

When I was 19, I went on a summer mission with an organization called Teen Missions International. It provided teenagers opportunity to experience overseas missions. Their teams went all over the world. I signed up to join the team going to Israel. But before you actually went out to the mission, you had to get some basic training. This happened at Boot Camp in Florida for 2 weeks.

So all teens for all teams gathered here. I think there were something like a thousand of us. There we met our team and began training together. They designed bootcamp to prepare for the harshest environments their teams could face. Some would go to places without running water, refrigeration, power and actual buildings. So we all had to live for 2 weeks in such conditions.

We had no showers. We had to learn to bathe in a pond or from a bucket of water. We had no cold drinking water. We lived in tents. Cinder block stalls without a roof served as our bathrooms.

We ran an obstacle course as a team each day. If we failed to complete it or one of our team members went outside the boundaries, we would get disqualified. That meant extra work and no free time. Yet it was all designed to force us to depend on each another, hold each other accountable and build team unity. We listened to lectures and teaching on the Bible and about the people and place of our mission. If we survived all that, we could go out as a team to our mission.

Our team went to a little village called Beit Jala outside of Bethlehem. Our job was to build a chicken house for an orphanage of Arab boys. They would then raise the chickens for food and eggs. Our facilities were somewhat better than Boot Camp in Florida. Yet we still endured several hardships. This included a limited water supply and difficult working conditions in the hot sun. We also faced some challenges to team unity when things got difficult. Yet ultimately, the foundation and the structure of the building went up to help this orphanage. The basic training of boot camp helped us get through the challenges of that summer.

Many of you know that you have to learn some basics or fundamentals to grow in any area of life. You don't just wake up one morning and become a carpenter. You have learn how to use the tools and lay out the project. You have to get training to become a nurse or doctor or dentist or electrician or accountant or teacher. We have to learn how to take care of ourselves if we're going to take care of others like children. The same is true in living the Christian life. We need

to learn some basics. They will help us keep going when life gets rough. They also help us connect to God's mission and purposes for our lives. This includes bringing the hope and good news of God to those who don't yet know Him.

Today, in the final teaching passage of Paul's letter to the Colossians, he will review some basics of living out the Christian life. I pray that God will use at least one of these to encourage your heart and stimulate greater connection with God. When life gets confusing or difficult or just blah, going back to the basics can reorient us to the One we need the most – God Himself.

So let's discover these basics in Colossians 4:2-6 in your Bibles. It's on page 836 in the Bibles we have for you. It's also on the front page of your little program.

Colossians 4:2-6 (ESV)

²Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. ³At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— ⁴that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

⁵Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. ⁶Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

What are some basic practices of the Christian life?

Practice 1 – We must learn to persevere in a regular prayer life. Now I suspect most of you already know this. To be a Christian involves prayer to God. The concept of prayer is pretty simple to understand. It involves talking to God and hearing from God through His word and in His Spirit. Yet, I think it's the easiest practice to neglect. We often pray when we're alone where no one sees us. If we don't pray, no one sees that either. So it's easier to neglect this. It's also tempting to abandon because it can seem like nothing actually happens. If you put some bread in a toaster, you can see that the bread has changed after it pops out of the toaster. But when we get up from prayer, it may seem like nothing has changed.

Yet things do change because of prayer. We may not see it or hear about it for awhile. But the Bible states that God hears and listens to the prayers of his people. Yet we struggle to keep at it. It seems this is not a new issue. For notice what Paul wrote to the Colossian believers in the first century.

Verse 2. "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving." Notice four exhortations about our prayer lives - Continue; Steadfast; Watching; Thanksgiving. So continue implies "do it constantly." Engage in an ongoing conversation and dialogue with God or with Jesus all day. Most of us have someone we talk with throughout the

day. Maybe it's your spouse or your parents or your kids or some friends. You go through your day and maybe call them once and text them several times. You keep in touch. You update them on some news. You may receive encouragement or counsel. You might get corrected or redirected. But you communicate throughout the day. That's what we need to do with God. Sometimes we can pray maybe for a couple minutes in the morning. Then we forget about God all day. But God is available anytime and anywhere to hear our prayers. So we must continue with them.

