

Habits

Part One: Who Before Do

Successful people do consistently what other people do occasionally.

- Romans 7:15, 18-19, 24-25

Three reasons We Don't Succeed

1. We focus on the what but don't understand the how.

2. We don't see progress fast enough.

- Galatians 6:9

- Wrongly conclude: Small good decisions don't matter that much.
- Wrongly conclude: Small bad decisions don't matter that much.

3. Our distorted identity sabotages our success.

- Romans 6:6-7, 18

- An unhealthy identity creates unwise habits.
- Unwise habits reinforce an unhealthy identity.
- A healthy identity creates positive habits.
- Positive habits reinforce a healthy identity.

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Habits

Today we are picking up where we left off last week with a new series called "Habits." Of course this is the time of year that we focus on changing bad habits and try to start new ones, and that's a really good thing. It's not like we can only deal with habits at this time of year – it's really a year-round thing, but of course the beginning of a new year is the time when people are really open to change. I believe this could be the beginning of something for many of you that will be very significant, because people are open to the work of God, that people are looking at how they can improve their lives, how they can make changes. So for these next three Sundays we want to get very practical in order to give you hope for change, encouragement to change, and practical help on being able to change and develop good habits in your life and eliminate bad habits.

We are using material from Pastor and author Craig Groeschel, and from various books, which will be listed in the footnotes in the manuscript¹ if you want to study this further.

So why do habits matter? Because...

Successful people do consistently what other people do occasionally.

Successful people in *any* area of success, if someone is spiritually thriving and they're close to God, they're consistently living the disciplines that help them grow close to God. If you've got someone that's financially successful, they're consistently doing things that other people will only do occasionally or maybe even never, ever do. Relationally, physically, it's all about small things leading in a direction of big things over time.

Think about it; if you look at, for example, people in Scripture who were successful. I don't think anybody would argue against the fact that Jesus was incredibly successful at pleasing God and obeying him. I think anybody would say Paul was incredibly successful at pleasing God and obeying him. If you look at their lives, one thing I can tell you is that Jesus never, ever, ever said, "I just can't find the time to pray. I'm so busy, and these disciples, they're wearing me out. Peter keeps stepping on my last nerve. I wish I had more time to spend with God, but I just don't have the time." Jesus never said that! What you will see is a consistent habit of breaking away from the crowds to have intimate fellowship with God.

The Apostle Paul did not make excuses. There's a verse in Scripture that said he had the habit of going to the Temple to share his faith with those who were not in the family of God. Habits matter, successful people do consistently what other people do occasionally. I like what Sean Covey said, "Our habits will make or break us. We become what we repeatedly do."

¹ *Habits*, Craig Groeschel, open network, *The Compound Effect*, Darren Hardy; *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg; *Atomic Habits*, James Clear

So this is a good time of the year to talk about habits because this is the time of year that people create New Year's resolutions. That's great – that's the good news – people want to change. The bad news is that according to studies, 92% of your New Year's resolutions will be gone by Valentine's Day. That's bad news. Even worse if it involves sin or obedience to God. But you know it from last year, you had the goal, the resolution, and for most people in most cases, it doesn't last. Maybe it didn't last as long as this last week! And you end up feeling like the Apostle Paul in his writings in Romans 7, when he said this:

“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...” (Romans 7:15, 18-19, 24-25, nlt)

If we were Paul, we might say, “I don't really understand myself, for I want to stop eating junk food, I want to stop procrastinating, I want to stop overspending at Target, whatever it is, I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate.” “I want to do what's right,” he says, “but I can't. I want to do what's good, but I don't. I don't want to do what's wrong, but I do it anyway.” And then Paul does what so many of us do, he connects his failure to his identity, and he says, “oh, what a miserable person I am. What a failure. I'm not disciplined, I'm not becoming more like Christ. What a miserable person. Then he asked a question, and that's when we see him shift in his thinking. He says, “Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?” And he looks to the source, the only one who can truly change him, and he says, “Thank God, the answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord, who can change us, who can deliver us, who can set us free.” Christ is our source; Christ is our strength. Christ is our healing, Christ is our hope, Christ is the one who makes all things new. It doesn't matter who you were, where you were, what you did, where you've been. With Christ, he takes all things and makes them new. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new person. The old is gone, and the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:17) My prayer is that you will not only experience all the life available to you in Christ, but you would live out the disciplines that lead to a God-honoring, God-pleasing, successful life, because successful people do consistently what other people do occasionally.

