

Holy Habits!

Making a Habit of the Lord

Luke 4:14-21

Mark 1:35

Sermon Preached by Pastor Rob Fulton

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Now, I don't know why, but usually, when I think about a HABIT, I think of something BAD...a NEGATIVE sort of thing...something I've gotten accustomed to doing, but really SHOULDN'T be doing – things like biting my fingernails...or clicking my pen in a meeting...or rolling my eyes when someone says something I don't agree with...or eating a big piece of Sue Crawfis' chocolate cream pie right before I go to bed. Those are all, after all, just FEW of the bad habits I find myself doing.

There are others as well, of course...some of which may be bad habits you YOURSELF may have gotten into – things like driving too fast...or not getting to work on time...or picking your toenails...or drinking too much coffee...or smoking too many cigarettes...or eating too much junk food...or drinking too many Yuenglings while watching the Sunday afternoon football playoff games...or the worst...the absolute WORST bad habit of all – falling asleep during church while the preacher's preaching his sermon – an absolutely HORRIBLE habit which I'm sure none of you would EVER do.

Well, whatever it may be...a habit is usually something you get into, but wish you hadn't...something you indulge in, but know you shouldn't...something which, when push comes to shove, you'd have to say is something you ought NOT be doing...but do anyway. And bad habits, like stray dogs and unwanted cats are oftentimes well nigh unto IMPOSSIBLE to get rid of.

But what if our habits WEREN'T all bad? What if, instead of being something NEGATIVE, our habits were a GOOD thing...something POSITIVE...something HELPFUL...something BENEFICIAL – things like walking a mile or two every day...or getting some other form of regular exercise. Or brushing your teeth after every meal. Or eating healthier, more nutritious food instead of so much junk food. Or turning off the television set at night and reading a good book. Or having a regular family dinner time where you all sit down together. Or enjoying a family game night. Or actually sitting and TALKING to other family members instead of sitting in separate rooms...or maybe even in the SAME room...and texting each other on your I Pad or I Phone like I recently heard of a couple doing. Or maybe even taking a little time each day, in the midst of the fast-paced, hussle-bussle, frazzle-dazzle lives we live, just slow down long enough to “smell the roses” so to speak...to notice and enjoy the simple things in life – a wintertime sunset...the twinkling of the stars in the nighttime sky...the cooing of a baby...the smile upon another person's face. GOOD habits to get into.

And yet, so that all of this doesn't just dissolve into some pop-psychology lecture you could hear on the radio with DJ Delilah each night as she spins her sappy-sweet, feel-good tunes, let's bring it all down to our FAITH PERSPECTIVE and look at it from a RELIGIOUS point of view. Because that, after all, is why we are here, is it not? To discover how to live life from a RELIGIOUS point of view...from the perspective of our FAITH?

So what I'd like to suggest to you this morning is that we put away all the theoretical, theological mumbo-jumbo that we sometimes talk about in church and get down to some hard, cold realities about the HABITS we keep as followers of this one we call Jesus who is forever calling us to FOLLOW HIM. And what I'd like to suggest to you as that because we ARE followers of Jesus, that we look to HIM to discover the HOLY Habits which HE kept...and WE'D be well-advised to keep as his followers. In other words, what I'd like to suggest to you this morning is that WE, like Jesus, get into the practice of making a HABIT OF THE LORD...a HOLY Habit of the Lord. And how do we

DO that? Well, let's listen to what JESUS did...and see if he might not provide a worthy model for us as his followers.

Our scripture readings this morning come to us from two places early in the Gospels...first from Mark and then from Luke. I invite you to listen to the Word of God.

Mark 1:35
Luke 4:14-21

Singing in Meditation: *"Day by Day"*

Day by day, day by day, Oh, dear Lord, three things I pray:
To see Thee more clearly, Love Thee more dearly, Follow Thee more nearly
Day by day!

