

10,000 hours seems like a lot of time. It is. It would take almost 417 full days to reach 10,000 hours. Malcolm Gladwell, the publisher of *Outliers* says that very successful people have almost always put in more than 10,000 hours of practice time in activities related to their success. Gladwell discovered the two key factors for success: practice and potential. How much time do we put into practicing our faith?

I loved playing basketball when I was growing up. I would play every opportunity I could get. Even though we shot free throws in our practices, I would stay after almost every practice and shoot an extra 100 free throws. As a result, I was decent free throw shooter. But since I gave up shooting 100 free throws a day a long time ago, now I'm lucking to hit any free throws at all.

If we are going to succeed in living out our Christian faith, we need to practice our faith, to put into practice the good things God wants us to do. Now let me make sure I don't confuse you. Practice does not make us perfect. We are not put right with God by doing all of the right things. The Apostle Paul tells us, "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God." (Ephesian 2:8 NLT) But that doesn't mean that Christianity is a spectator sport. We are not supposed to be couch potato Christians. Paul also wrote, "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago." (Ephesians 2:10 NLT)

The good news is we don't do faith alone. We're on the team of faith called the Church. God created the Church, the community where we work together for the good of all. The Christian community is the place where wise and faithful Christians can nurture others in the faith. We are all part of the same body, the body of Christ. We belong together and need each other. Whenever we cut ourselves off from other Christians, our faith begins to weaken and fail. We need each other.

The Christian Church is not limited to one local congregation or even a denomination. The Christian Church is all who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. That means that the circle of support and encouragement we have is much bigger than our own local church. I find myself going outside of the Lutheran church for resources, help and direction. Maybe you have Christian friends who are not members of Peace who you help and encourage, or who help and encourage you. We don't do faith alone.

We do need to practice our faith if we want to put it into practice in our lives. The basketball player who never practices shooting free throws isn't likely to make free throws when the game is on the line. Christians who don't practice their faith are likely to fail when being tested.

So what do we practice? Paul tells us to practice telling the truth. **“Stop telling lies. Let us tell our neighbors the truth.”** (vs. 25) Lies separate, create doubt and confusion. If someone is in the habit of telling lies, you never know when to believe them or trust them. Truth is the glue that holds a community together and makes it possible for us to depend on and trust each other. If we all practice telling the truth in love, after 10,000 hours we would have a healthy community.

Next we need to practice dealing with anger. Paul wrote, **“Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil.”** (vs. 26-27) There are some things worth getting angry about. Jesus got angry with those who had turned part of the temple into a market place, making it impossible for the Gentiles to worship and pray. So he did something about it. We need to learn to control our anger. We need to deal with our anger quickly and thoughtfully. One of the keys to that is learning to forgive those who hurt or offend us. If we don’t, we are giving the devil a foothold into our lives and that anger can consume us. It can also destroy a Christian community.

The third thing Paul tells us to practice is serving others. We live in a world where service is looked down on, where being served is a sign of power and prestige. Serving others doesn’t come naturally. Paul wrote, **“Use your hands for good hard work, and then give generously to others in need.”** (vs. 28) Jesus tells us if we want to be great we need to serve others. He offered His life in service to others. Jesus spent three years of his life serving others, helping people meet their needs. Isaiah calls Jesus the Suffering Servant, because He suffered and died in our place to pay the price for our sins. When we practice service, when we do things to serve others, it helps us. God lifts us up when we serve others. Imagine what our church could be like if all of us practiced service to one another, to the community and to the Lord.

Next Paul tells us, **“Don’t use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.”** (vs. 29) Wouldn’t it be great if everyone running for office this year would do this? It is not easy. James tells us that it is the hardest thing to tame. That is why we need to practice controlling our speech. We should be building each other up, not tearing anyone down. We should avoid foul or offensive language. Just because everyone else is using some offensive words doesn’t mean we should use them too.

So how do we do this? How can we successfully practice our faith? The key is to let God’s Holy Spirit guide us. Instead bringing sorrow to the Spirit by the way that we live, we need to receive the power of the Holy Spirit to be able to say “No” to sin and “Yes” to God. We can’t practice our faith on our own. The Prophet Zechariah wrote, **“It is not by force, nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.”** (Zechariah 4:6) The Spirit guides us through God’s Word and through the help, support and encouragement of our fellow Christians. So we need to read God’s Word. We need to hang out with and learn from our fellow Christians. We need to let God’s Spirit be our guide.

Our lives should mirror the character of God. People who don't know Jesus look to see Jesus in us. If we are practicing our faith, they are more likely to see Christ in us and through us. But if we don't practice our faith, they are going to see something else. Paul tells us, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (vss. 31-32) The difference should be obvious. Is it?

It takes time and practice, the help and support of fellow Christians and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to reflect the character of God in our everyday lives. But Christianity is not something we do. It is who we are. Paul wrote, "Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children." (vs. 1) Because we are His Children, we know that He will always loves us. Because we are filled with His love, we can love and serve one another. We can practice our faith and put it into practice every day. That may not be normal, but it is how God helps us live.