Most of us, we genuinely have good intentions. We want to lose the weight, we want to get on the treadmill, we want to do whatever it is, but we fail again and again and again.

I want to show you...

Three Reasons Why We Don't Succeed

...when we have such good intentions. You can take notes in your journals or in our church app or on the back of the person in front of you; whatever you need to do so you don't forget this!

But the first reason that we often don't succeed is because...

1. We focus on the what but we don't understand the how.

We end up focusing on the action that we want to perform, the thing that we want to accomplish, but we don't understand how to get there. Think about it. Almost everybody that you know has for the most part similar goals. If we surveyed 100 of you and asked, "What's really important to you in life?", most of you would say things that generally fall into the same categories. Many of you would say something about how you want to be healthy. I don't know anybody who's saying, "My goal this year is to have dangerously high cholesterol." Right? Nobody's going to say that. So, when it comes to finances, most people say, "I want to be free – I want to be out of debt, I want to be able to be generous." I don't know anybody who's saying "I want to double the debt that I'm in and get it at really high interest rates. Maybe 25 or 30% would be fantastic!" Nobody does that. We all want good relationships. Spiritually, if you're a disciple of Jesus, you want to be close to God. You want to make a difference in this world. You want your life to matter. Most of us, we have very similar goals or hopes, but it's the results that are dramatically different. Some are really achieving what they want in one area, and others are falling way, way short. James Clear, in his book *Atomic Habits* says that winners and losers generally have the same goals. He says that successful people and unsuccessful people have the same goals. Think about it, at the beginning of any season in sports, what does the coach say to the team? The coach has the same goal: "We want to win the championship." I don't know any coaches that say, "Okay team, this year, we're shooting for fifth place. It's going to be amazing." Nobody's doing that, right? When somebody gets married, what do people want? We want love, we want a blessed life, we want to be happy. Nobody's saying our goal is to make it five years, maybe seven, and then divorce is in the cards. Nobody does that. We all want something similar, but we end up with very different results. Why? It's because *goals don't determine success, but systems determine success*. Goals alone don't get us to the end result that we want, but the systems in our life determine success. Again, in his book he says, "You don't rise to the level of your goals, you fall to the level of your systems." You fall to the level of your systems. You may say, that doesn't sound really spiritual at all. But when I read the Bible through the lens of that thought, I see examples all over the place of successful people because of Godly systems or unsuccessful people because of the lack of systems. Think about the Old Testament hero Daniel – he's a fantastic guy. If I want to model after the life of someone who stood out and had great faith, I want to live like Daniel. Why was Daniel successful? Why was it, among this group of other young men, why did Daniel stand out to all the leaders as Godly, gifted, talented, and different? Why is it that when they he was thrown into a den full of lions because of his obedience to God, why was he able to stand strong, trusting God, and come out alive on the other side? It's because he had the *systems* in place that led to a life of faith and faithfulness. What was his system? For years and years and years, Daniel had pre-decided that three times a day, every day, he would stop what he was doing and spend time with God. Three times a day. If you want to grow in your faith, and if you want to be more faithful, you will not rise to the level of your goals, you will fall to the level of your systems. If you have in place systems that build your faith, strengthen your knowledge and intimacy with God, start gathering with believers and worshipping regularly, then you will more likely become the person that you want to become. Here's the mistake that we tend to make. We tend to think, I want to change the *results*. Whatever it is. I want to lose 20 pounds by Easter. I want to be more organized. I want to finally pay off

that one credit card that I've been carrying a debt on for too long. The problem is this: we need to change the systems that create those results. If we will fix what we do, how we live, the habits in our life, the outcomes will fix themselves. Does that make sense? So in this series we plan to give you some really practical and spiritual principles to help so you can change your systems and develop the right habits and stop the bad ones.

So again, one reason we don't succeed is because we tend to focus on the what, but we don't necessarily understand the how.

The second reason we give up so quickly, and 92% of our New Year's resolutions fail, is because...

