

The Power Of Habit
Message #1
CCV, 1-4-16
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We are starting a new series today called “The Power of Habit” and I want to start out by asking you a question:

What’s the one thing you’d like to change about your life right now?

In the late '60s and early '70s, researcher Walter Mischel began methodically tormenting four-year-olds at Stanford University’s Bing Nursery School.

More than 500 children were volunteered for the diabolical program by their own parents, many of whom would later, like millions of others, laugh mercilessly at videos of the squirming, miserable kids.

The devilish experiment was called “**The Marshmallow Test.**” It was an interesting way to look at willpower.

Kids were offered one of three treats—a pretzel, a cookie, or the now infamous marshmallow.

- The child was told that the researcher had to step away, and if he could wait 15 minutes until the researcher returned, he’d be awarded a second treat.
- One treat now or two later. (Mischel knew they’d designed the test well when a few of the kids wanted to quit as soon as they explained the ground rules.)

Left alone with a marshmallow they couldn’t eat, kids engaged in all kinds of delay strategies, from closing their eyes, pulling their own hair, and turning away, to hovering over, smelling, and even caressing their treats.

- On average, kids held out less than three minutes.
- And only three out of ten managed to delay their gratification until the researcher returned.
- It was pretty apparent most kids struggled with delayed gratification. Willpower was in short supply.

Initially no one assumed anything about what success or failure in the marshmallow test might say about a child’s future.

That insight came about organically.

- Mischel's three daughters attended Bing Nursery School, and over the next few years, he slowly began to see a pattern when he'd ask them about classmates who had participated in the experiment.
- Children who had successfully waited for the second treat seemed to be doing better. A lot better.

Starting in 1981, Mischel began systematically tracking down the original subjects.

- He requested transcripts, compiled records, and mailed questionnaires in an attempt to measure their relative academic and social progress.

His hunch was correct—***willpower or the ability to delay gratification was a huge indicator of future success.***

Over the next 30-plus years, Mischel and his colleagues published numerous papers on how “high delayers” fared better.

- Success in the experiment predicted higher general academic achievement, SAT test scores that were on average 210 points higher, higher feelings of self-worth, and better stress management.
- On the other hand, “low delayers” were 30 percent more likely to be overweight and later suffered higher rates of drug addiction.

That seems like pretty conclusive evidence – the reason you can't change that ONE thing you really want to in life (lose weight, eat healthy, stop watching 18 million cute cat videos on YouTube during work) is because you were in the low delayer group as a kid!

-You couldn't help yourself from eating a stupid marshmallow, could you?

-Well, for decades this “lack of willpower” theory was the theory that was the “King of the Hill” – knocking off all competitors – until people started doing better research.

-First, they found that this study was flawed. It turns out, in research world, that if you go looking for an answer that you've already made up in your mind is true, then rest assured you'll find support for your conviction. This was not a double-blind research study submitted for peer review.

-Second, over the last 20 years, there's been surprising research into the way God has wired us to change which has turned that Stanford study on its ear.

-Behavioral researchers have proven that actually **willpower is limited in supply**

-sort of like gasoline in the tank – there’s a limited amount of it
 -meaning, the more you have to practice willpower, and are forced to make hard decisions, the less willpower you actually have over time

-What researchers surmise, for instance, is that the children who couldn’t resist tasting the marshmallows – didn’t so much suffer from a lack of willpower – as they already had to practice a lot of self-restraint earlier in the day before that study was conducted

-they had already tapped into their “willpower reserve” early in the day and when they went to draw upon it during the marshmallow test, there was nothing in the tank

-The good news is ***you have as much willpower as the person next to you***

-What researchers are finding now is something God has known all along –

People change *not so much* because they were born with extraordinary discipline, but because they’ve built strong habits that carry them through *when their willpower fails*, which it inevitably will

-So the key to change is what **Gary Keller** talks about in his book **The ONE Thing**,

When we know something that needs to be done but isn’t currently getting done, we often say, “I just need more discipline.”

Actually, we need the habit of doing it. And we need just enough discipline to build the habit.

The trick to success is to choose the right habit and bring just enough discipline to establish it. That’s it.

