

Five Simple Things ZCC 1.11.15 (Philippians 4:6-7)

In nothing be anxious, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.

Do any of you follow baseball? We do, but I admit that Vonna and I are fair-weather followers—in that we mostly watch the play-offs and the World Series. I didn't get started even following the World Series until I was an adult—when my dad and I started hunting together regularly after I got out of the Air Force. For 10 or 11 years, we were in the deer woods when the World Series was going on and we would listen to the game every night on the radio—and that kind of got me hooked.

When I think about an illustration for a sermon, I normally choose something that has happened in my life or something I have seen. But when I started working on this sermon about prayer, I found a story on the internet about a player named Goose Goslin and I thought it fit my point very well.

Since I found it on the internet, you know it is true, right? Even more—I found it in several sermons by 4 or 5 preachers, so you KNOW it has to be true.

So I wrote it up and I wrote the sermon and I LOVED how it made my point so well.

Then I got curious about the World Series that is mentioned in the story and I found out that not only were many of the details wrong—the very point I wanted to make was either wrong or at least couldn't be found anywhere but in those sermons.

So, why am I telling you this?

Well, I wanted to be sure that you know that you can't trust the internet and you can't believe preachers...oh, wait...

Anyway. Just because the story is suspect doesn't mean I'm not going to tell it to you :)

So here it is: Some people say that the greatest year in baseball history was 1924. That year, the World Series was between the Washington Senators and the New York Giants—and that is supposed to be THE Series of all time.

The Series was tied at three games each. The seventh and final game was played at Washington. By the top of the ninth, the game was tied a 2-all. New York came up to bat and it was “3-up-and-3-down.”

Washington didn't do much better. The first two batters struck out and the Washington crowd let out a collective sigh as Goose Goslin stepped up to the plate. They KNEW he wasn't going to get a hit.

Sure enough, it was a quick “strike one” and then “strike two.”

On the third pitch, Goslin swung for all he was worth and the ball went high and into left field—hitting the fence about 6 inches down and bounced away from the fielder.

Goslin ran for all he was worth. The winning run was his if he was fast enough.

Around first and then second and then third.

About that time the short stop caught the throw from left field and then fired it to home. Goslin beat the throw by at least a foot and got up jumping and yelling.

The Washington fans started to celebrate but then the umpire yelled, “you're OUT!”

The stands went crazy—throwing fruit and bottles and anything they could get their hands on. They threatened the umpire because it was obvious that Goslin had beaten the throw.

The umpire at the plate gathered up with the other umpires and the whole field was quiet. Everyone, even the Giants, expected a reversal.

Then the umpire straightened up really tall and said, “the runner was not out at home plate. The runner is out because he did not touch first base...”

Goslin was running so hard that he missed first base.

He was so intent on the goal that he forgot one of the basics of baseball and the run of a lifetime slipped through his fingers.

Sometimes in our lives—as believers—we sometimes get so caught up in life that we forget the very basics of Christianity—or we remember them and do them only sporadically.

Since you are here this morning—and since most of you are here Sunday after Sunday—I will make the assumption that you have a relationship to God through Jesus the Christ.

If that is so, then you have touched that base—the most important base of all.

I wonder, though, if there is anything else in our lives—our Christian lives—that keeps us from doing away with daily anxiety and that keeps us from experiencing that peace of God that passes all understanding?

Well, according the passage I just read, it COULD be the lack of a connection to God—a lack of prayer and meditation—petitioning God for what we want and what we need and then letting him be God.

I'm guessing that if some reporter came in and interviewed us and asked what part of our Christian walk that gives us the most trouble, that many of us would say “having a prayer time” or even “reading my Bible.”

It seems that prayer brings a peace no one else knows—and that peace will guard our hearts (I take that to mean our minds and our very being) and will guard our thoughts. Well, if our hearts and minds and thoughts are guarded by God's peace, then I'd say we are well on the way to being happy and productive members of God's kingdom—wouldn't you?

It is early in the year and lots of people out there (and in here) probably made resolutions about getting healthy and especially about exercising. We know that spending 30 minutes a day or so can extend our lives and make us more happy and more able as we get older. But it is hard to do, isn't it? Even though we know that the benefits are huge.

Many of us have a similar difficulty with prayer and Bible study. We know it is important. We know it will make us stronger and more healthy spiritually (and maybe even physically.)

Prayer and Bible study are like spiritual vitamins—vitamins for the soul. Just like vitamin “E” or “C” there is kind-of a minimum daily requirement.

I'm going to offer a list of 5 simple things that we can do to increase our spiritual health. I will expand on them a little, but they pretty well stand by themselves.

I'm going to cover prayer specifically, but the same principles apply to Bible study also. In fact, in some sense, those 5 principles might apply to a physical exercise program, but we won't be going there today—maybe next week :)

1. Set a time. If possible, a non-negotiable time. You and I have spent our lives living by a schedule. Going to school. Eating. Sleeping. Going to work. We plan our schedules around these non-negotiable activities. We go to work on time and we go when we are tired and we go when we don't want to and we go when we really have other things we HAVE to do—or other things we need to do.

If you are a student or if you are working, I know you are busy with more things that you can accomplish.

I used to wish I was retired so I wouldn't have so many things pulling me in all directions, but according to my dad, you retired people wind up being more busy than ever... That said, busy or not, let's commit to setting a time for prayer and trying to stick with it.

2. Designate a place. Normally I would suggest that we have one place, but if you have kids or grand kids you might need to have more than one place. Since it is just Vonna and me, I am lucky to be able to go to a room and close the door—expecting to not be bothered unless it is an emergency. If you don't have that, you may need to pray in the car in the morning [but don't get on your knees and close your eyes]. Maybe in the bathroom at night. Any place where we can be alone with God is the right place.

3. Have a book. A book on prayer or a devotional book is good, but I'd suggest that THE Book works also. A short reading of scripture is a perfect place to start a prayer. [If you are driving I'll suggest you quote a verse or two instead of reading.] Reading the passage and asking God to speak to us is a great way to start prayer-time.

4. Invite the teacher. Who? The Holy Spirit of God. In a sense, that was part of the “Book” suggestion in number 3. When God Speaks, it is through the Spirit. It is great to go to God and agonize over our fears and frustrations during prayer—that is REAL stuff. It is great to bring our wants and needs. In fact our passage says that very thing—to petition God. It is wonderful and it is scriptural to praise God for what he has done and what he will do and who he is when we pray.

But—some of the best time we can spend in prayer is time of silent listening. Listening with our souls and with our hearts as the Holy Spirit teaches us about God and scripture and even about prayer itself.

5. Bring an open mind and spirit. When we read our passage and when we listen to the Holy Spirit, we have to come with an open spirit as well as open hands. In order to get the most out of our listening, we must open ourselves to hearing what the Spirit is trying to teach.

As we listen openly, we will find more and more light cast into the dark recesses of our hearts and our minds. We will find more light cast on scripture and on the nature of God.

We will find more light cast on his will for each of us—where we are and as we are on HIS journey. It is in an open spirit that we find an open door to spiritual growth in our lives. Spiritual growth is important. Of course, when find opportunities for growth and when we find new truth, God expects us to act.

We are never THERE. No matter how old we get and no matter how studied-up we get, there is always room for growth and for service. And God expects both up until we take our last breath. As God's Spirit shines a light on new meanings and new directions and new work and new growth, God expects us to be open to learn and to act.

As we seek to have God's peace that passes all understanding, we can begin this year committing to getting a better connection to God through regular prayer.

Five simple things will help make that happen.

1. A time.
2. A place.
3. A book.
4. The Teacher.
5. An open spirit.