2. We don't see progress *fast enough*.

You know what this is like. Maybe you start out walking on the treadmill three days that week, and then you get on the scale, and you gained two pounds. What? And you think, "This isn't working!", right? You read your Bible plan for four days straight, and then you're driving to church, and you yell at your kids all the way there. You think, "This doesn't work at all." Or maybe you stop drinking coffee to save money, and you go a whole month, and you save \$100. Now, instead of owing \$35,500 on your college loan, you owe \$35,400! You think, "I can't even make a dent in this." Because of that, we tend to make a mistake, and the mistake is this: we...

- Wrongly conclude that small, *good* decisions don't matter that much.

We wrongly conclude that this small, God-honoring habit, this small, faithful decision, this small, good, and positive action doesn't make that big of a difference at all.

Then consider the opposite, too – the not-so-good things. What happens? Maybe you go do online gaming for three hours straight, and your wife's not happy, but she doesn't leave you. You skip going to church in person for a weekend, and your whole world doesn't fall apart, nothing tragic happens to you spiritually. You eat a third of a box of chocolates, and you don't gain any weight, and so then, you also...

- Wrongly conclude that the small, *bad* decisions don't impact your life that much.

The small, good decisions don't really move the needle, and the small, bad decisions don't matter that much, and you miss the truth of what is impacting your life in massive ways. And that is this: our life is the sum total of *all* the decisions that we make. Who you are today is a result of every single small decision that you've made along the way. They all matter, and they all add up over time.

Rarely if ever do you wreck your life and end up in a really bad place immediately. What happens is, you make a small decision. A little compromise here, cut the corner there. Fudge a little bit here, lie a little bit there. Bend the rules a little bit here, if you take a step

over the line here, and then, one day, you wake up and think, “How did I mess up my life so much?” Well, you didn't do it all at one time. How'd you do it? One little bad decision followed by the other.

Or think about it the other way: there's someone that you know who, in some area of their life, they're doing amazing. They're living the end result of what you want. How'd they get there? They didn't get there all at once. Again, it was one small decision at a time. It was a moment of self-sacrifice. It was a small discipline, done again and done again. Nobody else knows about the time you spent in prayer and the time that you fasted and the time that you sought after God and the time that you had a difficult conversation, about that time you decided to give extra. No one knows the early mornings and the late nights, and the grind and the faithfulness, and all the perseverance that it took for you to get to a certain point. They don't see that, they don't understand it, but you know it was one small, faithful decision after another over a period of years that led you to the place that everybody else wants to be. Your good decisions are not wasted. They're being stored up. You may not see it. It's a little bit like my breakfast. Almost every single day I eat oatmeal with a little bit of raisins and walnuts. Some days I'll have eggs. Very occasionally it's something else. We don't go out for breakfast hardly ever, and it's probably a good thing because I'd have big cheesy omelets all the time. I don't know when the last time I had biscuits and bacon gravy was! But if we're making quick oats, we'll put room temperature water in the pan and turn on the fire. And the water is just room temperature. You don't see anything happening, but the fire is changing the temperature in the water. It gets to be 78 degrees, then 104, then 139, then 187, then 201. At some point, the heat is being stored up. You may not see it from the outside, but at 211 degrees, what do you have? You've got really hot water, 211 degrees. Then at 212 degrees, you hit the tipping point. It's not just really hot water, it's boiling water. Here's the point: you add a God-honoring discipline, and another one, and another one. You're generally faithful. Sometimes you mess up, but you're generally faithful. You may not see any results for a period of time, but the temperature is rising. Your faith is being stored up, and at some point, I promise, there's a tipping point, and it becomes obvious. You're now in shape, you're now out of debt, your marriage is now better, you're now making a difference, whatever it is. And people will look on, and they're going to call you an overnight success. They have *no idea* all the private sacrifices, all the faithfulness, all the consistency, overcoming your own self-doubt, failing, and starting again, praying, and seeking God, enduring the criticism. They have no idea. Right? It's the things that no one sees that bring results everyone wants. It's what's invisible, people don't see it. But you know it, one small decision at a time.

I like the way the Apostle Paul said it to the believers in Galatia, he said this in Galatians 6:9:

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” (Galatians 6:9, niv)

Let us not become weary in doing good. Let's not become weary in honoring God. Let's not become weary in doing the right things. Let's not become weary in living by a budget. Let's not become weary in counting calories. Let's not become weary in getting up 30 minutes earlier to seek God. Let's not become weary in working out. Let's not become weary in fasting before our God. Let's not become weary giving and in doing the right thing. Because it's being stored up. You might not see it at first, but at the proper time, we will reap a

harvest if we do not give up.

