits in our reactions and our attitudes. Maybe a better analogy of this putting off the old man is stripping paint with a toothbrush, a soft bristled toothbrush, or maybe it is scraping rust off an iron railing. It takes some elbow grease, it takes some effort. It is not something you are going to do just like that. It is hard, dirty work. Go a few pages forward in the book to Colossians 3.

**Colossians 3:1-5** If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. [This is the renewing of the mind.] Set your mind on things above, not on things of the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. [that is the goal] Therefore [this is a conclusion] put to death your members which are on the earth [and then he lists several].

Did Paul think that putting off the old man was like simply taking off some clothes? Have you ever thought of taking off one's clothes being equivalent

to killing or cutting off a body part? See, that is the way he looked at it; that putting off the old man is hard. It is like cutting off an arm or a hand. It is like plucking out an eye or poking out the membranes in one's ears. It is hard, dirty, awful work. And that is what Jesus said, because Paul did not come up with this on his own. Jesus said in Matthew 5:27-30 that if one of your members offends you cut it off, pluck it out. Now, He and Paul do not mean that we should do this literally. What they are trying to get across is the lengths that we must be willing to go to quit sinning. We have got to be willing to kill it, put it to death, burn it out at its roots, do not let it come back. Deep work.

So sometimes we have to take drastic action and do some very hard things. Stretch ourselves far beyond what we ever think we could stretch to overcome sin.

**Ephesians 4:25-32** Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another. "Be angry and do not sin": do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil. Let him who stole, steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. Let no corrupt communication [word] proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you.

Now, what do we have here? Notice again we start with "therefore." So this is a conclusion that once we have figured out that we are going to put off the old man and put on the new, therefore, what does he say to do?

First, we need to evaluate ourselves, and hopefully we have done that. II Corinthians 13:5, "Examine yourselves whether you are in the faith." Check yourself out. Where do you fall within the parameters of godly living? Where are your weaknesses? What are your strengths? Well, once we think we have a handle on our shortcomings, and if you do not have a good handle,

ask your spouse, then we obviously have to stop doing those things where we fall short and start doing things better.

But just stopping sin does not ingrain good habits in the place of old bad habits. If we take something away, it causes a vacuum and it needs to be filled up. And Jesus says, if you send the demons away and you leave it empty, seven more demons worse are going to come back, so we better fill it up with something that is good. So Paul advises us to replace the sin with its godly opposite. He says, replace lies with truth, stealing with work and giving, foul speech with upbuilding, gracious language, anger and malice replaced with tenderness and kindness.

So if you find you have a sin, root it out, get it out, and then start doing things to replace it that are godly. These are not easy to do, especially with years of accrued ungodliness in these areas under our belts. So we approach them with the principles of deliberate practice and deep work. In deliberate practice, we purposely set ourselves tasks to do that, force us to practice doing good. Do you have a problem with slander? Do you cut other people down? Then you must make yourself repent of the slander, root it out from your life, and then start praising other people and lifting them up with your words, and edifying them.

For instance—this is deliberate practice—you have a problem with slander set yourself this goal: Pledge to say three praiseworthy things about others while you are at services on the Sabbath and not say one bad thing about anyone. Replace the bad with good. Start making it a habit. You have to force yourself to do these things at first and after a while, it becomes part of our character to do those things rather than the sin. And then once you have mastered three, give yourself a higher goal. Make them increasingly difficult to fulfill so that you put the slander so far in your rearview mirror that it does not come up again until you have "mastered" the encouraging word.

Deep work is deliberate practice on steroids. As I said before, it is what we turn to when we want to overcome something particularly deep seated and resistant to our other efforts; maybe we have worked on something with deliberate practice and it has not worked. We need to do deep work on this particular problem to root it out. Of course, we have to rely on God to give us what we need to truly overcome. But we have to put in the hard work.

This might include a deep and exhaustive study of the issue in God's Word so that we know exactly what God says about it. From the front of the Bible to the back, we can quote the verses, we have them in our minds and right there so that we can remember them when the temptations come. So that is the first part of the hard work.

We could also go to the world in certain areas and find help. Let us say, in the matter of addictions. Say, if someone has an addiction with gambling or an addiction with, I do not know, these days pornography on the Internet is a big addiction for men. If you have got that problem, read the literature on it and find out if there may be a suggestion to help that you can implement in your own deep work about how to resist these things. Sometimes they have some good ideas. Fasting on the problem is a given. That is another area that we can add to our deep work.

It may also mean setting up a series of goals of increasing difficulty to overcome in a certain set time. It also may take some radical action, throw away the TV, throw away the computer, throw away your CDs that have suggestive lyrics on them or whatever they happen to be. Throw away all the alcohol, never darken the door of a bar or a restaurant that serves alcohol or whatever. Whatever it takes to overcome the problem and to do away with the temptation.

Doing deep work on a sin is being willing to put in the time and the effort to root out the problem, no matter what it takes, and to *make* yourself do it every day. Do something on it. Get rid of the old, put on a new habit.

Let us conclude in Acts 14.

**Acts 14:21-22** And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples [they were in Derbe], they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."

Yes, indeed. God puts us through trials and tests. He stretches us. He sees what is in us. He wants to know whether we have it in our hearts to keep His commandments. And we, too, must be putting ourselves through deliberate



practice and deep work so that we can overcome and make righteousness our habitual ingrained way of life. And in this journey practice does one day make perfect.