But this may not come naturally. It is easy to forget about God amidst the pressure and challenges in a day. So Paul writes, "Continue steadfastly in prayer." Be devoted to prayer. Be earnest about continuing in prayer. Be serious about it. This is not so that we have some oppressive thing we have to do all day. It's "continue steadfastly because of your great need for God." We need God's wisdom, strength, protection and hope each day.

God has really had to work on me in this area. I don't like depending on others. I loved believing the illusion that I was self-sufficient. There is power and pride in feeling like you can take on the world and overcome any obstacle on your own. Then comes illness or trouble or death or confusion or people who don't do what we want them to do. God has been teaching me over the years that there are a lot of things in this world beyond my control. Yet, I know the One with supreme control and ability. That is the Lord. So I need to continue steadfastly in prayer with Him all day.

Then Paul writes, "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it. The image is of a night watch person or a guard in a lookout tower. What are we supposed to watch for? It could mean to watch for the return of Christ. We never know when Jesus will return and history will end. So we keep that in mind with our prayers. But it could also mean to stay awake to the times we live in. If we live being watchful that will likely change our priorities. It will help us live and pray with the most important things in mind rather than Lord help me get to the weekend so I can have fun.

We must also learn to include thanksgiving in our prayer. Sometimes, we may think of prayer as just coming to God with our grocery list of requests. We read off our list to God and all the things that we want Him to sort out. Then we leave. But a grateful heart is good for us. A grateful heart is medicine to our soul. The more we can be thankful, the more we see God's blessings all around us. So when we practice thankfulness in our prayers, we gain critical perspective that helps us keep going in tough times.

I hope that in this brief reflection, you can see how much there is to basic practice of prayer. We need to keep practicing and learning it because our lives need continual realignment to God and His purposes.

Then we come to verses 3 and 4. They point to another practice of the Christian life. **Practice 2 – Pray for Others.** Paul asks the Colossians to pray that “God may open a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ on account of which I am in prison.” So Paul languishes in some sort of prison cell as he or his scribe writes this letter. Yet he still asks for prayer that God will open doors for others to hear about hope through Christ. He also asks that they pray that he speak clearly.

I think this verse can help us in our relationships with those who don’t know Christ. We don’t have to force a conversation about Jesus. We pray for God to open a door. The mystery talked about here is not some mysterious or secret knowledge. It most likely refers to God’s unfolding plan for the world through Jesus the Messiah. Paul already referred to the mystery back in Colossians 2:2 as “the knowledge of God’s mystery which is Christ.” But the basic practice I want us to see here is the need to pray for others.

One of the greatest gifts you can give to another person is to pray for them. When we hear of one another’s needs, we hopefully think about ways we can help meet them. But there are some needs that only God can meet. Yet we can participate by praying for others. I’ve heard this past week of 2 significant answers from God because others prayed. One involved the healing or removal of a shadow on a person’s scan that may have indicated cancer. Another involved timely medical treatment that if not received may have resulted in death. These happened in the last few days as God responded to His people’s prayers.

This also points to our need to share our needs so we can invite others to pray for us. There will be people available after the service to pray for needs. You’re welcome to come and share your needs for prayer. That invites others to engage in this basic Christian practice of praying for others. So Practice 1 – Learn to persevere in a regular prayer life. Practice 2 – Pray for Others.

There’s one more practice that gets mentioned here. **Practice 3 – Learn God’s ways to interact with non-Christians.** We see several of these in verses 5 and 6. **First, we need to live wisely towards outsiders.** “Walk in wisdom towards outsiders.” “Live wisely among those who are not Christians.” What does that look like? One commentator puts it well – “We must follow Christ as God’s pattern for full and authentic human living.” Jesus did not give people, outside the faith, reasons to criticize him or gossip about him for the way that he lived. We’re told “he grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men.” So this must mean we aim to be good workers, students, neighbors and family. We

don't mistreat people or reject them. We have a warm and inviting openness just as Jesus did to people from all walks of life.