Why do we tend to fail so often? We focus on the what, we don't understand the how. We don't see progress fast enough.

Then, the third reason we don't succeed, and this is a big problem...

3. Our distorted identity ***sabotages*** our ***success***.

This goes back to what I was talking about last week, too. We see our failures and sins and we listen the accuser who is constantly accusing us of being spiritual failures or life failures, and our distorted identity sabotages our success. That's because our enemy tries to connect our failures to our identity. You failed so you *are* a failure. You did bad, therefore you *are* bad. That's what happened to the Apostle Paul in that passage we read at the beginning. Remember? He said, "I try to do what's right, and I don't do what's right. Oh, *what a miserable person I am*." When you look at some of the most effective people in God's Word, you see people who battled with identity issues. In the Old Testament, somewhere along the way, Moses didn't live up to his own expectations. And so when God called him, he said, "I'm not a good public speaker, I'm not a good leader." For years he identified some failure with who he was, and that sabotaged his potential. The same was true with Gideon. Gideon failed or didn't follow through or something, but he took that failure, that shortcoming and identified with it. So when the angel of the Lord called him a mighty warrior, Gideon said, "I'm the weakest and I'm the least in my community." God saw what he could be if he let God work in him. Gideon saw his failure.

You can even see glimpses of the Apostle Paul doing that. He said, "I'm unqualified, I'm not good enough, I'm not educated enough, I'm the least and I feel incredibly unworthy." That might be how it plays out in your life. "Well, this is just the way I am. I have an addictive personality, and so, well, I might as well take another drink." Right? "I'm not good with money, I've never been good with money, so I might as well go shopping just to deal with it. I'm not a disciplined person. I'm not an organized person. I've never been good in relationships. I just can't seem to get it done..." It's identity, and here's what happens:

- An unhealthy identity creates unwise ***habits***.

We get stuck in our guilt and regret and failure; we don't trust God that he can transform our lives. So our habits are the result of what we think. Then, the...

- Unwise habits reinforce the unhealthy ***identity***.

It's a cycle. We don't see ourselves as Godly, therefore, we don't live in a way that's Godly, therefore, the way we live reinforces the identity that we're not really living for God, and the cycle becomes very, very negative.

So instead of falling into that trap, try this: most people start with "do goals." In other words, "here's what I want to *do*." I want to lose 18 pounds...whatever it is. Instead of starting with a "do" goal, try starting with a "who" goal. First start with the identity and ask

yourself, who do I want to become? Who do you want to become? Who is it that when people describe you, you want them to describe? You might say, I want to be a true man or woman of God. It's a great who goal. You might say, "I want to be clean; I want to be sober." That's a fantastic who goal. I want to be a Godly husband or wife or mom or dad. That's a great who goal. I want to be financially free. I know it might take four years, it might take seven years, but I want to be generous along the way, and I want to be radically and irrationally generous in the years to come. Or you might say, I want to be a bold witness to the other people in my school. I want to be a healthy person. I want to recognize that my body is a gift from God. It's a Temple, it's a house for the Holy Spirit of God, so I want to make it healthy. Who do you want to become?

When you make that your goal, here's what happens: Identity shapes actions. It does. The point is, when you know who you are, you know what to do. Who do you want to *be*? When you know who you are, then you know what the right thing is to do. The *do* overflows out of the *who*. Don't start with the do, start with the who. Who do you want to be?

So here's how that makes a difference: let's say you're trying to stop smoking cigarettes or trying to stop vaping. And someone says to you, "Hey – you want a smoke?" If you say "No, I'm trying to quit," what you're doing is you're identifying as a smoker. I am a smoker trying to quit. If, on the other hand, you say, "No, I don't smoke anymore," your identity is saying, "That's a part of my past, it's not a part of my present."

Identity shapes actions. You may say, "But this is just who I am, I can't change." That's true if you are relying on yourself. But when you let God work, everything can change!

Remember God's Word, Romans 6 says this:

"We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. Now you are free from your slavery to sin, and you have become slaves to righteous living."! (Romans 6:6-7, 18, nlt)

When you know who you are, you'll know what to do. Don't let your distorted identity sabotage your success! Who are you in Christ? You are redeemed of the Lord; you are righteous in Christ. You are more than a conqueror, you're an overcomer. You're blessed coming in, and you're blessed going out, you can do all things not by your own power, but through Christ who gives you strength. "Oh, what a miserable person I am. Who can deliver me from this body of death? Oh, thanks be to God! His son Jesus Christ our Lord can set me free!" Identity shapes actions. When you know who you are, you'll know what to do.

