

Practice Makes Us More Perfect

Lesson 10 in "More Like Jesus"

Lesson Aim: To learn that deliberately and thoughtfully applying the principles of God's Word in the experiences of life, will help us grow into spiritual maturity.

Key Verses: For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. 13) For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. 14) But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.
Hebrews 5:12-14 nas

Just Like Soccer

Does one become an outstanding soccer player without intense practice? Probably not! He has certainly spent years in training and practice, often in pain. He accepts that as the price of excellence.

Is it reasonable to expect that Christians would pursue spiritual excellence in a similar way? Should we "practice" love, forgiveness and other Christian virtues in life's difficult situations? By practice we mean giving deliberate thought to how you want to handle a certain situation, and then specifically trying to respond in that way when the need arises.

Consider some situations in which you might "practice" your Christian walk.

- Loving a "difficult" person
- Thinking positive thoughts
- Dealing with the voice of condemnation
- Personal victory, Spirit rules over flesh
- Joy, in difficult circumstances

Conscious practice is important in learning to successfully dribble a soccer ball around one's opponent, and shoot it past the goalie into the net. It is equally important in learning to love the unlovely, forgive the spiteful, or be forbearing toward the overbearing.

Scriptures to Consider

These verses communicate personal responsibility and deliberate action in becoming more like Jesus, and in living out our Christian commitment.

Romans 6:19 - Do it once, it'll be easier next time! We know this works for sin; let's also believe it works for righteousness!

Philippians 2:12b - "work out your salvation." "I've told and shown you how to do it, now go work it out in the realities of life."

Philippians 3:12-15 - Read it. Paul was constantly striving to do better! Feel the sense of personal initiative and responsibility here and his commitment to excellence!

Philippians 4:9a - "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice." Wow!

Colossians 3:8-15 - We must take certain things off and put other things on. Spiritual maturity won't just happen. An athlete may need to get rid of a bad habit before he can develop a certain skill. We will take conscious action at various points if we want to become more like Jesus.

Hebrews 5:12-14 - Our key verses.

We Christians must accept responsibility for our own spiritual walk. We need to take initiative to deal with weaknesses, and persevere in developing the skills needed to handle life's challenges in a mature way.

A good athlete will always be conscious of weak areas in his game. He's not too proud to acknowledge them, and doesn't consider himself a failure because he's not perfect! He'll invest the time and effort needed to improve himself.

Do It Again!

Does an "up and coming" soccer player pout, condemn himself and take his ball home if he shoots at the goal and misses? Doesn't he accept "missing the shot" as a normal part of learning?

Sometimes we do well in applying the principles of Christianity to the challenges of life. Other times we miss the mark. Can we, as the soccer player, objectively look at what we're doing wrong if we "miss," and then work at correcting that error? Can we miss the mark without becoming discouraged and giving up?

Let's say we recognize a problem in our attitude toward a certain person. We confess it to God. He speaks counsel to us through a scripture or a friend.

We think about how we'll respond to them the next time. We pray and ask God to help us be kind toward them, and we run through the whole scene in our mind. Sure enough, the next time we meet we experience a real measure of grace and feel a kindness toward them that surprises us. "Praise God," we say!

Possibly the time after that it goes well too. But then you drop your guard. Maybe you meet them when you're in sort of a bad mood anyway and "BAM," the old feelings come back. You feel like a total failure and are tempted to think it's no use. But then

you think of the soccer player who messed up a good opportunity to score and you decide to go at it again!

Knowing Your Opponent

Sports teams watch videos of the games of their opponents, to understand their strategy. They want to develop a game plan to beat them.

Obviously Satan is our opponent. He works through people and the situations of life, trying to defeat us by tempting us to fear, jealousy, hatred, or lust, for example.

Sometimes it's like he has his players take the ball to one side to get us away from the center of the goal zone. Then they'll pass it back into the center real quickly, and into the goal it goes because we were pulled away from our defensive position.

Deception is a big part of success in many games. It is also one of Satan's most powerful weapons!

He knows our weaknesses, and works through circumstances to set us up one little step at a time. Then when we're off guard, he'll score one on us! He uses the same tricks time after time!

