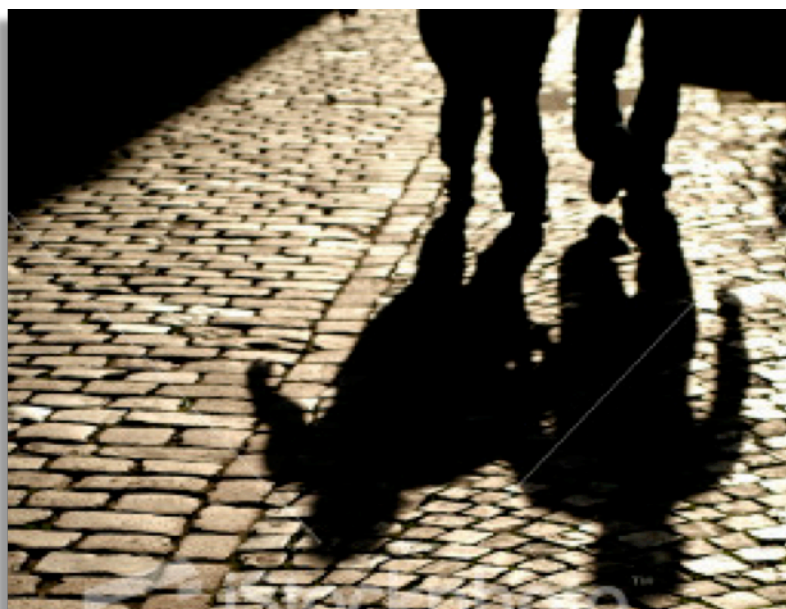


SEASONED WITH GRACE

Mission Partners Study 3



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The Fellowship of Ailbe



Seasoned with Grace
Mission Partners Study 3
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Welcome to *Seasoned with Grace*

Welcome to the third in our series of Mission Partners Studies, *Seasoned with Grace*. The six studies in this series include:

Sent like Jesus – If we really want to live, we have to live like Jesus.

To Fill All Things – Jesus Christ through you to your world!

Seasoned with Grace – Talking with others about the grace of God.

Lived Truth – Our mission begins with *being* witnesses for Christ.

Redeeming Culture – We can't avoid or escape culture, so we need to transform it.

Confident Witness – How to be bolder and more effective in sharing your faith.

These studies are provided for Mission Partners to help you in identifying and working your Personal Mission Field in the Kingdom of God and Christ.

Obviously, fulfilling our calling in our Personal Mission Fields will involve a good bit of conversation with others, fellow believers as well as unbelieving friends, neighbors, and co-workers. Conversation is a learned art, and we can learn to converse well if we don't understand the dynamics of conversation so that we can begin practicing them faithfully.

This is what *Seasoned with Grace* provides – an introduction to the art of Christian conversation!

The Mission Partners program is designed to help you understand and make the best use of those daily disciplines that can allow you to follow Jesus with into more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God.

Here are the assignments for Month 3 of your Mission Partners project:

Video: Your Personal Testimony

Study: *Seasoned with Grace*

- Tasks:
1. Pray daily for the people you will see in your PMF that day.
 2. Initiate or continue conversations with people in your PMF.
 3. Develop your testimony, and pray through it at least weekly.
 4. Share your testimony with your Mission Partner.
 5. Watch the *Resource Video* of the Mission Partners Program on using a questionnaire.

These studies are designed for use with a Mission Partner. For more information on the Mission Partners program, visit our website, www.ailbe.org.

We're pleased to offer the Mission Partners program, and the studies that go with it, at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe. Information on how to contribute to The Fellowship of Ailbe can be found at the end of this study.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 A Learned Art

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10.31

A mixed blessing

Some time ago, hoping to find some guidance for improving my conversational skills, I began keeping a list of all the references in Scripture to our tongues and how we use them. I was thinking I might find a dozen or so references to help me grow in this area.

Instead, I'm now up to four pages of notes and references in my notebook, and the end is not yet in sight.

Speech and language are surely among the greatest of God's gifts to people. How much wisdom, sound advice, pleasure, and delight the spoken word can convey!

On the other hand, how much confusion, suspicion, doubt, fear, and uncertainty can arise when people fail to communicate with one another, or communicate meanly or poorly. Job, for example, complained that his friends were "tormenting" him and breaking him "in pieces" by their harsh, unsympathetic words (Job 19.2).

