

Have you heard about “the 10,000 hours?” Well, that’s probably pretty likely—it’s kind of entered the everyday language for a whole lot of businesspeople. So, what does it mean? Well, the gist is that it takes 10,000 hours of immersion, practice, or learning to become a great expert at something. That’s basically it! And that ties right in to our series here on research-wisdom-action, doesn’t it? What we’re going to do is dig around in the idea for a bit of history and a bit of analysis and critique, all with some twists and turns brought on by Jesus Himself! Then, we’ll look at our personal path ahead in this, no matter our life phase.

So, how did this idea get started? Well, Malcolm Gladwell authored a wildly popular topical book titled *Outliers: The Story of Success*. In what’s likely the most referenced section of this book, Gladwell profiled a variety of well-known high achievers, from world-class musicians like Mozart...to Bill Gates...to the Beatles...to Bill Joy, a pioneering and highly influential computer programmer. And those profiles all were defined under the thesis that, somehow, 10,000 hours of learning and practice are kind of a necessary milestone, a foundational requirement, of anyone who really becomes extremely good—very elite—at a particular skill set.

So, the Beatles? Countless seven-day-a-week gigs at pubs in Germany...for years! Mozart? He started composing at age six and ultimately composed his first masterwork at age 21. The two computer-geek Bills—Joy and Gates? Well, they both finagled access to countless hours of computer time when they were young until they became very proficient, yes, pioneers and world-class. And the rest is history! Mozart and the Beatles became gold-standards in their respective music genres, and both Gates and Joy became cofounders of extremely successful businesses, Microsoft and Sun Microsystems.

Listen now. Gladwell cited a particular study that was an originating source of the 10,000-hour idea, and Gladwell said this: once a musician is admitted into an elite music school, then the research suggests it comes down to work ethic! Now that’s similar to the old joke about the ultimate performance venue in New York City: a musician asks the taxi driver. “How do I get to Carnegie Hall?” The driver answers, “Practice, practice, practice!”

But one of the study’s researchers and authors, Anders Ericsson, reportedly indicates that the 10,000 hours idea really is about “*deliberate practice*”—that’s right, *deliberate*, which means working under the guidance of a teacher. Well, now, for most everybody, that’s likely significantly different than just casually poking around on the internet on your own. And that’s different than reading a basic how-to book and then starting to try to master the violin or pitch a baseball or manage people.

Now Bill Gates and Bill Joy, the computer programmers, were apparently pretty much self-taught, but coding can work that way for some radically gifted people: your coding either does what you intended or it doesn’t, and then you have to figure out what you did wrong and fix it. (Which, I might add, would get you to those 10,000 hours pretty quickly!) But playing the violin? A great teacher can make a great difference. And an honest teacher who gives honest, meaningful feedback can make a great difference. And that’s what the study’s authors were intimating when they referred to “*deliberate practice*.”

But it really is much deeper than that simple phrase. Take it from someone who has mentored and trained professionals for years and also has taught thousands of college students over decades—the abilities, attributes, and mindsets of the learners matter, and matter deeply. Let’s make a brief list that helps us get a clearer picture, because the range of the learners’ attributes are very broad. So here goes. Aptitude matters. Eagerness matters. Intelligence matters. Emotional maturity matters. Ambition matters. The current level of expertise matters. Work ethic matters. Speed of learning matters. Time frame for improvement matters. Perseverance matters. Brain memory matters. Muscle memory matters. Refusing a victim mentality matters.

So, on the one hand, Gladwell is right—it *does* take a whole lot of hours over a long period of time to become world-class in composing music, programming computers, or stewarding an organization to greatness with countless competitors working to displace you.

But here's the point. Looking back to Ericsson adds a very important dimension to those 10,000 hours: "deliberative practice." That means that a great teacher, mentor, or discipler can more clearly...and more quickly...and more deliberately guide the willing student into greatness. That's because that great guider can customize to the student as to all the "matters" that we just outlined—you know, like aptitude, eagerness, intelligence, perseverance, and all the rest. And that's true in a group dynamic, too. I teach to a group 50-something, seasoned CEOs differently than a class full of 19-year-old students. Well, duh!

Here's the pinnacle of finding the very best teacher, though. For the truly *daily* trinitarian Christian—not just someone who recites creeds on Sunday that were crafted centuries ago—there is an amazing, real-time dynamic that is the foundation of all learning. That's found in those first few stunning words in John 14:26, when Jesus made this astounding statement for all God-followers, then and now! Here's what Jesus said: "...the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, *He will teach you all things.*"

That means something very profound. For the Christian learner, *the Holy Spirit will teach all things!* Wow, that amazing perfect Helper will foster the deepest learning in the context of all of those "matters" we just talked about. As for Christian teachers, mentors, bosses, disciples, and parents, we are all secondary to the Holy Spirit and should foundationally rely on His guidance. The upshot? The teacher is the most important part of the 10,000 hours—so rely on the Holy Spirit, doing your best to be in total alignment.

For years, Gladwell's identification of the 10,000 hours from his *Outliers* book has been crucial in my interaction with college seniors. I tell budding graduates this: sign on with the best organization and the best supervisors you possibly can in your first full-time job out of college. Here's some math: at a "standard" 40-hour week, it takes 50 weeks to tally 2,000 hours in a year, so then five years total to tally 10,000 hours. So, should students want to learn under a company or a manager whose standards are just average? Or do they want to join a firm that takes world-class training and mentoring very seriously as a matter of both principle and self-interest? After all, if you are learning from someone who's average, it's very unlikely you will easily surpass the standards they have ground into you for five years! Do you want the college grads you hold dear to be immersed in 10,000 hours of average...or 10,000 hours of greatness?

But, now for the big question. What about the status for you and me—*10,000 hours from now?* Look back to the relatively simplistic world of just a few years ago—with far less activity really being done browsing on Amazon, and collaborating on Zoom—well, now, do you think in this fast-moving era that we naturally tend to be on top of everything that's going on? Come now, is what we learned that was actually very good not very long ago *now actually working against us in our workplace company because we arrogantly or uncaringly think we are up to speed?* There are dramatic shifts in the digital world, the changing business landscape, the shrinking world, the radicalized regulatory environment—and what we could bank on a few years back can actually work against what we should be doing today! That begs this question: are we *currently* the best stewards that we need to be for our organizations?

Here's the deal. You and I must always be focused on the *next* 10,000 hours—for us and for everyone in our workplace organization! We must be identifying and attacking flaws that are here or emerging! We must not settle in to what used to work if that's now embedded in deficient processes and practices!

So *this* is our opportunity! What is supposed to make Christians different is that we are firmly planted on the timeless truths of the Kingdom, even while we are proactively dealing with the emerging technological cultural changes that will actually work for good for those who are called to the purposes of God (Romans 8:28). So, this about *your* research-wisdom-action! Go download the Application and Action questions for this episode at whitestone.org/podcast and craft a life-altering approach to *your* next 10,000 hours!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Perhaps you are expecting into really being fairly passive for the next several years. Or maybe you are very focused on maximizing your learning to the highest level possible. So, what are the specifics of your blueprint for *your* next 10,000 hours? What things will you focus on, and how will you master them?
2. How are you cultivating the teaching of the Holy Spirit in all things, as Jesus Himself promised we should expect? Give specific examples of how you do this in your life.
3. Other than the Word of God and the promised teaching of us by the Holy Spirit, name five teachers, whether you have met them personally or not, who have taught you the most. Describe the focus or examples of what each of these five has taught you. Then this: who should you add to the list for your *next* 10,000 hours?