

Practice Makes Perfect  
Philippians 3  
Eric Watts

The Woodside Church

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The game was between the California Bears and the Stanford Cardinals, two strong college football programs. The bears had a good season and were on the cusp of making the postseason. If they got this win in the final regular season game they were shoo ins to make the postseason and play in a bowl game. However there was a daunting challenge that stood in their way. There was a quarterback on the other team that went by the name of John Elway, a future college and pro hall of fame QB. The game was close the whole was through and nearing the end of the fourth quarter, the Bears were up 19-17. But Elway had the ball with time on the clock. Just as he had done many times, he led his team down the field and got them in range to make a field goal. The kicker lined it up, they snapped the ball, and whoosh right through the uprights to take a 20-19 lead. The California Bears were deflated. With 4 seconds left on the clock Elway had beat them again with another miraculous comeback. Even with that 4 seconds there was no way to get the ball to end zone for the bears in just one play. That is until this happened.... And just like that the game was over, the season was over, and for John Elway, his college career was over. All because of one huge play. This play has lived on for years and will continued to be relived many more as it was amazing, but it is also so well-known because amazing plays like this happen so infrequently. When the coach was putting in the game plan, it didn't have make a miraculous unscripted mind blowing play with 4 seconds left to steal the game. No it probably had a methodical, planned, strategy driven play by play plan in a playbook they made that was supposed to win it without any miracles needed. Than they took it to the practice field and drilled into their heads the plays and how to handle any situation that may be thrown their way. So even when an amazing, random, unscripted play like that happens, the coach can trust all the practice the players put in will steer them to the right path and pull off the play. One of the biggest football sayings of all time that is preached by almost all coaches that achieve success is "practice makes perfect."

What a great story, let's start with the motto stated earlier, practice makes perfect. The more you practice something, the closer to perfection, whether that is sports, jobs, music, faith, you will get. We all know no one is perfect but we strive to get better every day, including at our faith. In Philippians 3:12-14 Paul, who authored Philippians, says "I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have no achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us (NLT)."

There is a lot in this passage but first let us focus on the practice makes perfect. Paul has not achieved perfection. Nor will he. But He continues to press on to possess it. As long as sin

exists, which in this world it always will, we cannot achieve perfection as it seems we can't even go a day without sinning let alone a lifetime. So what does he mean by he continues to press on to try and possess it? It means that even though we won't achieve perfection, our goal is we practice our faith and our habits as if we could achieve that perfection, because each time we do, we get a little bit closer to being like Christ. It is up to each individual Christian however, to build up their own faith. This may be hard for some to hear but it is your responsibility to grow your own faith. It's not your spouses, your parents, your pastor, your youth leader, your favorite televangelist. It is yours and only yours. God has equipped and given you the tools necessary to do this but it requires practice to make it more impactful. Now all those people I mentioned are great resources to learn from. Help to guide you in the right direction. Give you feedback and encouragement. But no matter how much they help and do for you, it's your responsibility to practice and build the habits that build your faith up. So what are good faith practice habits? What habits can we possess to push towards our goal line just like a football team tries to march their team down the field and cross the goal line for a touchdown?

The first faith habit is **Christians feed our spirit**. Matthew 4:4 says "People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (NLT)." Where is the best way for us to hear the words come from the mouth of God? That would be the Bible. We have to create a habit of opening God's word, not just skimming through, but truly soaking it in and feeding our spirit. When we build a bible study habit, a quiet time, we learn how to hear God's voice through His word. This helps us to grow stronger in our faith and closer to him. We move closer to our goal line every time we open our Bible and allow His word to speak to our spirit.

The second habit is **speaking the word**. Proverbs 18:21 says "the tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk will reap the consequences (NLT)." We underestimate frequently the power our words have when we say them. A great quote from the show Scrubs is "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words hurt forever..." What if we as followers of Christ really took seriously this proverb that our words can bring death or life? How would our relationships change? How would people's perception of us change? How would WE change? If we practice speaking words that give life it will eventually become our natural reaction to build up instead of tear down. It takes humility and action on our part to stop the death that slips from our tongues and instead turn it into life, even if we feel at the time it may cost us something.

When the Philadelphia Eagles signed T.O. (Terrell Owens) who would go on to be a hall of fame wide receiver, they thought He would be the piece that took them over the top to get their first super bowl. However T.O.'s ego, words, and insecurity led to him speaking out again his teammates, especially their QB Donovan McNabb and creating division in the locker room. Even though they did make it to the super bowl in 2004, they didn't win. It was only downhill from there and He became such a distraction that even in his prime as a football player they traded him away. It makes you wonder if He had humbled himself, and worked hard to build up instead of tear down, what that team could have accomplished together. These first two habits seem pretty obvious right? Doable? Good because now we are going to get tougher.