I wonder how often my speech impacts others like that?

A most effective tool

Foundational to human relations are the conversations we hold with one another. The richer and fuller our conversation, the stronger will be the bonds that unite us. For the Christian, conversation can be a most effective tool for loving our neighbors and advancing the Kingdom of God. But there are certain ground rules and guidelines that must give shape and direction to our speech if we are to master the art of Christian conversation.

Anybody can converse – whether poorly or well. But it takes preparation, concentration, and much practice to learn to converse with others in such a way that the glory of God becomes evident in the exchange of words we share with them, and that the reality of the living Christ is actually refracted through our speech.

Paul says that in "whatever you do" we must seek to do it all to the glory of God. This includes our use of language and the conversations we have with others. Implied in Paul's exhortation is the real possibility that our speech might be a means of bringing the very presence of God into our relationships with others, so that both we and they become aware of a presence greater than both or all of us, one that weighs in with a firmness, warmth, graciousness, and solidity suggesting transcendence and permanence.

Imagine!

Words and glory

Surely we must wonder, from time to time, whether our habits of speech and conversation refract the reality of God into our relationships, or whether our words are received as a kind of torment and breaking in pieces? We are glorifying God in our speech and conversations not merely when we are talking about spiritual matters or bearing witness to our Lord Jesus Christ with the words of the Gospel. We glorify God in our speech when our words reflect and convey something of the divine essence – His truth, goodness, peacefulness, thoughtfulness, earnestness, kindness, and love – to all those with whom we are conversing.

This is definitely a learned art, but one that every Christian must work at mastering. For we do few things more each day than exercise our tongues in speech and conversation. The more we consciously and diligently

seek to engage our words in a manner reflective of the character and truth of God, the more others will begin to be aware, when conversing with us, that they are in the presence of something unusual, intriguing, awesome, fearful, inviting, loving, and sure.

Christian conversation is a calling and art every believer must take up and master.

And there's never no time like the present to begin.

For reflection

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the highest rating, how would you rate yourself as a conversationalist? On what do you base that rating?
2. What opportunities do you have for engaging people in conversations each week? Do these conversations lend themselves to discussing spiritual matters? Might they?
3. How can Christians help one another become better conversationalists? Why should we do so?

Next Steps: As you and your Mission Partner work through this study, practice improving your conversation by talking through the questions for each lesson and encouraging one another to complete the Next Steps assignments.

Prayer:

2 Becoming Conversational

Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and his answers. Luke 2:46, 47

Jesus and conversation

Jesus was an excellent conversationalist all His life, as we see from this earliest example. He was able to engage those who had much more formal learning than He. He listened well, asked good questions, and gave carefully formulated answers and explanations. He was firm, but not argumentative. Even during His ministry Jesus did not argue with people; He simply told them the truth in plain language.

It seems clear from our text, at this early stage in His life, Jesus understood the importance of using conversations effectively for the cause of His Kingdom. As He continued to grow in favor with God and men (Lk. 2:52), we can be sure that improving His skills at conversation was high on His list of areas for growth.

Becoming a Christian conversationalist will mean, in part, that we begin to be more like Jesus in our ability to talk with others in ways that keep their attention, earn their respect, and lead them into the presence of God. That doesn't mean that every person with whom we speak will be head-over-heels happy to have had a conversation with us. Hardly! Jesus made some people *furiosus* as a result of His conversations. Not because He wasn't gracious, but because He was true.

Four criteria

But becoming conversational Christians will mean that our speech will be sufficiently considerate, consistent, clear, and excellent so that others will respect and appreciate what we have to say. If we can realize these hallmarks for our conversations, what we say – and how we say it – can be a powerful tool in helping many to experience the presence and glory of God.

Consideration, consistency, clarity, and quality: This is a good summary of the criteria we must follow and the standards we hope to achieve as Christian conversationalists.

In our conversations we must be *considerate* of the views of others, listening attentively, asking questions, and affirming or disagreeing respectfully at all times. If we will work hard at learning to listen well and at becoming consistent, clear, and excellent conversationalists, there will be no shortage of people willing to engage with us.

