

What every Christian needs to grow: Spiritual habits of effective people

Message for Sunday, May 1, 2016
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Galatians 6:7-8; 1 Timothy 4:7-8;
James 1:2-4

Children's Message: Read Luke 5:27-32

A girl told her mother, "Mom, three frogs were sitting on a log floating in a pond. One frog decided to jump off into the pond. How many frogs were left on the log?" The mom replied, "Two."

"No, that's not right," the girl replied. "Let's try again: There are three frogs and one decides to jump off; how many are left?" The mom said, "Oh, now I get it: if one decides to jump, the others would too. So there are none left."

"The girl said, "No, Mom, the answer is three. The frog only *decided* to jump."

Ideas are a wonderful thing, but without action they don't mean a thing. It's what you do with your ideas that makes the difference.

We just heard in the Bible how a man named Levi decided to follow Jesus. Note: he didn't just think about it: he started doing it! One of the first things he did was to have a big party, where he invited all his friends and people from work so they could meet Jesus, too.

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Habits shape your character, so plan your habits

Habits are things we have done so regularly and for so long they become part of our nature. Many times we do them without even thinking about what we're doing.

A man who travelled for business was looking for a place to have breakfast one morning. He saw one restaurant which had a sign which read "Unique Breakfast." Intrigued, he walked in and sat down. The waitress brought him some coffee and asked him what he wanted.

"What's your Unique Breakfast?" he asked.

"Baked tongue of chicken!" she proudly replied.

"Baked tongue of chicken?," he exclaimed. "Baked tongue of chicken! Do you have any idea how disgusting that is? I would never even consider eating anything that came out of a chicken's mouth!"

So the waitress asked, "What would you like, then?"

The man replied, "Just bring me a couple of fried eggs."

That isn't to say that habits are bad. No, they can be wonderfully good things. One of the greatest books I've ever read is *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen Covey. It's not a religious book (it's actually written from a business perspective) yet I find it one tremendously inspiring. That's because it demonstrates, and describes with real life examples, what happens when people make their habits follow their values. Through repetition, those values and principles become part of their character.

We live in a culture that demands instant communication and overnight courier express. In contrast to that, real deep change takes time, but it's worth it.

You can make superficial changes very quickly. It's like cramming for an exam, leaving all the work until the night before. You might pass the course, but you haven't really absorbed the subject, so that you know it by heart.

Let me ask the farmers and gardeners here: what would happen if you tried to grow crops by cramming? You don't bother ploughing or planting in the spring; you forget about weed control all summer; then you try to cram in the fall to bring in the harvest! There's a rule of nature: you reap what you sow.

Galatians 6:7-8, New Living Translation:

Don't be misled. Remember that you can't ignore God and get away with it. You will always reap what you sow! Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful desires will harvest the consequences of decay and death. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit.

Today I want to focus on sowing habits—*spiritual habits*—habits that help us to grow in our character as followers of Jesus.

1 Timothy 4:7-8, New Living Translation:

“Spend your time and energy in training yourself for spiritual fitness. Physical exercise has some value, but spiritual exercise is much more important, for it promises a reward in both this life and the next.”

Most of these habits build upon the messages of the last few weeks. I am going to give some specific and practical ways that you can develop new habits to bring about change in your life.

Goal 1: A relationship with God through Jesus Christ

This is the very first step. Trying these things without having Jesus in your life is like sailing with no wind. You can go through all the motions, but without the power you’ll get nowhere.

How do you do start a relationship with Jesus? You need to do three things:

- Ask Jesus to come into your life to be your *Lord*, the one you will follow and obey.
- Thank Jesus for dying for you on the cross, so that your sins can be forgiven. Ask God the Father for that forgiveness, in Jesus’ name.
- Ask God to fill you with the Holy Spirit, to actually live in you and give you power day by day to live God’s way.

Most of you here have already done this, and that’s wonderful! If you haven’t, you’ll have an opportunity to do that at the end of this message.

Goal 2: Know God’s Word and apply it to your life

That’s the goal. Here’s the habit to achieve that goal:

HABIT: ♦ Set aside time on a daily basis to read God’s Word.

The key here is to *take* the time to do this.

There is a lot of talk about conspiracy theories. The truth is, there *is* a global conspiracy! Everyone in the world is out to steal your time. They’re not going to give you time for what’s important to you; they want you to spend your time on what they

consider important. No one is going to give you the time for reading the Bible. If this is ever going to happen, it’s up to you to make it happen.

In that sense, it’s like dieting or exercising: we all know it’s good. But it’s deeper than exercise or dieting. Like Paul said in his letter to Timothy, we’re talking here about something that has eternal results. We’re talking about our relationship with God, which will last forever. Like I said earlier, we’re talking about deep change. It takes time for something to develop into a habit, to become part of your character. Keep at it.

HABIT: ♦ As you read, let God speak to you.

Ask yourself these kinds of questions:

- Where do I see myself in this passage?
- What principle or truth here still applies to my life today?
- Is there an example to follow?
- What part of this passage do I *not* like? Is it because it’s pointing at something in my life I don’t want to deal with?

Goal 3: Be a person of prayer

That’s the goal: to be a person for whom prayer is not a hook we grab onto when disaster strikes, but a natural, regular way of life. Here is the habit to achieve that goal.

HABIT: ♦ Set aside time on a daily basis to be with God in prayer.

Most people find that the time for Bible reading works well in combination with time for prayer. That’s because the two are connected. When we read the Bible, we are asking God to speak to us. Then we speak to God, and ask for help in putting into practice in our lives what we just learned.

But prayer is much more than asking God to be our tutor. In prayer, we worship God; we ask forgiveness; we give thanks and rejoice in the joys and blessings we’ve experienced; and we ask for help, both for ourselves and for others.

It’s also the time when we listen for God to speak to us. Be aware of the thoughts and the nudges that God places in our minds.

Goal 4: Grow closer and deeper with God

The goal is a deeper relationship with God: to enjoy God, to love God, to know God. Being a person of prayer, which I just talked about, is key to that. Here's another habit towards that goal.

HABIT: ♦ Practise trusting God with your problems.

We can talk all we want about what we believe. It's how we behave that really proves whether we mean it. This is particularly true with how we face problems.

The Bible tells us that there is purpose in our lives, that something good can come out of everything [Romans 8:28].

Now I know that I'm really pushing the boundary here of what many people are willing to accept. So I'll ask you to do one thing: for a moment, lay aside your preconceived ideas of what God is supposed to be like, and just simply listen to what God's Word tells us.

James 1:2-4, New Living Translation:

Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything.

How would that change your life if you really believed that? Instead of moaning and complaining about how rotten things are, can we turn that around and see how God is at work in our lives?

I was with a woman who was going through a string of problems, to the point that she was having great difficulty coping with all the stress, both emotional and financial. During one of our conversations I asked her, "Where do you see God in all this?" She replied, "Well I suppose he's around here somewhere, but I haven't had time to think about it."

She wanted to know more about what I meant by that question, so we took some time to explore how God was working in her life. I can't say that as a result she looked at her problems as "an opportunity for joy," but she certainly could be thankful that she

had grown tremendously in her faith in that month. She put it this way, "When I can step back from the latest crisis and catch my breath, I can clearly see how I handled things differently because I knew God was with me. Right at the moment when it happened, I was operating by gut instinct without even thinking; but now I can see his hand in it."

Do you *really* want to change? Do you really want a deeper relationship with God? It's not enough to just want this. You have to make a decision, and then—like the frog—follow through on it. Pray and ask for God's help. And then start doing it. Right now.