

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 (Isaiah 58:1-12) Feb. 27, 2022  
Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10  
Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21.

## Being Challenge: 5 Foundational Habits

### Winning Habits

Two weeks ago, 100 million people tuned in to watch one of the most highly-touted sporting events in the world: the NFL Super Bowl. Whether you wanted to watch this event or not, it was hard to avoid advertisements and news stories about it. Also, during this month of February, many watched another highly regarded sporting event: the Olympics. What the NFL and the Olympics have in common are athletes who have trained, sacrificed, practiced, and groomed themselves to compete at the highest level. They have practiced skills over and over until they can do them, blindfolded, without thinking. They've developed and practiced winning habits. Some of you may have heard the expression "in the zone" – when an athlete is playing to his/her peak, like they're on auto-pilot. The right habits, developed and honed, get them into the zone.

Sure, it helps to be born with the right kind of body and have some aptitude or talent. But there's more to it. You must work hard, put in the time, and most importantly you must develop habits that will bring you to victory. My daughter, when she was competing in gymnastics, had a little sign in her room that said: "Practice makes perfect NOT! **Perfect practice makes perfect.**"

### Right Aim

I don't know how many of you watched the Olympics, but here's a story from the history books. Not many remember the name Matthew Emmons. He is a world class marksman. He won the 50-meter rifle prone at the 2002 International Shooting Sport Federation World Shooting Championships and won the gold at the 2004 Summer Olympics (Athens Greece). At those same Olympics he was scoring well ahead of others in the three-position match and was thought sure to win a second gold medal. But on his last shot he accidentally aimed at the wrong target, the one in the next lane, and so scored zero which dropped him to 8<sup>th</sup> place.

The lesson here is this: you can be great at what you do, but if you focus on the wrong thing, you won't hit the right target. We Christians may have good intentions but we might also be doing things that don't actually matter. The great evangelist Dight L. Moody said, "Our greatest fear shouldn't be of failure but of succeeding at something that doesn't matter." In fact, with good intentions we could be spending our time on things that actually turn people away from Jesus! Christians are to be disciples of Jesus, so they can become more like Him. **To become more like our Lord, we must aim at the right targets.**

The best way to do this is to follow Jesus. If our aim is to be more like Him, why would we follow anyone else? He's the One who said: **Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.**

***But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash, Matt. 7:24-27.***

**Here's my challenge to you, especially to the families with children still in the home: what are you really aiming at in your life? What truths and values are you passing on to your children? Are your actions actually in line with what you say you believe?**

**In order to put Jesus' words into practice our starting point – the first target to hit, if you will – is being in relationship with Him. **All of our doing for God flows out of our being with Jesus.** Forgiving one another, serving one another and the needy, giving of our finances and time to His work, and going out to share Him, all of that flows from being in relationship with Him.**

### **40 Day Goal**

**In thirty to forty days, anyone can have in place any new habit they seek. If you want to change your diet, exercise more, make your bed, or floss your teeth you can have these habits so entrenched in your life, that they come naturally, embedded in who you are. During the next forty days or so, this season we Christians call Lent, we're going to focus on **the central goal of our Christian life: to develop habits that bring us closer to God**; habits to regenerate our souls to make us more like Christ. *“Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity, Joel 2:12-13.***

**During Lent our small groups will study, reflect, and encourage, to help each one of us grow closer to Jesus by practicing the habits of Jesus. Now, if you're not in a small group you will hear a Sunday message (like this one) on the good habit's we're talking about. But if that's all you get, it's like nibbling on the hors d'oeuvres, rather than enjoying the whole meal. Even though we're talking about being, what do you *do* to *be* with God? How do you grow in your relationship with God? What does it look like in practical terms? I know that my relationship with God is important, but where do I start? Well ...**

**To stay on target, we must allow Him to develop in us the right habits ... we start with the five keystone habits in the life of Jesus. That's what we'll be learning and practicing. What's a habit? The definition says it's “a regular tendency or practice, especially one that is hard to give up.” They say that 40% of the actions we perform each day aren't actual decisions, but habits. What are your habits? They seem like small things, but over time what we eat, what we say to our family and friends, whether we spend or save, how often we exercise, all add up to an enormous impact on our health, security, and happiness.**

**A “keystone” habit is “a habit that people introduce into their lives that unintentionally carries over into other aspects of their lives” (from Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit*). A keystone habit can create a domino effect that changes other areas of your life and can lead to other good habits. It is no more difficult to develop a keystone habit than any other, yet it provides multiplied**

benefits. In next six weeks, through Sunday messages and small group meetings, we'll get into the five keystone habits we see in the life of Jesus and put them into practice.

