

Message: “Five Habits for Living”

If you want some interesting reading, try Googling “common good habits.” The list wasn’t what I expected. The AI identifies regular exercise, drinking enough water, and getting adequate sleep as the Top 3 good habits. Then you find habits related to our mind and productivity, such as reading, planning tasks, mindfulness or practicing gratitude. Perhaps you can relate to a few of these common good habits.

Then trying Googling “common bad habits.” Again, it wasn’t quite what I thought it would be. Procrastination, excessive screen time and poor sleep are the current Top 3 bad habits. This is followed by health and mindset habits like unhealthy snacking, negative self-talk, nail-biting and impulsive spending. As a former nail-biter, I know I relate to some of these bad habits, as do you.

What’s interesting is these habits are normal, everyday activities we do, or don’t do. I was expecting the habits to be at a higher level. For example, smoking, drinking or substance abuse, fighting, poor diet and isolating yourself are harmful habits. These behaviors hurt you and the people close to you.

Similarly, connecting with people, active listening, curiosity, setting healthy boundaries and expectations, caring for friends, family and neighbors are healthy habits. These behaviors build good relationships which support the community and the people who are part of it, our neighbors, you and me.

Habits are important. They’re part of the rhythm of life we live as individuals within a community. By themselves, habits can be harmful or helpful. There are a lot of resources available to help you improve your habits. For example, some of you may remember “7 Habits of Highly Effective People” by Stephen Covey. I read that one from cover to cover when I was in my 30s.

Earlier this year, I found a book written by Michael Frost called “Surprise the World.” In it, he shares a few simple ways people have found to renew their enthusiasm for life. He shares practical, everyday tools for cultivating good, spiritual habits in our lives. This forms the basis for a 6-part sermon series, which we’re beginning today.

Embracing our inner life is an important part of our walk with Jesus. This series will help us with our spiritual journey. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised to discover how our inner life shapes our outer life, and vice versa.

Let's start with some basics, look at scripture and then I'll give you a preview of the upcoming weeks.

A good first step is to define habits. James Clear, the author of the best-selling book, "Atomic Habits," offers a definition. He writes, "Habits are the small decisions you make and actions you perform every day."¹ According to researchers at Duke University, habits account for about 40% of our behavior on a given day.

Your life today is essentially the sum of your habits.

What shape are you in? A result of your habits.

How happy or unhappy are you? A result of your habits.

How healthy or unhealthy are you? A result of your habits.

How content or discontent are you? A result of your habits.

How loving or distant are you? A result of your habits.

What you spend time thinking about and doing each day forms the person you are, the things you believe, and the personality you portray. Everything from procrastination to nutrition to relationships to our inner life starts with habits. When you learn to transform your habits, you transform your life.

Dr. Wayne Dyer said, "Change the way you look at things and things you look at will change." Change is a beautiful gift reminding us we can't control what happens outside us, but we can control the way we respond.

Life is about perspective, and if there's one thing the apostle Paul wants us to learn, it's how we see life and its challenges.

Philippians is the most personal of Paul's writings. Mutual warmth and affection come through. Confidence fills the letter. "Joy" appears in some form sixteen times. This is remarkable since Paul is writing from prison. Yet even in his personal trials, Paul expresses gratitude and love for the people at Philippi.

¹ <https://jamesclear.com/habits>

But Paul isn't satisfied. Paul's whole life is centered on his passionate longing to be like Christ. Paul knows he has limitations. His love isn't fully perfected, so there will always be room for progress. And so, Paul keeps moving forward, seeking what Christ has for him (3:12).

There's a "not yet" aspect to Christian life. We aren't yet who we can be. Paul knows this when he writes, "*I myself don't think I've reached it*" (v13).

Our love isn't perfect. We haven't reached our destination yet. To claim we have shows a lack of humility. But we also shouldn't dwell on our past. Paul ignores his past successes and failures as he presses forward, expecting to reach the goal (vv13-14).

Our Lord doesn't dwell on our past failures or successes, either. Jesus wants us to keep moving forward by having faith in him. A mark of a Christian is moving towards the goal, trusting in the Lord despite our circumstances.