If you observe your life and your patterns of failure, you can soon learn his game and develop your own defense strategy. As time goes on, you will become more and more sensitive to how he is trying to defeat you and will have the opportunity to overcome him. You are no longer bound to anger, jealousy, gossip, deception, lying, or lust, for example. God is forming Christ in you!

Who Is The Coach?

Soccer players have a coach. He has probably played the game himself and knows it well.

The coach is responsible to give the players instruction and to help them do better, and they must receive correction from him. Often he can see things they are doing wrong that they can't see themselves.

In this game of life we need a coach.

John 14:15-17 & 26 identifies the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, as our counselor and coach.

Hebrews 4:14-16 - Jesus has "played the game". He lived here and experienced all that we have to go through, and to greater measure than we will ever know. He understands, and is able to help us!

The Holy Spirit speaks through the scriptures and in that "still small voice."

He also speaks to us through our pastor, spouse, or other friends. It is good for each of us to have someone we look to as a coach; one who sees our life and is willing to walk with us. It is hard to see ourselves objectively and it is good to have someone we trust, to help us.

A soccer player who is not willing to receive coaching is a liability to the team. A Christian who is not willing to receive coaching will be severely handicapped in his personal life and service. He is also a liability to those he serves with.

The Textbook

Many athletes read magazines and study textbooks written by experts in their sport. They want to learn from those who have gone before them.

We have a textbook written by an expert. In fact, He's the very originator of our game! He knows everything there is to know about it. He has played the game more intensely than anyone else and the textbook is his autobiography. It also contains stories of other players; some great, some not so great. We can learn much about the game of the Christian life from them!

This book offers technique and strategy and tells a lot about what to expect in our opponent's game. It's loaded with valuable instruction. Like the serious athlete, the serious Christian will read it and learn the game well. And if he hopes to excel, he'll practice what it says.

Closing Thoughts

Don't we wish that when we got saved, God would just lift us up and set us in some fluffy clouds? There we could float along above the realities of our weaknesses and the complications of life!

But He doesn't. In His wisdom He lets us walk with our feet on the ground, and sometimes in the garbage of life. It's His divine intention to form Jesus in us, in the midst of it all. In fact, it's that very garbage that He often uses to our great benefit!

In order to live life at all like Jesus did, we need to "get into the game," as we say. We must become active participants. God doesn't need any benchwarmers on His team. He has a position for everyone.

Doing or Being

It's easy to try to get into the game with a lot of "doing." But first of all God would have us concentrate on "being." He wants to reshape the inner man; the insights, attitudes and thought patterns that shape our actions. Many Christians try to shortcut that with a lot of busy doing.

Some of God's training and coaching is in the secret parts of our heart; the part that we don't want others to know about.

Building spiritual excellence is often a slow process. At times it's downright painful. We're tempted with discouragement and want to quit the team. Some players do drop out. But the smile of the Coach after a game well played, and His patience toward us when we mess up, spurs most of us on.

More than anything else, we find ourselves pressing on from a desire to please Him because of the wonderful privilege of playing on His team. We want to become all that He could make us to be!

Then too, He has promised us something better than the “Hall of Fame” when the season is over!

Prayer:

Jesus, my Coach, I need your instruction and encouragement in this game of life. I’m not playing nearly as well as I could and I want to do better.

Jesus, I open my heart to hear you. I invite you to work deeply in me, by your Holy Spirit, and lead me in the path toward spiritual excellence.

Please help me to open my heart to others, too, so that I can hear you through them.

Jesus, I yield myself to you anew not only as Coach, but as Master; one who has full rights to form me in your way, for your own purposes. May it be so.

Thank you, Jesus!

Questions for Thought and Discussion

- 1) How is the word “practice” used in this lesson?

- 2) In what areas of your life are you deliberately working at applying the principles of godly living?

- 3) What do you think of this statement: “Christians who are passive about their spiritual growth are about as useful as a soccer player who is passive about developing his skills.”?

- 4) Do most Christians you know diligently pursue spiritual excellence? Do you?

- 5) Are they willing to acknowledge areas of need, and work on them? Are you?

- 6) Do you have a problem with giving up when you don’t “get the victory” in a certain area?

- 7) Are you becoming increasingly aware of the ways in which Satan “sets you up”?

- 8) Do you take time to listen to God about weaknesses in your life, and to receive instruction from Him?

- 9) Are there people in your life through whom you can receive “coaching?”