The third habit is **Control our thought life**. How many of you in here would be comfortable and proud to let everyone know exactly what is going on in your thought life each

day? Each hour? Each minute? Not too excited about that idea are you? I'm not either, some of the things that have crossed my mind before startle me. Sometimes I am quick to push it aside and know that is wrong and shouldn't be in my mind, but others... well sometimes we enjoy sitting on that thought too much don't we? Joshua 1:8 says "Study this book of instruction (the bible) continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do (NLT)." How healthy or toxic is your thought life? Even though you may not act on those thoughts and they seem harmless, you never know when emotions, uncontrollable circumstances, or life crisis may strike. When that happens don't you want your thoughts to be filled with God's word and love. That our reaction to bad situations is God's word dwelling in us? Joshua is emphasizing we need to meditate on this book day and night. He knows if we don't, it's easy to slip up to the toxic thoughts that we allow to sit and fester in our minds. When our first thoughts in situations happen go to Christ or God's word, we tend to make more Christ like decisions. This doesn't happen overnight. This takes lots of practice and intentionality. When the toxic thoughts arise we need to intentionally put God's Word in its place. For example, next time someone cuts you off in traffic, instead of thinking of many four letter words, instead exercise restraint and remind yourself of God's peace. It will be difficult at first but practice makes perfect.

The fourth habit is **Anchor our hearts in praise**. Psalm's speaks to this in the 34<sup>th</sup> chapter when it says in verse 1 "I will praise the Lord at all times. I will constantly speak his praises (NLT)." How often do we hear the Lord praised outside of Sunday worship or when you step out these doors? I'll tell you what, I hear a lot more dangit's with God put in the front of it than praising God in public that's for sure. How often are we praising God for all the good things He is doing in our lives every single day? We as people like to focus on the negatives. All the things he isn't doing. All the things that aren't good in our lives. What if we changed our mindsets and practiced praising all the things he does for us every day instead of focusing on the why not's? What if we started being thankful for waking up each morning and speaking praise to that? What if we thanked God for the time we do have with people instead of the time we don't or might not in the future? What if we thank God for being there during the hard times so that we could have peace and comfort in the direst of circumstances? If we started looking at life from a perspective of praise in all situations our lives would change drastically. Now this doesn't mean to live obliviously and not be able to be sad and grieve over awful things because hardships will come. But the process to healing and the practice of praising Him even through the hard times will allow us to keep ourselves grounded in God.

The fifth habit is **pray in the spirit**. Practicing to pray in all situations can make a world of difference. We vastly underestimate the true power of prayer. Give your worries and concerns to God, give your praises to God, give your 6am trafficked up road rage to God. Be in prayer constantly. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says "Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus (NLT)." How many of you have a hard time praying when you're at church, in bible study, tucking your kids in at night or at family dinner? It's not hard right? Because you have practiced that habit and it comes naturally to you because it's where you have put time in. Who has a hard time praying when someone verbally attacks you? Says hateful things? Who has a hard time praying

FOR that person later on, let alone in the moment? If we learn to practice praying in all moments, it's amazing the things God will be able to do in our lives and through us because praying is the act of inviting God into any situation. He is a God who gives us free will and will not go into a part of our lives where we have not invited him. If we let him in, pray to Him constantly, and allow Him to work through us the things He will do amazing things. We just need to practice praying in all circumstances so that He can begin to work wonders.

The sixth and final habit is **to get rid of baggage**. Whenever rookies enter the NFL, during training camp they are expected to carry all the veterans' equipment, baggage, and whatever else they may need carried. It is part of the NFL tradition. Wherever the veterans go, there are the rookies with them carrying all their baggage. Jesus, however, doesn't treat any of us like rookies. In fact, He offers to carry our baggage for us. To give Him our baggage so we no longer have to carry that burden alone. He wants to walk through all the baggage in our life together so that we can unload it to Him and He can help us to leave it in the past because we are a new creation in Him. Psalm 55:22 says "Cast your burden on the Lord, and He shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved." Jesus will take your burdens for you if you give them to Him. Jesus also loves to use people who are "unqualified" or have baggage. Just ask Paul. Paul used to be known as Saul and He would go around killing Christians. Lots of them. Jesus eventually broke through to Him and He changed His name to Paul and become one of the most famous prophets. In fact He wrote the most books of the Bible at 20. If Jesus can use a man that has that much baggage, why couldn't He use you to do amazing things even though you have baggage? We must follow Paul's example although in giving our baggage to Jesus, who invites us to do so.

In the last four seconds of that football game, no one could have foreseen that play would happen. Yet almost every coach still takes time in the preseason and during the week to practice plays like that, even though it is unlikely that would ever happen in a game. They want to practice it and be prepared for even the most unusual circumstances. This is the same logic that goes behind us practicing our faith and developing those 6 habits. We have no idea what this life is going to throw at us. But if we practice all these habits, we will be prepared for what life has to throw at us because we practiced for this situation. God gave us the playbook we needed to be successful in life and grow closer to Him. It just up to us to use that playbook, push toward the goal line, and continue to practice our faith.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfebplfAt8g>