

Practicing the Fundamentals

Spring Training Series # 3

2 Peter 1: 12-15

03-15-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

Teaching a young child to play baseball or softball is an exercise in patience. The process includes innumerable games of **catch**—although I have never understood why it is called “catch.” “**Chase**” would be a more accurate description! During a typical game, a parent throws the ball to a child who misses it. After chasing the ball down, the child throws it back wildly. Then the adult chases the ball. This process is repeated until both are exhausted.

Adults sometimes forget how difficult it is to learn something new. Beginnings are hard. Try this experiment. Use your opposite hand to throw a ball or attempt batting from the opposite side of the plate. Run a mile in your children’s cleats to better understand their perspective.

I. The Fundamentals

In order to learn a sport, a player must master the **fundamentals**. A coach doesn’t spend time instructing a five year old, T-ball player how to hit and run, double-steal, or suicide squeeze. Instead, they practice the basics over and over again.

It’s a bit of an oversimplification, but there are four basic skills in baseball: **throwing, catching, hitting, and running**. Visit any ball practice in town, and you will see the players practicing these four things repeatedly. Baseball and softball. T-ball, coach pitch, machine pitch, kid pitch, slow-pitch, and fast-pitch. Minor League, Little League, Junior League, and high school ball. Throwing, catching, hitting, and running.

But here’s the thing. Attend a Spring Training exhibition game for a Major League Baseball team. Arrive early for practice. Do you know what the players practice doing? Throwing, catching, hitting, and running! Most of these athletes have played baseball since they were five years old. A few have played the game over 30 years. However, a player never outgrows the need to practice the fundamentals.

Practicing the fundamentals is equally important in the **Christian faith**. Discipline is a critical part of discipleship. Believers practice spiritual disciplines in order to grow in Christ. For those who have been in the church for a while, the fundamentals can seem so fundamental; but we never outgrow the need to practice the basics of our faith.

In case you have a burning interest in clergy issues, this can be quite a challenge in preaching. On the one hand, sermons need to “feed the flock” and nurture believers who are firmly established in the faith. On the other hand, there is a need to introduce “seekers” to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The good news is that all of us benefit from the basics. So this is why you might hear me repeat myself occasionally. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it!

In 2 Peter 1: 12 - 13, the author wrote to the church: *"So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you*

now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory" So today I want to remind you of things you already know . . . and hopefully practice.

- 1) How to become a Christian
- 2) Prayer
- 3) Bible Study
- 4) Fellowship
- 5) Action

II. How to Become A Christian

At the risk of sounding like Yogi Berra, the first step in becoming a Christian is becoming a Christian. **Vince Lombardi** was the legendary football coach of *The Green Bay Packers*. He was fanatical about practicing the fundamentals. The team would often practice one play hundreds of times. One season the *Packers* got off to a rough start, losing five games in a row. The coach had chewed out every player and tensions were high. He gathered the team in the locker room, held up a football, and said, "Gentlemen, the basics. THIS is a football." From the back, wide receiver Max McGee called out, "Hold on a minute, Coach. You're going too fast!"

Unfortunately, many people can go to church for years and miss the most basic and important truth of all. If we do not understand how to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, then all of the other fundamentals of discipleship are useless. Here is the **Gospel** good news in a nutshell.

- While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. God's initiative.
- Nothing we do. Has been done for us.
- Accept God's grace/free gift through faith/trust. "Salvation by grace through faith."
- Enter into salvation/eternal life
- Begin process of transformation

III. Prayer

When we become Christians, our relationship with the Lord must be nurtured. We are invited to spend time in God's presence. Communication is the key to any relationship. The primary way we do this is **prayer**. Prayer is communication with God. It requires no special language. Do not have to use "Thee, Thou, and Thy." Don't have to conjugate Elizabethan English. Talk and listen.

I've heard and given sermons, Sunday School lessons, and Bible studies on prayer. But the only way to learn to pray is to **pray**. Like a child learning to talk. Sometimes just babble but learn in the process. Slowly learn the language and art of prayer. Effective prayer embraces two disciplines: daily prayer and constant prayer.

- 1) Pray at **specific times**. Set aside a time for prayer. May well be kneeling in home or church. But can also be in car, bed, exercise, etc. If it's in the car, just don't close your

eyes while you are driving, texting, and taking a call. On second thought, that might be the perfect time to pray!

2) Pray **all the time**. (What is the best thing to say to your boss when he catches you napping at work? Just say "Amen" before opening your eyes!")

