

“Follow the Playbook”

Ephesians 4:11-18

Series: Essentials for Frontline Workers Week 4. Grow in Grace by Learning

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March 14, 2021

What do you do when winter drags on and students are stuck inside? One man invented a “game that would be interesting and could be played indoors.” He typed up 13 rules on two pieces of paper. Then he nailed two peach baskets high on opposite walls of the YMCA training center in Springfield, Massachusetts and Basketball was born. The inventor? James Naismith. You may know Springfield is home to Basketball’s Naismith Hall of Fame. What you may not know is James Naismith was orphaned at the age of 9, he was from Canada, he coached at the University of Kansas, he presented the first gold medal for basketball at the 1936 Berlin Olympics and, by far the most important fact of all: the inventor of Basketball was a Presbyterian minister.

With the resurrection of NCAA March Madness, we look back one hundred thirty years to the pastor whose ministry was on the court instead of in the pulpit. Naismith never patented his game and had no desire to profit from it. 71 years after his death, the two yellow pages of 13 basketball rules he created in 1891 were auctioned by Sotheby’s for \$4.3 million – the largest price paid for a relic of sports history.

Naismith’s Lord and Savior Jesus also gave us a priceless document: the Bible. It’s more than a rule book. It’s more like a playbook – giving us the ultimate direction and guidance for the game of life. In our fourth week of Essentials for Frontline Workers we are Growing in Grace by Learning. Basketball players learn by studying the playbook. They read, memorize and practice each play until they can do them in their sleep. If one player messes up a play the whole game might be lost. We grow in grace and become more like our Teacher Jesus when we study, memorize and practice the Bible – His playbook for life. What’s the best way to study God’s Playbook?

1. **Get a Coach.** The coach is the one who teaches the playbook to the players. The Apostle Paul says to the Ephesians,

It was (Jesus) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service. Ephesians 4:11-12

That’s a chain of coaches. Paul says God gave us apostles and prophets who wrote the Scriptures, evangelists who preach the Scriptures, pastors and teachers who explain the Scriptures. For years I have asked every one of you to find a Timothy – someone you can train in the ministry you do. That’s still essential. If you have not found your Timothy yet please ask someone. Now just as Paul trained Timothy, he had Barnabas to coach and encourage him. Barnabas’ name means “Son of Encouragement.” You and I need someone to coach and encourage us on how to study and apply the Bible.

Perhaps the greatest coach of all sports, of all time, is John Wooden. He set records that may never be broken in college basketball. From 1948 to 1975, he had a win-loss record of 885-203—a phenomenal career winning percentage of .813. He had an 88-game winning streak at UCLA. His teams won ten NCAA championships in 12 years. NBA star Bill Walton said of his former coach,

All his preachings and teachings, everything he told us turned out to be true. His goal was to make you the best basketball player but first to make you the best person. He would never talk wins and losses but what we needed to succeed in life. Once you were a good human being, you had a chance to be a good player. When you're touched by someone that special, it changes your life. You spend your life chasing it down, trying to recreate it. He didn't teach basketball. He taught life.¹

Perhaps Wooden's most important coaching method was to model what he taught. I have a coach named Bob Logan, one of professors from Fuller Seminary in California. He has been an incredible guide through the challenges of these last years, especially during Covid. Look for a spiritual coach who will speak God's Truth to you and model God's Truth for you. The staff, elders, deacons, teachers, Growth Group leaders, youth leaders are here to coach you on how to grow in grace, how to study and apply God's Word.

John Wooden was a devout follower of Jesus. He read the Bible daily and was a faithful disciple at his church. He considered belief more important to him than basketball:

I have always tried to make it clear that basketball is not the ultimate. It is of small importance in comparison to the total life we live. There is only one kind of life that truly wins, and that is the one that places faith in the hands of the Savior.

That's the kind of coach we all need.

2. Join the Team. Why do we need spiritual coaches – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers? Paul continues,

to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Ephesians 4:12-13

Many today say, "I'm spiritual, not religious" or "I like Jesus but I don't need the Church." They want to follow Him solo. That reminds me of someone who once said, "I can't stand sports and I'm never going to a game again. Here are my ten reasons:"

1. Whenever I go to a game, they ask for money.
2. The other fans don't care about me.
3. The seats are too hard.
4. Coach makes decisions I don't agree with.
5. I don't like how those people stand up, shout, sing and raise their hands.

¹ Hal Bock, "A Coach for All Seasons," The Spokane-Review Newspaper (12-4-00), p. C8

6. Some of the games go into overtime.
7. The band plays songs I don't know.
8. My parents took me to too many games when I was growing up.
9. I can be just as good a fan out in the woods.
10. I won't take my kids to a game either. They must choose for themselves which teams to follow.²

Following Jesus is not a spectator sport or a solo sport. There's one problem with that view that it's just me and Jesus – Jesus is against it. Jesus started His ministry by gathering twelve disciples. Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). Paul tells us to work together to build up the body of Christ just as an athlete builds up his or her body. Christianity is a team sport. We need each other. It takes a team to follow Jesus.

