

Series: HABITS – Six Healthy Practices to Live By

If we sow a thought, we reap an act. If we sow an act, we reap a HABIT. If we sow a HABIT, we reap a life. If we sow a life, we reap a destiny. Our HABITS shape our lives.

Our HABITS shape our lives. We see this from a variety of sources:

- "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a HABIT." (Aristotle)
- "Winning is a HABIT. Unfortunately, so is losing." (Vince Lombardi)
- "Power is the faculty or capacity to act, the strength and potency to accomplish something. It is the vital energy to make choices and decisions. It also includes the capacity to overcome deeply embedded HABITS and to cultivate higher, more effective ones." (Stephen R. Covey)
- "A man's fortune has its form given to it by his HABITS." (Anonymous)
- "Bad HABITS are like a comfortable bed, easy to get into, but hard to get out of." (Anonymous)

Our human experience tells us: The HABITS of our lives have a determining effect on our success or failure. If we take control of our HABITS, we take control of our life.

The same holds true for faith development. Our HABITS are a crucial part of developing and shaping our faith. The mission of our congregation is "to develop fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ." There is nothing new about this—it has been the mission of the Church ever since Jesus gave the original disciples the Great Commission in Matthew 28.

Several years ago, during a staff retreat, we asked the question, "How will we know? How will we know when persons are becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ in and through our congregation?" The conversation that followed resulted in identifying six core HABITS that historically shaped the lives of those who live with the greatest spiritual power and potency: weekly worship—weekly small group—daily devotions—regular serving—regular giving—and faith sharing.

The Christian life is a life of change and transformation. The way that the Spirit often brings change and growth is through the HABITS we practice in our lives. We see this throughout the scriptures. Jesus called his disciples to leave their former ways of life and follow him—a change in HABITS. Paul admonishes the people in Colossae to "take off" their old life which is dead in its sinful HABITS—and to "put on" a new life in Christ—a change in HABITS. He also describes the before and after nature of

conversion when he contrasts the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians—the result of a change in HABITS.

On the day of Pentecost, after 3,000 persons had responded to the message of the Gospel, the first thing the disciples did was to expose them to the life-giving habits that grow faith. Acts 2:42-47 tells us: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ TEACHING and to FELLOWSHIP, to the BREAKING of BREAD and to PRAYER. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were TOGETHER and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to GIVE to ANYONE who had NEED. Every day they continued to MEET TOGETHER in the temple courts. They BROKE BREAD in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, PRAISING GOD and enjoying the FAVOR of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

The first Church established life-changing, faith-developing, Kingdom-expanding HABITS—and during the last 2,000 years, the times that the Church of Jesus Christ has flourished have been the seasons when the followers of Jesus have been intentional about pursuing life change with the HABITS of their lives. One such season was the time of the Wesleyan Revival—which is the place where we trace our heritage.

John Wesley, the first Methodist, called these HABITS the “means of grace.” He lived two centuries after the start of the Reformation which gave him a unique perspective on the strengths and the weaknesses of the Reformation. On the positive side, Wesley was a strong supporter of the major emphases of the reformers. Wesley could affirm all the great tenets of the Reformation: *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *solus Christus*, and *soli Deo Gloria*: Scripture alone—faith alone—grace alone—Christ alone—and all to the glory of God alone. One of the reasons that I am a Methodist is because I believe in the power of the practice of the “means of grace” to change a life. Our HABITS shape our lives.

However, Wesley also understood that the restoration of the doctrine of justification by faith alone and the emphasis on the sole sufficiency of the work of Christ in our salvation could, tragically, lead some in the church to adopt a more antinomian view regarding the life of holiness and the call to continue growing in Christ. The emphasis could be placed on getting saved—and not continuing to live like Jesus.

Wesley saw that, in the years since the invigorating message of the Reformation, the churches were doctrinally and theologically sound—but the lived experience of Christians was still at a very low ebb. They were not saved to the uttermost. Wesley

responded by developing a more robust understanding of how God's grace works throughout the life of a believer. The Pietists and the Patristic Christians (eastern and western) helped him in this reflection. It is here that Wesley developed his views regarding the "means of grace" — the holy HABITS that would shape his life and soul.

Wesley defines the "means of grace" as "outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace." Wesley goes on to identify three primary "means of grace" which God has given to us: prayer (private or public), Scripture (reading or listening), and the Lord's Supper. These are widely understood as the general means by which Christians grow stronger in their faith and grow in the grace of Christ. In other words, they are God's instruments to sanctify us.

