

No Progress Without Practice

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It is foolish to think that we can make progress in the habits of godliness by doing nothing more than listening and learning. While these are essential, they are not enough. It takes practice to make progress, and we should not expect that to be any less true in spiritual matters than in those of a worldly nature.

When we meet individuals who have become adept at the disciplines of the godly life, we often suppose that they're just more devout than we are. Or perhaps we think that they're more intelligent or insightful. Or we wish that we could have read the books and heard the sermons that they've read and heard. But when we think this way, we betray an ignorance of the real thing that produces spiritual progress: practice. The trait that distinguishes the adept from the inept is that the adept have done certain things . . . over and over and over, every day, for many years.

Prayer: Not all of our prayers are of equal quality. Keeping in mind a Scriptural definition of "good" praying, it must be said that we do not pray as well at some times as at others. Paul mentioned that "we do not know what we should pray for as we ought" (Rom. 8:21), and the disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples" (Lk. 11:1).

But how do you make progress in your prayer life? Well, we certainly need to learn all that we can about the principles of prayer, but the time comes when we have to start practicing the art of prayer. It can't be learned any other way than by praying . . . over and over and over, every day, for many years.

Understanding: It would be hard to overestimate the importance of Bible study, but frankly, some people do a better job than others of correctly understanding what the Bible teaches. The Ethiopian eunuch, for example, was reading the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, but he was having trouble understanding what the passage meant (Ac. 8:30-34). So we need to work not only on the quantity but also the quality of our Bible study.

But how do you make progress in your understanding of the Scriptures? It can't be done by the simple investigation of hermeneutics; it requires patient repetition of the act of Bible study. You're not likely to find a mature, responsible student of God's word who arrived at that point any other way than by doing Bible study . . . over and over and over, every day, for many years.

Discretion: Isn't it refreshing when we encounter some older Christian who has grown very wise in matters of discretion and discernment? In a good sense, don't we "envy" those who have learned how to size up a difficult situation and see which course of action is best to take? Surely we do, and of all the abilities we need in this life, none is

more vital than the ability to take God's general principles, apply them to a specific situation, and discern what God would want done. Paul wrote, "Do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:17).

But how do you learn to be a better decision maker? There is only one way, and the Hebrew writer put his finger on it when he spoke of those "who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (Heb. 5:14).

In matters of godliness, then, there aren't any effective shortcuts. Being a beginner is just hard; that's all there is to it. Sometime will have to pass before we can be more skilled. But the passage of time will not, by itself, guarantee improvement (Heb. 5:12); we have to actually do the things that need improving — and do them repeatedly. So let's look for every opportunity to practice the things we want to improve. God deserves nothing less than our very best, and the best that we can do won't be done unless we pray and study our Bibles and use our discretion . . . over and over and over, every day, for many years.