As for *consistency*, we want to learn to use the language properly. The best way to become a good conversationalist is to read widely and pay attention to the ways good writers use language. Take up journaling on a regular basis. "Writing maketh the exact man," Sir Francis Bacon reminds us. This will also improve your conversational skills and develop consistency in your speech, because by writing in complete sentences, consistently over time, you will learn to think and speak in complete sentences as well.

Practice conversation often, especially with your fellow believers. Work on your vocabulary and the timbre, pace, and inflection of your voice, and you'll be on your way to meaningful consistency in speech in no time. If we don't pay attention to such details, how will we ever be able to bring others into the light of God's glory?

Clarity relates to the subject matter of our speech. We should take an interest in the interests of others, in the world of creation and culture, and in the issues and events of the day. Read widely, think carefully, and pray often about such matters, until they become working parts in your repertoire of topics for conversation.

Then concentrate on practicing the highest *quality* of conversation, which always begins, to return to being considerate, by being a good listener. Avoid trivialities and vulgarities; look people in the eye as you speak; ask questions and affirm contributions to the conversation, speak in complete sentences.

Work at it

Consideration of others, together with consistency, clarity, and quality in all our speech can establish a powerful framework for talking with others in a way that honors them and glorifies God.

We have to think about such matters, pray about them, be alert to how other writers and speakers use them, and, yes, practice our conversational skills in each of these areas. We can improve the discipline and art of Christian conversation, but we'll have to work at it.

For reflection

1. Think of some of Jesus' other conversations – with Nicodemus, for example, or the woman at the well. How can you see that Jesus took the opportunity for conversation very seriously? Can you see each of the four criteria mentioned in this lesson in those conversations?
2. What would you describe as some of the hallmarks of Jesus' use of conversation? Did He start conversations? Join conversations others were having? How would you describe His participation in conversations?
3. Explain what we mean by each of the following terms, as they relate to the art of conversation: consideration, consistency, clarity, and excellence:

Next Steps: Today, practice being more considerate in all your conversations. Review the lesson, and fix in your mind those practices that make for considerate conversation. Work on these today, then share the results of your efforts with your Mission Partner or a Christian friend.

Prayer:

3 Toward the Far Horizon

So it was, while they conversed and reasoned, that Jesus himself drew near and went with them. Luke 24.15

Good conversations

Conversation is not a “one-and-done” activity. Good conversations range far and wide, branch off into new topics, and continue intermittently over long periods of time. Conversation, in short, should simply be a way of life for us as followers of Christ.

Conversations can build relationships; thus, Christians should be actively involved in seeking to start and maintain conversations with as many people as they can, especially those we encounter each week in our Personal Mission Fields. The more we practice consideration, consistency, clarity, and excellence in our conversations, the easier it will be to keep them going over time.

But the Christian conversationalist does not engage others merely for the sake of conversation, as though conversation were an end in itself. We know that all of life – including those with whom we converse from time to time – is moving toward the far horizon of eternity. So we must learn to see our conversations in the light of and for the sake of that horizon.

The conversations we have with others should pique their interest in spiritual matters, or, at the very least, remind them that such matters are of vital concern, at least to us. Like Jesus, walking, listening, talking, discussing, and teaching the disciples on the Emmaus road, we want our conversations to lead people to a *heightened awareness* of God and His glory.

A proper perspective

How do we do that?

First, we must maintain a proper perspective on all our conversations, regardless of the subject matter or context. Nothing we do, and this includes our conversations, is done merely “under the sun,” as Solomon might say. We always live our lives *under* God, *unto* God, and *for* God and His Kingdom. We are citizens and ambassadors of a Kingdom not of this world. It is to be expected, therefore, that our conversation will reflect that reality.

Thus, we must be constantly mindful to make sure that all our speech is offered in the very presence of the Lord of glory (Col. 3.1-2). Through meditation, prayer, and practice with our Christian friends, we may enhance our ability to live our lives under the watchful eye of our ascended Lord, even, as it were, seated with Him in heavenly places (Eph. 2.6)!

Conversations carried on in that light will always be ennobling, enriching, and pure, never vulgar or trivial.

Keeping God's purposes in mind

Second, we must think consciously, as we are conversing, about the relationship between the topic in view and the sovereign purposes of God.