Wesley, however, has a much broader understanding of the "means of grace." What makes Wesleyan thought distinctive is that he sees these HABITS as a channel to convey not just sanctifying grace, but also preventing (prevenient), and justifying grace. In other words, Wesley understood that prayer, Scripture reading and even the Lord's Supper can be used by God to convert someone to the faith. Wesley understood this because the HABITS have no power in themselves to save anyone. Rather, they have the power to convey all forms of grace precisely because Christ himself is present in prayer, in the reading of Scripture, and in the Lord's Supper.

He also advocated additional "means of grace" that helped to form the character of the follower of Jesus — fasting — giving — serving — class meetings (small groups) — and Christian Conferencing to name a few. These HABITS are characteristic of Wesleyan/Methodist communities of faith.

For Wesley, there is no such thing as an autonomous person reading Scripture, or praying, or taking the Lord's Supper, or any of the others "means of grace." These HABITS are all practiced in community and the presence of the Risen Christ. Remember, Jesus is the source and only true "means of grace." The customary "means of grace" are given to the church as channels to Christ himself. So, we should exercise our free wills and give ourselves to the full range of these HABITS. Wesley encouraged people to wait IN the means of grace, not OUTSIDE them. He wrote, "all who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the means which he hath ordained; in using, not in laying them aside."

Wesley conveys a deep reliance upon Christ — not only in coming to faith, but in remaining in the faith. In Wesley's journal, he records a time in his life when he felt a complete lack of faith. He writes about it on March 4, 1738 (remember, Wesley's

heartwarming experience at Aldersgate does not occur until May 24, 1738). Wesley decided to quit preaching because, he reasoned, “how can you preach to others when you have no faith yourself.”

Wesley asked his good friend Peter Böhler if he should give up preaching. Böhler famously replied, “Preach faith till you have it; and then because you have it, you will preach faith.” This captures well the importance of waiting *IN* the means of grace, not *OUTSIDE* the means of grace.

Our HABITS shape our lives. Human development experts tell us it takes 30 days for a habit to become engrained in our lives and concrete life change to begin to take root. Thirty days...we are entering the season of Lent—the 40 day period (not including Sundays) from Ash Wednesday to Holy Week. In some traditions, Lent is seen as a season of penance and self-denial, and is observed by fasting or giving up something for Lent. I can remember my Catholic friends who would give up candy or pop for Lent.

This year, instead of asking each other to give something up, we are challenging each other to take *ON* some HABITS for Lent. If a new HABIT can become engrained in 30 days, imagine the potential of spending the 40 days of Lent devoting ourselves to these six life-changing, faith-developing, Kingdom-expanding HABITS: weekly worship—weekly small group—daily devotions—regular serving—regular giving—and faith sharing.

February 13/14

Title: Worship—Giving Praise

Text: John 4:19-26

Theme: We believe that our faith grows when we regularly worship God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength.

Summary: The average American Christian attends worship 1.5 times a month—here at Reynoldsburg UMC—we are average. When asked, we have about excuses ready—“It is my only day to sleep in”—“The kids have games”—“I have to get my shopping done”—“I don’t like this”—or “I don’t care for that.” In the end, our failure in the HABIT of weekly worship atrophies our faith and prevents us from living with spiritual power and strength.

I love the whole of this story of the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well. There are all kinds of subtle undertones that add meaning and depth to the story—a man talking with a woman in public—a woman coming to the well at noon—the way Jesus unpeels the layers of her life while offering grace—his response to the

man who told her everything she ever did. This particular part of the story is intriguing because each time Jesus uncovers another layer of her story—she attempts to deflect it with a conversation about “religion.”

He has just exposed her past and present living conditions—that she has had six husbands and the man she is with now has no husband (which is the reasons she is alone at the well in the heat of the day)—and she says, “I perceive that you are a prophet—tell me which place is better for worship—here in Samaria or in Jerusalem.” Jesus then redirects the conversation by saying that worship is not so much about place—but heart. It is not about brand—but substance. It is not so much about the show of a single worship service—but a reorientation of life around the priority of God. He says that the time will come when those who truly worship the Lord will do so in “Spirit and Truth.”

Later in Romans 12, Paul infers that worship is a whole-life proposition. It is not just something we do on Sunday, but our whole lives—each thought—each action—becomes a part of our spiritual acts of worship. It is important when the church gathers to worship, but of equally great importance is to scatter with lives that reflect worship.