Could you hear them? Could you hear the three Holy Habits Jesus engaged in that WE would be well advised to follow as WE ALSO make a habit of the Lord? Listen again:

"And in the morning, a great while before day, Jesus rose and went out to a lonely place. And there he prayed...AS WAS HIS CUSTOM...as he was in the HABIT of doing." Mark 1:35

"And when he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath...AS WAS HIS CUSTOM ...as he was in the HABIT of doing." Luke 4:16

"And when he was given the book of the Prophet Isaiah, (because he was in the HABIT of reading from it) he quickly found the place where it is written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...' " Luke 4:17

Three HABITS...three HOLY HABITS of our Lord Jesus Christ, which, it seems to me, WE would ALL be well advised to adopt if we are going to be faithful followers of Him who says to us: "FOLLOW ME" – 1. Spending time with God in prayer...2. Coming to church on Sunday...and 3. Knowing the Word of God.

Now, in reality, there's nothing new here, is there? We all KNOW that Praying...Coming to Church...and Knowing the Word of the Lord are good habits to have...HOLY HABITS to observe. Of COURSE they are! And we have every good intention of DOING them...of KEEPING those Holy Habits...of BEING in church every Sunday (or as often as we can, anyway!)...of HAVING a regular and active prayer life...a time of quiet to spend with God...not just TALKING and telling God what WE want or what WE need...but LISTENING as well...LISTENING to what God would say to US...to YOU and to ME such that we actually do take the time to *"Be STILL and know that GOD is God."* (Psalm 46:10) And we have every intention of READING our Bibles as well...LEARNING our Bibles...KNOWING the Word of God such that we are so familiar with the Scripture that we, like Jesus, can also quickly and readily find the passage where it is written: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..."* We have EVERY good intention of HAVING those Holy Habits and KEEPING those sacred practices.

But then, in the blink of an eye, something will happen to get us OFF TRACK...to PUT ASIDE our good intentions...and, before you know it, they're out the window...flown the coop...gone by the wayside like a wonderful dream vanishing at the breaking of dawn. A late night Saturday night will cause us to sleep in on Sunday morning...and though we know we SHOULD get up and go to church, it's SO much easier to just yawn and roll over and go back to sleep. Or we'll go on vacation for a few weeks and think that when we get back home, we'll get back into the routine...the habit...of going to church on a regular basis. Only to find that when we actually DO get back from vacation, our good intentions have become BAD habits and we're found sitting home on Sunday morning reading the Columbus Dispatch...or going out to breakfast...or going to the office to catch up on back work...or just sitting and relaxing and enjoying a few minutes of

peace and quiet because, after all, it's the ONLY time we get to ourselves ALL WEEK LONG! Nothing overtly wrong with that, mind you. Nothing intentionally bad. We simply get out of a GOOD habit and, before you know it, we're into a bad one. No longer are we in the Holy Habit of coming to church on Sunday..."as is our CUSTOM." We've simply gotten out of the habit of the Lord.

The SAME may be true of our prayer life...or our reading and learning God's Word as well. We may have every good intention of spending at least a FEW minutes every day in prayer...in studying and thinking about and meditating on the Word of the Lord. We may EVEN have a specific time each day when we DO that...maybe early in the morning...or at the breakfast table...or right after dinner when the family's all gathered together...or the last thing before you go to bed at night. Our intentions are good and, in fact, we even begin carrying through with them. We've got at Holy Habit in the making. HOORAY!

But then, something will happen. The phone will ring and interrupt us. We'll have an early morning appointment and not be able to keep our regular devotional time. The family will be scurrying in a dozen different directions at supper time and we'll not be able to sit together to read the Bible and share a prayer. We'll have had a long day and be so sleepy at bed time we end up reading the same line in the Psalms eleven times before our eyes finally droop closed for good...our glasses having slid down our nose and our Bible propped open on our chests. Nothing overtly wrong, mind you. Nothing intentionally bad. We simply get out of a GOOD habit and into a bad one and no longer are we in the Holy Habit spending time in prayer or reading God's Word..."as is our custom."