Because Jesus is the Lord of all, there is not a single subject or topic that does not have some connection to His eternal purposes and plan. All conversational roads do, indeed, lead to Jesus – if we know the map and can keep it in mind.

The challenge to us is to learn to see each topic of conversation as a pointer or portal to the risen Lord. This doesn't mean that we're going to pounce on every topic as a "bridge" to the Gospel; rather, it means we want to learn to appreciate and take seriously each topic, to infuse our conversations with gratitude and keen interest, and to help others, through our questions and opinions, to experience the larger, eternal setting within which even the most mundane matters are discussed.

Finally, we must look for ways of connecting conversations with eternal verities – elements of revelation in Scripture or creation, truths from the Christian heritage, aspects of our own experience in the Lord, inclinations and actions of the human soul that can only be accounted for in Biblical terms.

After all, we as believers are always journeying toward the far horizon, focusing on it continuously and longing for it eagerly. It is natural for us to see, in the glory of God everywhere being revealed, signposts and benchmarks indicating the way forward to eternal life.

In our conversations we will want those with whom we speak to walk that journey with us, or at least, to have the opportunity of glimpsing, however faintly, the far horizon toward which we journey, and considering whether it might not offer more of hope, peace, purpose, and joy than what they presently believe.

For reflection

1. What does it mean to live toward the "far horizon"? Why is "journey" (Celtic Christians called it *peregrinatio*) a good way of thinking about this?
2. How should we expect living toward the far horizon to affect our conversations? What can we do in our conversations to keep that far horizon in mind?
3. Why do you suppose most Christians are reluctant to let the far horizon of their lives affect their daily conversations? Is there a danger, in conversation, of being so heavenly-minded that we're no earthly good? Or so earthly-minded we're no heavenly good? Explain:

Next Steps: For one day, jot down as many things as stand out in your environment or experience – everyday, mundane things: getting dressed, seeing a bird in the sky, listening to the news, finishing a task, something lovely or disturbing you might see. Jot it down. Then, during the day, meditate on each of these, and try to connect them to some idea or passage in Scripture. Make some conclusion about each item concerning how it points to the far horizon of your life. Do you think doing this more frequently would improve your conversations? Share your thoughts with your Mission Partner.

Prayer:

4 Godly Conversation

Let *your speech always* be *with grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each one.*
Colossians 4.6

Gotta work at it!

The Scriptures have a great deal to say about the way we use our tongues. The Bible provides clear guidelines for nurturing a conversational style that is considerate, consistent, clear, and excellent in quality; that engages others in ways that encourage ongoing conversations; and that can allow us to bring the very character and presence of God into our conversations in convincing ways.

But such conversation doesn't come "naturally" to us. Even Jesus, an excellent conversationalist at age 12, continued to grow in favor with men and, presumably, in His ability to converse with them.

We need to study and practice the art of Christian conversation, pray daily for God's help and equipping, practice often with our Christian friends, and pay careful attention to each conversation in which we become involved, so that we do not squander opportunities for honoring God with our speech (Eph. 5.15-17).

Listening well, and more

As I mentioned previously, the first component for the kind of conversational style that honors God is that we become good listeners (Jms. 1.19). Good listeners look their conversation partners in the eye and respond meaningfully to their comments. They ask questions, and follow-up with other questions, in an effort to understand their conversation partners and to draw them more deeply into the conversation. The believer will not allow himself to become angry, even when his own views are attacked; instead, he will continue listening and trying hard to understand the views of those with whom he is conversing.

Becoming a good listener is half the battle in learning to become an engaging and God-honoring conversationalist. Other aspects of Godly conversation include politely refusing to engage in things vulgar or crude (Eph. 5.4). Others may find these topics interesting or amusing, but the Christian must not. We live on a higher plane, we are ambassadors of a more noble Kingdom, and we travel in the presence of the risen, holy Christ. Our conversation will only be Godly when it reflects His presence and character.

We must also concentrate to maintain a soft and respectful tone of voice in our conversations (Prov. 15.1; 2 Tim. 2.24, 25). Shouting, sniping, and ridiculing others are all out of the question, although well-meaning raillery is at times appropriate.

We must speak with the intention of building others up and pointing their minds toward eternal verities (Eph. 4.29). We must pay attention in conversations and be alert to every opportunity for injecting a word of grace or truth into our conversations according to the topic or moment that may arise (Lk. 4.22; Eph. 5.15-17).