Second, we need to snatch up opportunities to share about our faith with outsiders. Verse 5 says "Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time" or "redeeming the time." The image here is of the marketplace and the discovery of a bargain. When you see a bargain on something you know you need, you immediately snap it up. Here, the opportunity to be snapped up occurs when someone who isn't a Christian asks serious life questions. Or a conversation goes in a direction where there is opportunity to naturally share your faith. When those opportunities arise, we drop everything to snap them up.

Third, **we speak with grace and excitement about Christ to those who don't know Him.** Verse 6 – "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." Our conversation with non-Christians needs to be gracious. The word "speech" focuses on what we say. "Gracious" focuses on how we say it. In another place in the New Testament, 1st Peter 3:15-16, Christians are commanded to defend their faith with "gentleness and respect." It is amazing how gracious, gentle and respectful speech can lead to healthy and uplifting communication.

Think about how even the idea of someone approaching you with grace, gentleness and respect calms you down. Angry, disrespectful and harsh words stir up reactions. But we are much more willing to hear even hard truths from someone who takes the time to be gentle, respectful and gracious. I wonder how many more people might be interested in Christ if Christians spoke to them with care and graciousness.

Yet Paul is not just talking about speaking in general. He's talking about speaking about Christ. So he adds that strange phrase "seasoned with salt." What does it mean to have salty speech? Some point to the Rabbis literature which connects salt with wisdom. But there is also a connection to spiciness. Spices add flavor to bland food. Well our speech about Christ should not be bland or boring. It needs to be winsome, appealing and attracting. If we sound bored or embarrassed about our relationship with Christ, why would our non-Christian friend have interest in Him?

So when we speak about Christ, we hopefully speak in an appealing and attractive way about Him. We talk about the difference He has made in our lives. We may talk about how He has helped us and led us. This kind of speech invites the listener to consider the positive aspects of having Christ in one's life.

But does this approach work? Do people come to Christ when meeting Christians who fall on verses 5 & 6? I came across a story this week of a man named Al Fadi. He grew up in Saudi Arabia as a devout Muslim. He had memorized half of the Quran by age 12. He was willing to go to Afghanistan to fight the infidels alongside Osama Bin Laden. But his mother pleaded with him to stay behind which he did.

As he grew, he began to have some doubts about his faith. Then after finishing college in Saudi Arabia, he went to the US to pursue graduate education in engineering. He was very nervous because “Islam teaches its followers not to befriend Christians.” Since he believed the US was a Christian nation, he thought everyone was a Christian. So he could have no friends.

After about a month living in his university dorm, he heard about something called the International Friendship Program. It paired students like him with local volunteers who would provide help and hospitality. He signed up, not knowing it was a Christian ministry.

A young couple from the program contacted him and told him they were assigned to work with him. For the next 7 months they showed him love that far exceeded his expectations. It was love that he had never experienced before. In November, they invited him for Thanksgiving dinner. Only then did Al realize they were Christians when they prayed before the meal. His heart sank yet he was puzzled because he believed Christians were filled with hate not love.

Then he writes, “This family never shared the gospel with me, but they had shown me what the gospel looks like. And on that day, I walked out of their home with great doubts about my faith and its teachings. I vowed that I would do research on Christianity, hoping to learn more about how Jesus could make such a profound difference in someone’s life, offering the kind of peace and joy I had never seen before.”¹

A few years later after earning his Masters degree, he joined a local engineering firm. Then he met another Christian who had this joy, peace and light shine from him. He invited Al for supper at Christmas. Al noticed his wife and kids had the same qualities. So Al asked why he was so different. The engineer shared his testimony.

