

# Growth and Improvement

by Mark Sherwood



One of my favorite indoor activities to play when I was growing up was ping pong (or table tennis if you insist on being proper). I had several friends that I played ping pong with and I could totally lose myself in rally after rally if I was playing against a good player. However, some of my friends weren't that good. When playing these friends, the rallies were not as fun as they were slow, short, and disjointed. One such friend in my earlier years was Randy. He would watch the ball as it came towards him and swat at it. Sometimes he hit it, sometimes he didn't. If he did hit it, it was often a wild shot that ricocheted off the wall or the ceiling. Randy wasn't very good, at least not in the beginning.

I personally thought that I would always be better than Randy; much better. However, Randy eventually got his own ping pong table and played a lot of ping pong, a whole lot. At some point when I was in high school, I went over to Randy's house to play him and was shocked at how much better he had become. I still had the edge on him skill wise, but it was a small edge. I remember playing him again a year or two later. By that time he had improved even more and I was totally victimized by his smashes. He hit with so much velocity that I could barely even see the ball. Not only that, it was as though there was a magnet on the corner edge of the table that attracted the ball in the perfect place that made it impossible to return. I was helpless and embarrassed.

Six years earlier Randy showed no aptitude for ping pong at all. My prediction for his future success was that he would never be

very good. I thought he could improve, but I couldn't foresee that he would reach the seemingly invincible level that he reached. His example didn't fit my paradigm of the way improvement works. I knew that anyone could improve some, but I had no idea that hard work and practice could help someone improve that much.

I can't help but think that if God created people with the ability to vastly improve their ability at something like ping pong, that he would create his children with the ability to grow and mature in their faith in him. I'm not talking about the kind of growth and spiritual improvement that comes from just showing up at church on Sunday. Randy wouldn't have improved much if he had just shown up to watch ping pong once per week and occasionally hit a few volleys back and forth with another player. I'm sure he often played several hours a week and that he was very focused and intense while playing and practicing.

I know there is a part of the Bible that makes the Christian faith seem easy. You can't get away from the fact that God made salvation a free gift and that we are saved by his grace, not by works or effort. On the other hand, there is another aspect of the Christian faith that does require our effort if we want to grow and mature. The Bible says in Jeremiah 29:13, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." This does not impress me as a halfhearted pursuit that is done when it feels convenient. Entering into close intimacy with God is the type of thing that requires us to be sold out to God.

We can all ask ourselves if we are stuck at the beginner level in our Christian faith, or if we are daily seeking to grow in the Lord. There are many things that we can grow and improve at in life, but none are as important as our relationship with God. Don't buy into the lie that some people are just naturally more spiritual without having to work at it. God has given us all access to him through prayer. Most of us have access to his Word so that we can learn more about him, and most of us can find others who can teach us and help us grow closer to God. If it's possible to improve at skills, games, and earthly pursuits, God will make it all the more possible to grow close to him if we earnestly seek him.