Sometimes, we get so caught up in the worship experience that we forget to take the Lord of our worship back outside into the world around us. The same thing happened to Peter, James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Living a life of WORSHIP is a means of grace—a holy HABIT that grows our faith and changes our lives.

Special: Baptism

February 20/21

Title: Small Group—Being Connected

Text: Luke 6:12-16

Theme: We believe that our faith grows when we live in community with other followers of Jesus. Wesley also called this Holy Conferencing.

Summary: If we are ever going to be serious about growing into the fullest potential, we need to live and share life closely with other Jesus followers. We see this throughout the New Testament. In the calling and nurturing of the twelve disciples, Jesus establishes a model for developing fully devoted followers.

In the first half of the Gospels, when Jesus starts his public ministry, he draws huge crowds. His popularity is at an all-time high, but after he starts talking about the cross

and the cost of being a disciple, the crowd fades away. As he walks toward the cross, all that is left are those who have bound themselves together in life and ministry. Kyle Idleman did a great job showing this in his book, *Not A Fan*.

The truth is—the HABIT of attending worship alone will not form the whole of the Christ-like life in us—we need to share life regularly in smaller groups where we are known fully and fully known—where we share openly and hold each other accountable—where we make the transition from being a part of the crowd (congregation/member) to being a disciple—where care is given and truth is spoken.

There are several things that happen in the smaller settings that are very difficult to learn in the larger:

- Learning Spiritual Disciplines—John 8
- Speaking Truth in Love—Ephesians 4
- Holding Accountable—Matthew 18
- Watch Over Each Other in Love—1 Peter 5

We will be encouraging folks to join or form a small group for the remainder of the series.

Being connected in a SMALL GROUP is a means of grace—a holy HABIT that grows our faith and changes our lives.

Special: New Members

February 27/28

Title: Devotions—Soul Tending

Text: John 8:31-32

Theme: We believe that our faith grows as we feed ourselves with God’s word and learn to communicate with Him.

Summary: We cannot lead people to someone we do not know—and in the life of Jesus, we see a pattern for living that He modeled and taught. There were three regular devotional practices in Jesus’ life—prayer, fasting, and the study of scripture.

Prayer—Jesus was constantly getting away by himself to a lonely place to pray. Over time, His disciples saw that this habit was the source of great spiritual strength and depth in his life—so much so that they asked Him to teach them to pray. Jesus had a pattern in His life—He prayed and taught—prayed and healed—prayed and performed miracle—prayed and turned water into wine—prayed and fed 5,000—prayed and died—and rose. When we pray, we call on the God of the universe to get involved in our situation.

Fasting—Jesus practiced the discipline of fasting. He hammered out the nature of his ministry after His baptism by being led into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights of prayer and FASTING. It was during that time, that the devil came to tempt Him—and He had the strength to resist. Later, His disciples would not be able to cast out a demon, and Jesus reminded them that fasting was the source of great spiritual power in His life when He said, “This kind only comes out with prayer and FASTING.”

Scripture—we do not read any stories of Jesus studying scripture in the Bible, but He certainly does quote it. The One who inspired and wrote the book—quoted it—fulfilled its promises and told the disciples that if they would make His word their home, they would be His disciples—that they would know the truth and the truth would set them free. Knowing the Scriptures opens to us the promises of God—and remembering the promises inspires to live and act with boldness.

SOAP—one way we encourage the development of daily devotional practice in through teaching the SOAP Bible Study method – which is taught by Wayne Cordiero in *The Divine Mentor*. We will be reintroducing this simple, yet powerful means of grace during this weekend.

DAILY DEVOTIONS is a means of grace—a holy HABIT that grows our faith and changes our lives.

March 5/6

Title: Serve—Selfless Living

Text: Matthew 20:20-28

Theme: We believe that our faith grows as we serve others—in fact, according to Jesus, it is a pathway to greatness.

Summary: No matter how many times I read the Gospels, the servanthood of Jesus amazes me. In every situation, the One who had every right to be served—serves. The One who had the right to have pride—was humble. The One who had every right to make people pay attention because of who and what He was—did not count equality with God as something to be exploited—but emptied Himself. The Son of Man did not come to be served—but to serve—and we are called to do the same. Theologians call what Jesus modeled and calls us to a paradox—we lead by serving—we become great by being last—we live by dying to ourselves. This is difficult stuff.

This passage is one of the many where Jesus seizes a teachable moment to talk about this paradox. The story of the encounter between Jesus and the over-functioning mother of James and John is an interesting foray into the human condition. Like a

modern day “soccer mom,” she goes to bat for her boys for more playing time. She has no idea what she is asking.