Then in May 2001, Al made his first visit to a Christian church. They were studying the Gospel of John. There he learned who Christ really is. Then this happened. He writes, “In November 2001, without a shadow of a doubt, I accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior. But it wasn’t easy at first. Within a matter of months, I lost my marriage due to unfaithfulness

¹ Al Fadi, *I wanted to die for Allah. Now I live for Jesus*, Christianity Today, Jan Feb 2023, Volume 67, Number 1, 103-104.

of my spouse. I also lost my job. It felt like Satan was actively trying to destroy my faith. But these months taught me invaluable lessons about having a personal relationship with Jesus and learning to depend on him through all circumstances.”² Today, Fadi leads a global ministry called CIRA International to reach Muslims for Christ. In addition he teaches classes and seminars on Islam at various churches so that others can learn how to better witness to their Muslim neighbors. He concludes by saying “I came to know my beloved Jesus through simple acts of love. And I pray God will use my own simple acts of love to bring glory to Himself by drawing others to a saving faith in him.”³

Who has God placed in your life who does not know Christ? You can live in wisdom before them and snatch up opportunities to share. You can speak with graciousness seasoned with salt that God can use to stir in their hearts.

So I’m going to try to demonstrate this approach right now. I am speaking to those of you who are not Christians but have given your time to us today. First, thank you so much for spending this time with us. I hope that in some way our time together has encouraged you or maybe provides a little more perspective about life.

I want to tell you about this person known as Jesus Christ. He is the most humble and loving person I know. He showed great concern for the most vulnerable and ordinary people in his world. Yet He wasn’t afraid to confront evil power structures of his day whether they be political or religious. He knew that that we humans face 3 great enemies – Our own sin; death and the devil. He knew that there was only one way to grant us deliverance from them. That way was for a human to live a perfectly sinless life and then volunteer to die in the place of others. God, who created and ordered the universe, would accept such a sacrifice as payment. So that’s what Jesus did.

He offered Himself up. He was killed on the cross. His sacrifice paid for or atoned for our sins. But He also defeated our great enemy the devil. He overcame death because He didn’t stay dead. God raised him up from the dead on the third day. That’s what we celebrate at Easter. Now Jesus still has his human body with the scars from that terrible time. But He reigns over the entire universe. He looks with love for those who need His hope and help. He’s the greatest gift that has ever come into my life. He changed my life direction to participate in all the good and hopeful work He does today.

² Fadi, 103.

³ Ibid.

I would so much love for you to receive Him and experience the forgiveness and hope that He brings. So if you'd like to do that, you can come and talk with me or one of the people who will be up here at the end of our time. Or you can pray and receive Him into your life by asking.

Then you will join the rest of us who need to continue to practice these basics of the Christian life. Through regular prayer, and prayer for others and learning God's ways to share with those who don't know Him. We hope to see more join us on this journey of hope and life in Christ.

Jesus doesn't leave us after we first come to Him. He is constantly present with us spiritually to empower us to grow in these areas. Every day and all the time, we can live the Christian life by the power of Christ in us. This is not some weird experience. It shows up in very simple ways like obeying God's commands and treating others the way God commands us to treat them.

It also involves depending on Christ to transform our minds so that our behavior will eventually change. We do that through regular prayer where we intentionally place our dependence on Jesus. That prayer might sound something like this.

Prayer

"O Lord God, we recognize you as Lord over all including our lives. We also recognize our own limitations and weaknesses. We need your help, forgiveness, wisdom and mercy. So we ask for your wisdom and power to live in a way that glorifies you. We ask for Your power and strength to persevere in our prayer lives. We ask You to give us Your heart for people in our lives who don't know you. Help us see their lostness and the hope You have for them. Grant us wisdom in how we can live around and interact with them. Please give us gracious words that might create a thirst for you in our friends and family who don't know you. Grant us Your heart for them to make the best use of time and the most of every opportunity. Thank you for your ongoing love and support Jesus.