"Pray without ceasing." (1 Thessalonians 5: 17) Long times of prayer and flash prayers. Pray: in season and out of season, when you feel like it and when you don't, special times and all the time.

Pray even when you don't know what to pray. In Romans 8: 26, Paul wrote: *"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."*

3) There is no ONE particular formula or way of praying. One model that has been helpful to me is the acronym **A*C*T*S**.

- ❖ A Adoration
- ❖ C Confession
- ❖ T Thanksgiving
- ❖ S Supplication

IV. Bible Study

The second means of maintaining a vital relationship with God is through **Bible Study**. The Lord has already provided us an instruction manual for life. I often hear people talk about wanting to know God's will for their lives. We already have the plan! The Bible reveals God's will for our lives. Perhaps not moment-by-moment, but the Scriptures give us a compass direction to guide us.

You know that men don't need instruction books. We are instinctively born with the knowledge of how to put together toys, appliances, machines, and cars. Give us a hammer, duct tape, and WD 40, and we can put together anything. Real men's motto is: *"If all else fails, read the directions!"*

Sometimes we attempt to take the same approach to discipleship and Bible study. Forget that what we need to know has already been provided in Scripture. I would not say you cannot be a Christian without prayer and Bible study. But we are not going to grow in faith unless these two disciplines are an important part of our lives. Here are some important guidelines for Bible Study:

- ❖ Find a Bible you can read. Many here grew up with *The King James Version* of the Bible. However, it was written about the same time that Shakespeare wrote his plays. Most people do not comprehend 17th century Elizabethan English. I personally use *The New International Version*. Just find one that makes sense to you.
- ❖ Daily.
- ❖ Individual.
- ❖ Group

- ❖ Begin: Mark
Luke/Acts
Psalms

V. Fellowship

Individual/Friends who are fellow believers.

Small group. Essential. Jesus and the 12 disciples.

Worship.

God gave us the church because we need the church and the church needs us.

VI. Action

The fifth element in discipleship is action. When talking about prayer, Bible study, and fellowship, one might think the Christian faith is primarily a contemplative religion that focuses upon our relationship with God. However, true discipleship is both inward and outward directed. What happens within must be expressed without.

Western model: learn and then do. However, the reality is we often do and then learn. Cooperative model of education—take a semester of classes and then spend a semester in the work place. Couples learning and doing. Not either/or but both/and.

Some parents overheard their child saying her bedtime prayers. After a series of thanks and requests, she concluded by asking God, "Now, what can I do for you?"

Service impacts our lives. Change/transformation of self.

Service impacts others' lives. Ministry.

VII. Repetition

The final secret to the Christian faith is **repetition**. Athletes know the importance of reps. A batter will practice a swing with a tee, soft toss, short distance, and live pitching. Walk into a sporting goods store and examine all the gizmos and gadgets designed to improve a batter's swing. Pitchers practice the mechanics of their movements over and over again. Infielders catch countless groundballs. Outfielders shag one fly ball after another.

Dr. **Daniel Levitin** is a neurologist who coined a term "**the 10,000-Hour Rule.**" In an interview, he explained, "It's not a rule so much as it is an empirical finding. But in the final analysis, it comes down to that in order to be a world-class expert in anything, be it audiology, drama, music, art, gymnastics, whatever, one needs to have a minimum of 10,000 hours of practice. Unfortunately, it doesn't mean that if you put in 10,000 hours that you will become an expert, but there aren't any cases where someone has achieved

world-class mastery without it! So the time spent at the activity is indeed the most important and influential factor.” <http://www.audiology.org/news/Pages/20080811a.aspx>

So I did the math. If you pray for one hour a day or read the Bible for one hour a day, then it would take a bit over 27 years to reach 10,000 hours! Some here may be well on their way to that goal. Others may be just starting. Both the destination and the journey are a part of the Christian walk.

Conclusion

Go to any ballpark. Regardless of age, gender, or level, you will find softball and baseball players practicing the fundamentals: throwing, catching, hitting, and running. Knowing AND practicing the fundamentals are also critical in the Christian faith: faith in Christ, prayer, Bible study, fellowship, and service.

We are all familiar with the concept of muscle memory—repetition leads to mastery. I am convinced that our souls also have spiritual memory. Repetition of the spiritual disciplines lead to maturity in Christ. If you believe Daniel Levitin’s theory, then it takes 10,000 hours to master a task. We better begin today.