

OPENING

This week we are beginning a new series called The Power of Habits. We are all creatures of habit and, over time, our brains imprint those habits so that we do things automatically – without having to think. It is said that we can change or create habits within two or three weeks of beginning the process. When our brains imprint good habits, God is pleased. When they imprint bad habits – not so much. This week's study is one from which we can all benefit.

SCRIPTURE¹

1 Kings 20:40 While your servant was busy here and there, the man disappeared.

Romans 7:15, 7:18b – 19, 24-25a (NLT) I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead I do what I hate. I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God, the answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

2 Corinthians 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

Ephesians 4:22-24 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

John 8:29 The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.

Galatians 6:7-8 Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please the flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

Lamentations 3:22-23 (NLT) The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh every morning,

1 Corinthians 9:27 (NLT) I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.

OBSERVATION

We are used to Jesus teaching His disciples through parables. This allowed Him to speak His messages yet make them a bit mysterious so that those who had a heart for God would understand, but the Pharisees and other religious leaders would not. This week we are finding a parable in the Old Testament told by a prophet, possibly Jeremiah. It is based upon a message God had for King Ahab, a very evil King of Israel. He had been given instructions by God to destroy an enemy but, after capturing him and his army, spared the enemy's life. The consequences for Ahab's disobedience was death for him. The parable tells the story of a soldier who was entrusted with the guarding of a valuable prisoner of war. He became so distracted with busy-ness that he lost track of this responsibility and the man escaped. Just as Ahab's disobedience caused his death, so did the soldier's. This is a lesson for all of us – God requires our obedience. It is not optional!

¹ All scripture is NIV unless otherwise indicated

APPLICATION

The moral of our story is that productivity isn't the same as obedience. It isn't the same as being faithful. Paul tells us in his epistles that even he, a warrior for Christ, still did the things he didn't want to do and didn't do the things he knew he should. That is comforting for us, isn't it? We are just like Paul, but that doesn't mean we should remain in this state of apathy. It's time to go to work and ask Jesus to help us. He is our healer, our source, our strength and our hope. He will renew our minds - if we let Him.

Question: What good habits have you developed over your lifetime? What good ones have brought you closer to obedience to God? What good habits are you cultivating in your life today?

Question: What bad habits have you developed in your life? Which ones do you want to change? Why?

Our choices harden into our habits and our habits define our destiny. Do you realize that about 40% of our actions in any given week are done based on habit. That means we are not consciously choosing to do them. That's almost half of our behaviors. Our habits are turning us into robots.

Question: What routine actions do you take that make up your 40%? Which would you like to change?

Imagine if those actions were generosity, healthy choices, forgiveness, optimism, good work ethics, or serving God. Jesus was human and so a creature of habit, but in His life we see Him doing the right things. He had embedded habits that, no matter what was happening, He stayed obedient to His Father – He made obedience His habit.

Question: How obedient to God do you consider yourself to be? Where are you being disobedient?

James Clear, in his book Atomic Habits, tells us that changes in our processes or habits take place at three different levels:

- 1) The first one is changing our **outcomes**, such as losing weight, publishing a book, or graduating, etc. Outcome-based habits are focused on what we want to achieve;
- 2) The second is changing our **processes**, such as going to the gym or eating different foods;
- 3) The third is changing our **identities**. It is the deepest layer. We do this by focusing on what we want to become. Most habits function at this level: our worldview, self-image, beliefs, assumptions, past histories. The problem is our distorted identities often sabotage our success. This often comes from negative self-talk such as "I'm not good with money," or "I'm not a disciplined person", or "I've never been good in relationships." These thoughts shape our actions. We want to change these to positive statements like "I am a child of God." Our identities shape our actions.

Question: Where are you in this process of changing habits? What thoughts are sabotaging your ability to change?

Question: If you have internalized these identity concepts, what is stopping you from applying them?

Paul understood this identity struggle, but he also understood that he was now in Christ. When we know who we are in Him and pray without ceasing, we will know what to do.

Do you realize that the significance of our lives is determined by the substance of our days? The picture of our lives is determined by the small decisions we make each day. We all want to live lives of significance, don't we? We all want to finish well – to leave a legacy of service to God. Every day presents an opportunity to build our legacies. A Chinese proverb says "The best time to plant a tree is ten years ago. The second best is today." If we want to make changes for good in our habits, we need to start today. Then in ten years we will see a harvest of goodness. We can embrace this season as a moment of new beginnings by committing to consistency in our habits.

Question: What habits do I have that are right and need to be amplified? Which ones are wrong and need to be eliminated? What habits are missing and need to be added?

Question: What is your legacy? How will people remember you?

Question: What have you done for God that has had an eternal impact on others?

Question: Who are you in Christ? How would you define your relationship with Him?

When we know we are redeemed, righteous, conquerors, and overcomers, then we can do all things, not by our own power, but through Christ who gives us strength. Then we can put the habits into our lives that produce the spiritual outcomes we desire that effectively honor God.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we have a wealth of bad habits. We also have some good ones which You can amplify in us as we are obedient to You. Help us to begin today to plant the seeds of righteousness and good habits pleasing to You. In Jesus name. Amen