The best place to study and learn God's Word is in a team we call a Growth Group. We have Men's, Women's, Mixed Groups, Junior and Senior High Groups. The Spring Semester of our Growth Groups starts next month after Easter. Several of our Groups will be following the Sunday message series called, “Hope Rising” based on the first Letter of Peter. If you are not in a Growth Group now is great time to join one. If you are in a Growth Group now is a great to invite a friend to it. If you have been in a Growth Group for a long time now is a great time to start what I call a Microchurch – it's a gathering of 4-6 people who follow a simple format, study God's Word, put it into practice and start new Microchurches which start new Microchurches. Anyone can lead it. Sign up on the connection card and Meg Smith and I will help you get started. Christianity is not about “me” it's about “we.” Did you notice how Paul said,

*We all reach unity in the faith
 We all reach unity in the knowledge of the Son of God
 We all become mature
 We all attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

We all need each other if we want to know Jesus, follow Jesus, be like Jesus.

3. Practice, Practice, Practice. The best way to know God's Word is not just to read and study it but to practice it every day. Paul continues,

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. Ephesians 4:14-16

One of the delights of being a grandfather is watching my grandchildren learn how to do something I take for granted. One year ago my granddaughter Evelyn was baptized. Since then she's learned to sit, stand, crawl, walk and feed herself. She's even started doing Bible study. She's also developed a sense of humor. Yet even with all she's learned, she still

² Mike and Amy Nappa, *A Heart Like His* (Barbour, 1999), pp.182-183.

needs constant care 24 hours a day. Her parents would never think of leaving her alone or placing her in a boat on a tempest tossed sea. Yet that's how Paul describes many believers who are tossed to and fro by the winds of cultural fads, the waves of current events, the schemes of cunning and crafty people. The church in America is a spinning weathervane, turning this way and that, following the dictates of the religious right or left, of new age mantras or age old superstition. How do infant believers grow up and mature in the faith?

Maturity often comes by simply practicing something over and over again. Michael Jordan — arguably the world's greatest basketball player ever — did not make the varsity basketball team in high school. In an interview with ESPN he said,

It was embarrassing not making that team. They posted the roster and it was there for a long, long time without my name on it. I remember being really mad too, because there was a guy that made it that really wasn't as good as me.

It taught him one incredibly important lesson: practice, practice, practice. Jordan became the best by practicing the most. Until the end of his career, Michael Jordan was the first person to get to the gym and the last to leave. He practiced basics, such as free throw shooting, three hours every day. He also emphasized that winning requires a team. During the 80's, Jordan won a ton of awards but no championships. Those didn't come until he teamed up with Scottie Pippen, Horace Grant, and Phil Jackson.

If you think and achieve as a team, the individual accolades will take care of themselves. Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence win championships.

What is the free throw Paul wants us to practice? “Speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Some of us go wide to one side when we clobber people with the truth and leave out the love. Some of us hit the other side — we are loving but don't tell people the truth they need to hear. The key is to aim for the center — tell the truth with love. That's how we apply God's Word. That's how we build each other up. That's how we build up the whole Body of Christ. That's how we prevent each other from falling into sin and danger. That's how we Grow in Grace becoming more like Jesus who is both Truth and Love.

On Easter Sunday, Woodside will begin the celebration of our 75th Anniversary. Starting April 4, I ask you to commit to 75 Days of Prayer and Praise, Study and Service. I invite you to set aside time to pray and read a small portion of the Book of Acts for the next 75 Days. Read the passage a few times. Focus your attention on the words. Ask the famous newspaper questions: Who, What, When, Where, How, and Why? Try to understand how God wants you to apply the passage to your life. Put it into practice.

If you are not in a Growth Group I ask you to get in one. If you are in a Growth Group I ask you to invite someone to join your group. What difference does it make to study God's Word and be in a Growth Group? I once received an email from a member of Woodside. He and his family went through a very difficult crisis which eventually led them to move out of state. It had been a while since I heard from him. But he was still on the distribution list for one of our Growth Groups. When a simple email went out from the

leader he used the opportunity to give us an update on his family. After a quick review of how the kids are doing he wrote this - which he gave me permission to share with you:

But the real purpose of this note is to say thank you. You will never know how important you guys were to me. Literally you saved my life. It's impossible to understand the power of those (Growth Group) talks. I still quote all of you in conversations with others here when asked about my experience. So don't stop doing what you are doing. Share your good work with others and know that you guys made a huge impact on my life. Say a prayer for me and the kids. I now know the power of prayer. It will fuel the impossible. I try now to live everyday filled with his glory. You helped show me the way and I'll be forever grateful. So God Bless you all, and thanks again.

Let's open the playbook and put it into practice.