The truth is that servanthood is “entry-level discipleship.” This is a mindset. If we can get this right, we take a huge step to becoming more and more like Jesus. Servanthood is a lifestyle—that gets modeled to those who live around us—at home—at work—at school—and in other arenas of our lives.

What Jesus is calling for is whole-life stewardship—where servanthood is modeled in every relationship. This is a lifestyle. What would it look like for us to be known as servants in all of the relationships in our lives—if we would outdo one another in love and service.

One other aspect of servanthood involves serving somewhere in the Kingdom enterprise. God has uniquely gifted each one of us to make a unique contribution, and the work of the Kingdom is lacking an incomplete unless or until we make our unique contribution.

SERVING is a means of grace—a holy HABIT that grows our faith and changes our lives.

Special: Communion

March 12/13

Title: Give—Generous Living

Text: Matthew 22:15-22

Theme: We believe that our faith grows as we trust God with our finances and live generously.

Summary: All we have is a gift from God—a gift of grace. God asks that those who place their trust in Him—give back to the cause of the Kingdom. God’s standard of giving is 10%. He guarantees His blessing of the tithe in Malachi 3:10. Fifty percent would be too much—no one would even try. One percent would be too little—no one would even notice. Ten percent is doable, but it brings us to the edge of ourselves, forces us to take a deep breath and step out in faith. The reason for giving is to grow faith and trust in God.

In this text, the religious leaders are trying to trap Jesus. They already tithe—everything—but they do not want to pay taxes. He advocates giving to Caesar the thing that are Caesar’s—and to God the things that are God’s. The whole tithe is the Lord’s.

The whole of the Bible teaches responsible spending—giving first—saving second—living within our means—and not entering consumer debt. Unfortunately, many of us practice irresponsible spending—we live above our means—wrack up consumer debt—save what required—and give what's left. Jesus calls us to give to God the things that are God's and live responsibly. If you would like help in this area, take Financial Peace University.

Our inability to live responsibly makes it very difficult to live generously—but a life of generosity is an incredible witness to the goodness and grace of God in our lives. We do not need to be rich to live generously. In fact, the example that Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 are the poorest of the poor who have given generously to an offering to help the church in Jerusalem. Generosity is a mindset—that there is always enough to share. We are called to generous living.

We are also called to sacrificial giving. The story of the woman giving her all—two small copper coins—caught Jesus' attention as the model for giving—she gave all that she had. Her life was on the line—and she gave it to God.

GENEROUS GIVING is a means of grace—a holy HABIT that grows our faith and changes our lives.

Special: Baptisms

March 20/21

Title: Witness—Faith Sharing

Text: Luke 19:28-40

Theme: We believe that our faith grows as we share our experience of Jesus with others. It's just too good not to share!

Summary: We do not all have the spiritual gift of evangelism, but we are all called to be witnesses of Jesus in this world. And we are—the question is “What kind of witness am I?”

The story of Jesus's triumphal entry to Jerusalem is a favorite of mine. I have walked the Palm Sunday Road from the top of the Mount of Olives into the Kidron Valley on the way to the City of Jerusalem. The history of that valley shapes what we find there. The three faith traditions that call Jerusalem holy have laid claim to portions of that valley. The Jews believe that the Messiah would come to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives (which they missed when Jesus came the first time), kick the Romans out and restore Israel—and have buried their loved ones there since the time of

David. Their graves are still there today—washed white so that those who follow the law do not touch them and become unclean.

Christians believe that Christ will come again in the same way, and have buried their loved ones in the valley—closer than the Jews—in anticipation of the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. The Muslims know that the Jews and Christians believe this, and they have buried their loved one along the wall of Jerusalem as an act of defiance to the Jews and Christians.

When Jesus rides down the road into Jerusalem with all the symbolism of a conquering king, the crowds pour out to meet Him. They join His disciples in shouting, “Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” The Pharisees asked Jesus to make them be quiet, and Jesus said, “If these are silent—even the stone would shout out.” The stones are the tombstones—He literally meant the dead would bear witness to who Jesus is. The good news of Jesus is too good to be kept to ourselves.

We all have a story to share of God’s grace. Some are extraordinary. Others are pretty pedestrian. Some carry great emotion. Others make logical sense. Each of them is important. Peter tells us: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” (1 Peter 3:15)

FAITH SHARING is a means of grace—a holy HABIT that grows our faith and changes our lives.

Special: Palm Sunday/New Members