Kingdom conversations

People found Jesus' words hard to resist. He was patient, loving, firm, down-to-earth, wise, and open to being challenged. He never tried to dazzle or impress, but was economical in His speech, and always used His words to draw people out beyond the limits of their experience or knowledge, and lead them to consider the possibilities of life in a new Kingdom, where righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit are the order of the day (Rom. 14.17-19).

Our conversations will be more Christ-like and Kingdom-oriented to the extent that our demeanor in conversation reflects that of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We don't always have to be speaking to be good conversationalists; but when we do speak, let's make sure our words are salted with grace. Salt preserves whatever is good against whatever might corrupt, and it brings out the savor of good things, making them better. Salt also makes us thirst for refreshment.

The more we can salt our conversations with the character of Christ and the presence of His Kingdom, the more our conversations will reach the souls of those with whom we speak.

And who knows what God might do, once our words have begun to lodge there?

For reflection

1. What are some things that can keep us from becoming good listeners? How might you improve this conversational skill?
2. Meditate on each of the Scriptures cited in the paragraph beginning "We must also concentrate..." Apply these to your own conversational style at present. Where do you need to improve?
3. Do you sense that the unbelieving people you know understand that you live in a different "Kingdom" than they do? Why or why not? Should people sense this? According to 1 Peter 3.15, how would this appear to them? Were this true in your life, would it increase opportunities for conversation with others?

Next Steps: What role do you think prayer should play in helping us to become better conversationalists? Talk with a Christian friend or your Mission Partner about this question, then begin putting into practice the conclusions you reach.

Prayer:

5 Take the Initiative

Now while Paul waited for them at Athens...he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him... Acts 17.16-18

Seeking conversation

Paul was an excellent conversationalist, in part, because he didn't wait around for conversations to begin. He went seeking them.

The verbs that relate to Paul's conversational style in Athens and elsewhere are instructive: "reasoned," "conversed," "explaining" (v. 3), and "expounded," "testified," and "tried to convince" (Acts 28.23). All these betoken a lively, engaging, and highly effective conversational style.

Paul went to the places where people gathered for conversation, and he joined in or took the initiative as often as he could. After all, as Christians we have really good news to talk about, good news that brings new light to every aspect of life and every person with whom we might converse. There's no reason to wait around when we have so much to talk about!

Starting conversation

But how do we begin conversations?

Remember, conversations are ongoing activities designed to build relationships rather than make points. So as we start a conversation let's try to keep the unseen realm and the far horizon in view, remembering that we're enlisting others in a journey toward truth in every conversation we have with them. And let's pray that God will help us to be considerate, consistent, clear, and excellent in our manner.

Raising questions about current events, issues in the news, or matters related to work, family, or the local community can be good ways of beginning a conversation. Everybody has opinions, and by creating opportunities for conversation with questions, we invite folks to air their views and to hear the views of others. People are normally willing to weigh in with their opinion on something; usually all it takes to get them going is for someone to ask the question and then be a sincere listener.

You might also look for opportunities to pick up on something said, some observation about the person with whom you wish to speak, or some area of common interest – such as kids or work – that you might use to get a conversation started.

Remember: All of life unfolds under the watchful, caring eye of our sovereign God; and even the smallest details of life can serve as opportunities for glorifying God (1 Cor. 10.31).

Make appointments to talk with others – at lunch or over coffee. Open your home for dessert and focused conversation over a movie or news event (press conference, political speech, etc.). Give people something to read and tell them you'd like to get their opinion on it later. Watch a movie with friends, then have a conversation about it.

All these can be effective ways of starting or resuming a conversation. And every conversation gives us the opportunity to get to know people better and to introduce them to the far horizon of life.

Don't dominate conversations

Remember: Starting a conversation doesn't mean we have to dominate it. In a true conversation give-and-take, listening and questioning, responding and explaining, agreeing and disagreeing will be part of the process, just as they were with the Apostle Paul.

Questions may come up that we can't answer, but that's OK. We can do a little research and then come back and renew the conversation. People will voice strong opinions with which we don't agree, but we don't have to persuade everyone to our view, just to make sure they understand us.

And if it's a conversation involving many people, we should do our best to help everyone get involved.