## **Laying the Groundwork**

To lay a foundation on which we can build our Lenten experience let me attempt to answer three questions: 1) Why should we aim at being like Jesus? 2) How will "keystone" habits help us become more like Jesus? 3) What are those "keystone" habits that we find in the life of Jesus?

### **1. The Reason Why**

Why should we aim at Jesus? Jesus was the only one in perfect relationship with God. To be, so that ultimately, we can do like Jesus, we first need to be in relationship with God like Jesus was. If our aim is to be like Jesus, then we ought to aim for Jesus! *Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, Matthew 11:29*, He said. As we learn from Jesus, we will find rest; our soul is at peace. We find who we really are. In The Message paraphrase of the Bible Eugene Peterson renders this verse like this: Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. **The goal of the Christian is for the habits of Jesus to become the unforced rhythms of grace in our lives.** Though this may be quite difficult at first, over time, these small habits just become a part of who we are. Like those top athletes who get into the "zone," we don't even have to think about them...it's just what we do and who we are.

It's important where you aim and that you keep the aim. Years ago, a small, private aircraft left S. California headed for Hawaii. The pilot had wisely calculated the fuel needed to reach the islands. However, he failed to keep watch on his aim, having plotted a path that was off by less than a degree. Hours later he was far north of where he needed to be and running out of fuel. He was forced to ditch his plane in the ocean. Fortunately, the Coast Guard had already been alerted and was there to pull him out of the water. Being just a little bit off can lead you far off the path! Here's the point: with good intentions many Christians love Jesus and want to be more like Him, yet it feels like we are losing ground collectively. **Christians, as a whole, are not generally known to be wholly like Jesus.** We can have all the right intentions but even if we're little bit off, it can lead to a crash. We may want to be like Jesus, but if we aren't hitting the right targets it won't happen. That's why we're doing this together. As St. Paul reminds: *We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain, 2 Cor. 5:20 – 6:1.*

### **2. Keystone Habits**

We tend to focus a lot on the decisions that we need to make in life. But what about all those habits we live by? We're on autopilot for almost half of what we do each day. And, of course, there are good habits and bad habits in our lives. They all serve some purpose. It's a lifelong challenge to break the bad habits and develop the good habits that produce a better quality of life. Not all good habits are created equal – some are better than others. **"Keystone" habits are better than other good habits because they carry over into other aspects of our lives."** Keystone habits create a domino effect that

changes other areas of your life and can lead to other good habits. So, to stay on target, we must allow Jesus to develop those habits in us.

### **3. The Five Habits of Jesus**

Giving advice to Timothy, his young protégé St. Paul wrote, *Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly, 1 Tim. 4:7.* In other words, don't waste your time on things that don't lead you to become like Jesus. Focus your efforts on the keystone habits that He practiced. In His ministry Jesus revealed to us five foundational methods to align our lives with God our Father and Creator.

- 1. Commit to community**
- 2. Study Scripture**
- 3. Make prayer a priority**
- 4. Seek solitude**
- 5. Choose church**

As you practice these five habits, consistently, I guarantee that you will grow closer to God and become more like Jesus. *... until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, Eph. 4:13.*

### **Small Habits Bring Great Rewards**

There is power in the small choices that you make. People often over estimate what they can do in the short-term and underestimate what they can in the long-term. That's because it is the small habits, practiced consistently over time, that bring great rewards. "Inch by inch it's a cinch."

What we do in life flows from who we are. *Our core being is what shapes our words and actions.* It has long been a Lenten tradition for Christians to reaffirm their faith in Christ – our salvation through what He has done for us on the Cross. This is what is at the core of our faith and what we want to be the primary influence on our words and actions. During the 40 days of Lent, I urge you to take actions to further align your being with the character of Christ. Develop the life habits that keep you on track with Him. It's 40 days seeking to become more like Jesus.

You might think, "Even if I want to change, I can't. I'm so stuck in my current mediocre or bad habits that I can't even think about good habits. I guess I'm stuck where I am." But here's what the Bible tells us: *But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one, 2 Thessalonians 3:3.*

Yes, when the temptation to quit sets in, when we hear the whispers of doubt, we can call upon the Lord to give us strength (see 1 Cor. 10:13) ... have you ever done that? That's why we do these things in small groups – so we can encourage one another and pray for one another and thereby find strength and like St. Paul say, *I can do all this through him who gives me strength, Phil. 4:13.*

Since Jesus Christ is our way out of sin and death, He is our way out of old, deadly habits and into a vibrant life-changing relationship with God. Your habits can change! *You have been given the Holy Spirit who gives you power to become more like Jesus.* Call on Him and take a step. There's a Chinese proverb that says, "A journey of 1000

**miles starts with a single step.” With commitment and discipline to follow Jesus we will nurture a hope in our living that cannot be defeated.**

***And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you, Romans 8:11.***