

“You have to practise” Pete said, as he passed me the guitar. Pete was Janet’s brother and he could play. I, on the other hand could not, but I wanted too. So, I did practise, but my fingers got sore, the ends of them cracked and got blisters, I tried buying softer strings but that didn’t work, my wrist hurt making bar chords and I could never get the thing to sound the way I wanted it too. Somehow it didn’t seem to be working, and after a few months I gave up. So, while I can strum a chord or two, I can’t play.

Sound familiar, have you ever tried learning anything; painting, writing, building a house, playing a musical instrument, even getting fit. Something that you need to practise, keep doing, keep at, keep going, until you get over it, gain a measure of proficiency, mastery even? And not been able to do it? Well join the club! There are a lot of us about who have had this experience.

But then, have you ever managed it? Ever heard those words, ‘you have to practise” and been able to make it work, able to keep going, keep doing it, keep at it until you are good, until you make the goal you’ve set yourself. You find you can do it.

It might be getting your degree, something you’ve achieved at work. A new skill you’ve wanted to learn or a new game or sport you’ve longed to be able to play. Saving up to buy a house or a new car, but the discipline, the practise, the time and the effort has paid off, you achieved what you’ve been trying to do and mastered it.

When I worked at Probation, there were articles that were available to us on line, and one, “The good lives model”, was about a psychological idea of how we make sense of what we are about, and one of the principles of that model was the concept of mastery. The idea that when we do something continuously for a while, when we practise for long enough, we gain a sense of mastery in whatever it is. In this article it was used in regard to work, that after doing a job for a while, we get good at it and can do it with more pleasure and profit than we could when we first started. Like playing the guitar, learning to paint or even getting fit. Once you get the knack of it it’s much more enjoyable.

“You have to practise,” Paul says to the Philippians, “You have to keep at it, you have to keep going, you have to keep doing it.” And if you do “the peace of God will be with you.”

This is the original “Good Lives” model. Paul is calling the Philippians to practise rejoicing, always. No matter, they should rejoice, be thankful, grateful, not be bitter. To practise being gentle, always, no matter what. To practise not worrying about anything ... anything. To practise praying about everything, and when praying to keep asking God with a thankful heart for their requests. That they are to pray about everything and thankfully ask God for everything, no matter how small or silly it might appear. They are to practise thinking about things that are true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, they are to practise keeping their thoughts on these things, and the peace of God will be with them, will guard their hearts and minds.

Has it ever struck you that these Exodus stories we are reading are about a people who are unfaithful? Every week is one story after another of moaning and groaning and complaining and basic unfaithfulness, and here we get another one. Moses is gone for longer than expected and even Aaron the chief priest gets in on the act of moulding a golden calf to worship. Unfaithfulness, perhaps this is the ned result of not practising ...

Then we see wedding guests sitting at a reception with mucky clothes, perhaps they've arrived like this, because they weren't washed in the practise of living the life, they'd been invited too by the wedding host?

"You have to practise," Pete said to me. "You have to practise," Paul says to the Philippians." You have to practise." If this Christian life is to be a faithful one, a one ending in beautiful wedding garments, as many of us know already, we have to practise, keep going, keep at it.

We have practise ... rejoicing ... always. Being gentle ... always. Not worrying ... about anything. Praying ... about everything. Being thankful ... in all things. Making our requests known to God ... each and every one of them. We are to think about true things, honourable things, just things, pure things, pleasing things, commendable things, excellent things, praise worthy things.

These are the things we need to practise.

We can't, like a hopeful, but undedicated guitar player, give up because we get cracked and blistered fingers, sore wrists and we find it difficult. If we are to gain mastery over our living, we have to persevere and practise.

If we do, the peace of God will be with us and keep our hearts and minds Always.

Thanks be to God.