There are plenty of ways to get a conversation going or to resume one already in progress. We just have to be willing to use them as often as we can.

For reflection

1. Why do you suppose so many Christians are unwilling to "take the initiative" in conversations? How might we overcome this in our own lives?
2. Think about an opportunity for conversation that you might have in the week to come. Suggest three different ways you might take the initiative to get this conversation started:
3. What are some things you really like to talk about? List them below. Then, next to each one, suggest a couple of ways you might be able to make a connection between these things and the far horizon of your life:

Next Steps: OK, let's try seeking out a conversation or two today. Whom will you see? What do you have in common with that person that might be a starting-point for conversation? What will you do to get the conversation going? What "far horizon" resources will you need to have at the ready, should the opportunity to inject them present? Share the results of this effort with your Mission Partner.

Prayer:

6 Talk Often with Christians

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. Colossians 3.16

A most helpful resource

I'm always surprised at how hard it can be to get Christians to talk about spiritual things with one another. We have plenty on our minds – work, sports, leisure activities, children, and so forth. Should we not make the most of our opportunities together to talk about such things as they relate to our callings in the Kingdom of God?

Our Christian friends can be a very helpful resource for improving our conversational skills. As iron sharpens iron, we may expect that, by engaging often in conversations with other believers, over matters of the highest moment, our conversational skills will improve steadily over time.

In conversation with our Christian friends we may practice and acquire the boldness, clarity, and skill we need in order to talk with anyone about a great many subjects. At the same time, we have the opportunity to encourage other believers to be more diligent and effective in practicing the art of Christian conversation with the people in their life spheres.

Conversations with other Christians can be a kind of training ground for talking with others about the things of the Lord.

Again, get ready to work!

But we'll have to work hard at this, too, because Christians are not automatically inclined to talk with one another about serious matters from the perspective of a Biblical worldview. So we'll need to make the most of every opportunity, and create some new ones, if we're going to engage our Christian friends in conversation in ways that can improve our conversational skills and theirs.

Here are some ideas: Insist that your Bible study groups provide opportunities for members to talk together about the lesson. And don't allow one person to dominate. Be the conversational leader, and try to draw everyone into the conversation, so that everyone has an opportunity to improve his speaking skills.

Develop deeper personal relationships with a few believers, with whom you meet regularly for conversation and prayer. Choose a topic to discuss. Do some advance reading. Then come together to hash out your views and to integrate your thinking into your Christian worldview.

Host an evening of conversation in your home – over a film or a book. You might even prepare some questions in advance to guide the conversation, thus allowing folks to prepare what they might want to contribute.

Strive always to improve

There are many, many ways that we can involve other believers in fruitful conversations about many things, but, once again, we're going to have to take the initiative.

In your conversations work hard to help one another not only to understand and share, but to improve your understandings and your ability to talk about many things. Talk about what it means to be considerate, consistent, clear, and excellent in conversation, and help one another to improve in each of these areas. Let

your Christian conversations be not only a fruitful time of mutual edification, but a training-ground to prepare you for talking with all kinds of people in the normal course of your everyday life.

You might even agree with one another to initiate particular conversations with the people in your Personal Mission Fields, then pray for one another about how to make the most of those opportunities for the Lord and His Kingdom.

And while you are with your Christian friends pay particular attention both to talking about the Lord Jesus and the blessings that come from knowing Him, and in discovering ways of bridging from the mundane to the eternal in the normal course of conversation.

Your Christian friends might be your greatest resource for mastering the art of Christian conversation. Take the lead in helping yourself – and them – to improve in this great gift and high calling.

For reflection

1. What opportunities for talking with other Christians do you presently have? Would you say that those conversations typically focus on the far horizon of your lives? Explain:
2. Our conversations with other Christians can range over a great many topics, and still be very spiritual and mutually-edifying. Give an example or two from an everyday situation.
3. What might you do, given the suggestions in this article, to begin helping the Christians you know make better use of their time for meaningful conversation?

Next Steps: Put together a group of friends for conversation. When you gather, share with them what you've been learning from this study of the art of Christian conversation. Prepare some questions to draw them into a conversation on this topic. Lead the group to some plan of action for improving their conversational skills and making the most of the opportunities for conversation they have each day.