So we talked about the negative spiral, let me show you the positive one:

- **A Healthy identity**, what does it do? It **creates positive habits**.

I fast, I tithe, I pray, I read God's Word. I eat disciplined, I work out. It creates healthy habits. And...

- **Positive habits reinforce a healthy identity**.

I'm a disciplined child of God. I'm a contributor, I'm an ambassador, I'm one who makes a difference in this world.

Who do you want to become?

What do I want people to say about me 20 years from now? First, that I'm alive! But that means I need to continue my systems of exercise and health and even improve them.

When I ask myself that question, I think, "What do I want my boys to say about me?" Honestly, I'd like it if you'd say good things about me too, but really, the only opinions that ultimately matter to me are God's and Shelly's and our boys. I want them to say I love Jesus. That I'm a good leader. That I'm a godly man. That I love people (including my grandkids, if they'd ever get around to giving me any!). I want them to say that I pastor West Valley Church well. That I'm a strong friend.

It's who I want to be. I want to be like Christ. Because if I'm like Him, I'm full of love, full of grace, full of truth. I reflect the love of God in this world. I want to be like Jesus. Conform me to His image. And if you are becoming more like Christ, you know who you are, then you know what to do. Because truly God-honoring people do consistently what other people do occasionally.

Prayer

So Father, help us to be like Jesus. Do a work in us, God. Stir up your church, God, to have great goals. Not just for the things in this world but to be who you call us to be.

Folks, whether you are here in this room or joining us online, would say be willing to pray, "I will seek God and listen to Him on who He wants me to become. I'm going to start with the who." If you're willing to do that, I know it's a real commitment – this isn't something you just do in a minute. It might take you a few minutes, it might take you a lot longer. But if you are in this room and that's your prayer, would you lift up your hands? I'm asking you to do that as a church today. If you are online, type it in the comment or click that next steps button and tell us. Father, I pray that you would just breathe life into this. It might take me awhile, but even if it's years from now, this is really who I want others to know that I am, this is what we stand for. And then, God, in the weeks to come, we thank you that the do in us is going to flow out of the who we are. More than anything else, more than being a good leader, good dad, good husband, good mom, more than anything else, God, help us to be like your Son, Jesus. As you keep praying, maybe you believe in God, but you never can seem to get it quite right for Him. Maybe you're not even like a God person at all but there's something that's drawing you to Him right now. And you don't know where you really stand with God. Jesus is the Son of God; He is God in the flesh. His name is above every single name. One day, every knee is going to bow to that name, every tongue is going to confess his Lordship. If you look at your life as you enter into a New Year, and you recognize you're living for *anything* else, you're shooting way too low. God loves you so much that he sent Jesus to show you His love. Jesus loved the unrighteous, Jesus loved the sinners, Jesus loved those who never, ever got it right, Jesus became sin for us as the perfect sacrifice on the Cross. God raised Him from the dead so that anyone who calls on His name would be completely forgiven. Maybe there's something in your past, that weight of your

sin follows you, the shame, the guilt, the regret. Anyone who's in Christ, their sins are forgiven, they're made completely new. What I hope you can understand is that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. If He's not first in your life, today, make Him first, make Him Lord. You just need to pray, I need His forgiveness, I need His grace, when you call on His name, He hears your prayer, He makes you new. That's the very reason that you're here today and you can sense it, I need His forgiveness, I turn from my sin, I turn toward Jesus. I give my life to Him. That's your prayer. You are saying, yes, I surrender to Him.

Let's take a moment and just join those around you in prayer. Everybody repeat this prayer after me and pray aloud, pray:

Heavenly Father,
I surrender to you,
Jesus be first,
The Savior,
And the Lord of my life.
Fill me with your spirit.
So I could follow you.
So I could live for you.
My life is not mine.
I give it all to you.
Thank you for new life.
Now, you have mine.
In Jesus's name, I pray.
Everybody said amen.
Amen!

Contact us. Join a small group. Sign up for a class. Start building the systems and becoming who you just prayed to be.

Pastor Jason Benediction:

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)