A Christian is like a runner who looks forward to crossing the finish line, only to find out it's not the end. There's more preparation, more races and we improve each time we go out. In the same way, developing good spiritual habits helps us with our daily living. This is how we find a rhythm to life, so we're moving with Christ.

Paul's letter to the Colossians shows this way of living. It's another occasion when Paul is writing from prison. He's concerned because the church was adopting a view that being more legal was the way to be. So, Paul starts by saying, "*Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus*" (3:17). When our whole life is in relationship with Christ, this pleases God. And it makes life better.

Paul then shares practical ways we can live as those who follow in Jesus' footsteps. Paul uses his own life as an example. First and foremost, the pattern of our living begins with prayer.

Paul is teaching us good spiritual habits. Be spiritually alert. "*Guard your prayer with thanksgiving*" (v2). This means pray with an attitude of gratitude to God for all we've received. Share our faith through what we say and do. Create favorable relationships with our neighbors. Add flavor and grace to our conversations through wit and liveliness.

And, in this way, Michael Frost says, we'll experience the presence of our Lord together. It's part of a 3-fold movement. We move *up* into greater connection with God, *in* to a stronger sense of community with believers, and *out* into the neighborhood in a loving, life-giving way. I look forward to reflecting on these movements with you as we grow together in this time.

A brief word about our upcoming practices. Over the next five weeks, we're going to learn how to play the handbells. Let's start right now. Hold your hand up. As I name a habit, wiggle one finger. Five habits, five fingers.

Ready? Here we go... blessing, eating, listening, learning and sending. What does this spell? Bells. Congratulations, you've started learning to play handbells.

Next week, we'll practice blessing.
I hope you join us. Please invite a friend.

Let us pray ...

Group Practice

I'm sure it'll come as no surprise to find out the best way to develop new habits is to practice them. Each week, we'll take a moment to learn how to build good habits. Then we'll have an exercise to practice during the week to help you improve your health, happiness and life.

The first strategy is to start with an incredibly small habit. Or, as Leo Babauta says, "Make it so easy you can't say no."

When most people struggle to build new habits, they say something like, "I just need more motivation." Or, "I wish I had the willpower."

Willpower is like a muscle. It gets fatigued as you use it. So, your motivation ebbs and flows. It rises and falls. Stanford professor BJ Fogg calls this the "motivation wave."²

You can ride the wave by picking a new, easy habit so you don't need motivation to do it. For example, rather than trying to meditate for 10 minutes a day, start by meditating for one minute a day. Make it easy enough you can get it done without motivation.

Since Paul taught us to pray with an attitude of gratitude, let's start there. Close your eyes or soften them and imagine yourself in the presence of the Lord. Take a couple of deep breaths. *[pause]*

Give thanks to Jesus for your life or something which happened to you recently. *[pause]*

Now imagine someone close to you. Give thanks to Jesus for them or something which recently happened in their life. *[pause]*

Let's stretch a bit and imagine someone not close to you. Give thanks to Jesus for them or something which recently happened in their life. *[pause]* Open your eyes and return to this moment.

Your weekly practice: pray for yourself, someone close and someone not close with an attitude of gratitude three times this week.

Gracious God, thank you for life and the many ways you bless our lives. Thank you for Jesus, who showed us by example how to walk with you. Guide and direct our steps as we learn new habits. Walk with us as we seek to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. In his name we pray, amen

² <https://jamesclear.com/habit-guide>

Colossians 4:2-6 (CEB)

Keep on praying and guard your prayers with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray for us also. Pray that God would open a door for the word so we can preach the secret plan of Christ - which is why I'm in chains. Pray that I might be able to make it as clear as I ought to when I preach. Act wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Your speech should always be gracious and sprinkled with insight so that you may know how to respond to every person.

Philippians 3:8b, 12-16 (CEB)

... I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus. So all of us who are spiritually mature should think this way, and if anyone thinks differently, God will reveal it to him or her. Only let's live in a way that is consistent with whatever level we have reached.