Prayer:

7 Improve Conversation with God

*God be merciful to us and bless us,
And cause His face to shine upon us,
Selah
That Your way may be known on earth,
Your salvation among all nations.* Psalm 67.1, 2

Begin here

The safest and best place to hone your conversation skills is in prayer.

In prayer we may come boldly before the Lord, just as we are, and talk about anything on our hearts and minds. Prayer provides opportunities for us to develop all our conversational skills and to sharpen our focus on the unseen realm and the far horizon before which and toward which all our conversations should proceed.

If we can work harder at prayer, and pay more careful attention to all the elements and facets of prayer, we will find that our conversational skills will improve. Conversation with God becomes the *fount* and *focal point* for effective conversation with men.

A struggle

Prayer is a struggle for most believers. We have short attention spans, and most of us have not received very good training in the disciplines of prayer.

Consequently, our prayers are neither very long nor, if we're honest, very effective in bringing us into the presence of God and His glory. When it comes to prayer, most of us feel pretty discouraged.

But if we can improve our prayers, we will find that our relationship with God will grow stronger and more meaningful, and our ability to converse with others about spiritual matters will improve as well.

Improving conversation with God

Here are some suggestions for improving your conversation with God. First, try *using the psalms* in prayer. Read through a psalm, then pray it back to the Lord, paraphrasing as you go, putting the psalm in your own words and applying it as the words suggest to situations in your life or the lives of others. The more you develop facility in using the scripts for prayer God has provided in the psalms, the more you'll find your conversations with others will come easier and be more consistent and clear.

I know of no better way to make a quantum leap in your prayer life than for you to begin using the psalms – all the psalms – to guide your prayers on a regular basis.

A few other prayer practices can serve to improve your conversational ability.

Pray out loud. Talk with God aloud, as though He were right next to you. This way you exercise your voice and speech and get used to hearing yourself in conversation – an obstacle that keeps many people from talking as freely as they might, but which out-loud praying can help you to overcome.

Practice prayer at different times during the day. Punctuate your day with prayer to the Lord, in complete sentences and around specific topics. If you get used to talking with God four or five times a day, it will become easier and more natural to talk with others.

Pray about your conversations – both those you’re having and those you want to have – and ask God to be there “just in time” to give you the words you’ll need (Lk. 12.11, 12).

The more you pray, and the more you bring prayer into your daily conversations, the more your conversations will reflect the power of prayer to accomplish great things (Jer. 33.3).

When it comes to becoming better conversationalists, the old saying “practice makes perfect” applies, but with a twist. Practice, of course, does not make perfect. Practice, as Earl Radmacher liked to say, “makes *permanent*.” If we practice reticence, unwillingness to engage others, and combativeness in our conversations, that’s what we can expect to become.

But if in our conversations, beginning in our prayers, we work to become more considerate and consistent, and to improve in the areas of clarity and excellence, we will find that God can use our conversations with greater effect in the lives of others than perhaps we have ever known before.

The far horizon toward which we’re journeying can actually become more a part of our everyday lives, if we will work hard at the art of Christian conversation, beginning in our prayers.

For reflection

1. What are the strongest aspects of your prayer life at this time? What are the weakest?
2. Why does it make sense to think that, if we can improve our conversation with God, we will be more likely to improve other conversations as well?
3. Which of the suggestions for improving your prayer life, mentioned in this article, seem workable to you? How will you try to implement those suggestions?

Next Steps: Get a group of friends together to go through this study with you – people who are in your Personal Mission Field. Make a copy of the study for each one, set a time to meet (weekly?). Then get going. Help yourself and others to improve in this important gift of conversation, then make the most of every conversational opportunity the Lord brings your way!

Prayer:

Next steps

Make sure you have completed each of the *Next steps* exercises before you meet with your Mission Partner to discuss the following questions. Below, list the *Next steps* efforts and results you'd like to share with your Mission Partner:

Questions for Discussion

Suggest some ways that becoming more gracious and consistent as a conversationalist can help you to fulfill your calling to make disciples in your Personal Mission Field:

1. What are the greatest obstacles you will need to overcome if you're going to become a more consistent and gracious conversationalist?
2. How would you describe the relationship between prayer for the people in your Personal Mission Field and initiating conversations with them?
3. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study?
4. How you are working to incorporate that lesson to your walk with and work for the Lord?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.