Now, you may THINK I'm talking to the wrong people this morning. You may THINK I should be talking to all those folks who aren't IN church this morning...who aren't as ACTIVE...who DON'T take their faith as seriously...NEARLY as seriously as YOU do. THEY are the ones I should be preaching to...NOT YOU! RIGHT?! RIGHT! But they aren't here this morning and you ARE. And it doesn't take a lot to figure out that even some of you FAITHFUL folk sitting here today will be ones who...sometime in the not too distant future...get out of the HABIT of the Lord...who LOOSE their Holy Habit of coming to church...of reading and studying God's Word...and of spending time with God in prayer. And the reason I can SAY that is because many of those who AREN'T here this morning USED to be and have simply gotten out of the HABIT OF THE LORD. Oh, it doesn't make them bad people, mind you...not by any means. It's just that they are no longer keeping their Holy Habits...for whatever reason.

But friends, habits don't always come easily...either breaking the bad ones or keeping the good ones. They often take a lot of work and effort. And even good intentions are not always enough. Yes, it IS sometimes hard to get to church each week. Sure it IS easy to get out of the habit...to stay home one Sunday...to sleep a little later...to go skiing or play a round of golf or go boating on the lake when the weather's nice...to do something else...ANYTHING else rather than to come to church on Sunday morning.

Yet, Holy Habits are worth WORKING at. Even Jesus, I'm sure, had to make an effort to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath "as was his custom," especially when the crowds began to turn against him and even tried to kill him in his own home-town of Nazareth because they didn't like what he had to say.

"When the people in the synagogue heard what Jesus said, they were filled with anger. They rose up, dragged Jesus out of the town and took him to the edge of the hill upon which Nazareth was built where they intended to throw Jesus off, headfirst. But passing through the middle of them, he left and went away, never to return to Nazareth again."

Now, did Jesus KNOW what kind of reaction he was going to get from his hometown crowd? Did he KNOW how violent they would become when he told them God's love and grace were not just for them but even for those BEYOND the bounds of their precious Judaism? I suspect he did. I suspect he DID. But he went to the synagogue in Nazareth that day ANYWAY because it was his CUSTOM...because he was in the HABIT of going to the synagogue on the Sabbath...and because he

knew it was good and right to worship the Lord and hear God's Word being shared...no matter WHAT the consequences.

The same may be true for our prayer and scripture reading "habits" as well. It may take a special effort to continue in the habit of reading God's Word and spending time with God in prayer. It did for JESUS. He OFTEN had to rise early in the morning, LONG before the daylight brought the crowds pressing in upon him, just in order to have some time alone to pray...and to listen to God's voice in his life. He OFTEN had to go away to a lonely place...AWAY from the crowds...AWAY from the demands...AWAY from the interruptions of life in order to spend those few precious moments in prayer...prayer which refreshed his spirit and gave him the strength to go back and FACE the crowds...DEAL with the demands...CONFRONT what were, not so much the INTERRUPTIONS of life, but the very real BUSINESS of life – JESUS' life that is – healing...teaching...offering love and mercy and compassion and forgiveness. Yes! It took effort, but he DID it...precisely because he knew how important those Holy Habits were to keep. And if it takes some special effort on OUR parts as well – doing whatever it takes to carve out a little time...a little space...a little quiet to spend with God – well, I can pretty much double-dog guarantee you, it'll be worth the effort for us as well.. Holy Habits are ALWAYS worth the effort it takes to make them happen. Just ask Jesus!

If it is true then, as we said last week, that Jesus calls us ALL to follow Him...and if it is true, as Schweitzer said, that it is in the FOLLOWING that we discover who Jesus is, then it is my HOPE...my PRAYER...my full CONFIDENCE and EXPECTATION that the Holy Spirit...JESUS' Holy Spirit...will also GUIDE us into keeping the Holy Habits which Jesus kept. There's nothing elaborate, nothing complicated, nothing highfalutin' or theoretical here. Just the keeping of simple, practical, down to earth HOLY HABITS:

- 1) Worshipping God in church on the Sabbath...
- 2) Spending quiet time with God in prayer...and
- 3) Learning and knowing God's Word.

Basically, what it all boils down to is making a HABIT of the Lord! And Jesus was a MASTER at it! Maybe...just MAYBE...we can at least become novices as we seek to follow Him as the Lord and Savior of our lives!

To God be the glory, in this...and in ALL things. Amen and AMEN!

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