-Or, as the Greek philosopher **Aristotle** said it even more succinctly,

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

-This a great time to be thinking about this – because - as you know - everyone on the planet is thinking about resolutions and changing stuff...

-Don’t believe me? Here’s a pic I snapped walking into my gym on October 19th

Show empty gym pic

-What do you think that gym is going to look like tomorrow on January 4th?

-Well today I want to talk about building habits, but I want to talk about something that is more important than losing weight, or getting out of debt, or whatever goal you have for yourself

-And that's the power of **daily Bible reading**

-I'd like for you to make it your goal to read the Bible and pray every day during 2016

-One of my favorite passages in the bible is the beginning of 1st Psalm

-Psalms is a collection of readings for devotion

-I remember memorizing this because of its amazing promise

¹ Blessed is the one

**who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,**

**² but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
and who meditates on his law day and night.**

**³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.**

-I want that SO MUCH for you here today

-But instead of just teaching a bunch of verses that talk about why that is important, I'd like to talk about how to build the habit of Bible reading and prayer

-Write down these 3 words: **REMINDER, ROUTINE, REWARD**

-Habit formation researchers talk about how if you want to make a behavior a habit, there has to be three things in place

-Let me give you an example of all three

-ex. smoking – many of you can't quit smoking

-and that's because you have created a habit fueled by a nicotine addiction

- You have a **reminder** – you wake and crave a morning cigarette – but there’s some reminder each day that it’s time – could be your alarm clock, or the TV coming on, or you open your car door
- You have the **routine** – you pick up the pack, you go someplace
- You have the **reward** – you have a nicotine hit, that’s a reward, but it is also possibly taking a break with friends, or enjoying the sunshine outside

-Let’s apply this to Bible reading.

-First we need a **REMINDER**

- When we think of reminders we think of Pavlov’s now famous dog experiment
 - where right before he’d feed a dog, he’d ring a bell
 - dog sees you with a bowl of food, ring the bell, hand the dog the food
 - After doing that so many times, Pavlov decided to simply ring the bell
 - And what happened? The dogs salivated simply because they heard the bell

-There was a more recent version of this study done. I’m not sure if you’ve seen it. Take a look at this...

[Play scene in The Office, Season 3, Episode 16, Phyllis’ Wedding, Jim gives Dwight Altoids]

-The lesson learned here is that our mental and physiological programming as mammals responds to reminders

-that’s how we create the dozens of small habits we practice every day

-So the first step of being able to read your Bible and pray every day is to set up a reminder

-Let me give you some options:

- One option is to **set a separate alarm on your phone** – when it goes off, it reminds you
- One option is to **have your Bible reading emailed to you**. Write this link down: <https://www.bible.com/reading-plans> (link also in ccv app). They have a few dozen Bible reading plans that can be sent by email every day
- Another alarm could be an automatic coffee brewer that’s set to go off at a certain time
- Another option is to **set a time to meet with someone else**. Find an accountability partner.

-Whatever it is, set a reminder that it is time to read your Bible

-Second, we need a **ROUTINE**

-When you think of a routine think of a place and a process

-For something to be routine, it must be easy to repeat

-Over the years I've noticed three reasons why Christians fail to create a successful routine of Bible reading, even when they have a reminder to do it

-**Lack of privacy** – they didn't have a place to go where it was quiet

-**Lack of a simple plan** – they didn't know where to start

-**Unrealistic expectations** – they expected God to tear through the sky and reveals vast wonders of spiritual awesomeness in 60 seconds or less

-So what happened more than likely is they opened a Bible while everyone was watching TV or while at work, just sort of flipped it open and thumbed through it, didn't understand what they were reading, and gave up after 1 day.

-Here's how I'd tackle this.

-First, **pick a private place**.

-same place every day, preferably one where you can get away for just a few minutes

-It was Jesus who said,

“But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” – Matthew 6:6

Second, **settle on a plan**

My favorite would be the **one-year Bible reading plan**

<https://www.bible.com/reading-plans/60-the-one-year-bible>

-15 minutes a day, and after 1 year you've read the whole Bible

-You can have it emailed to you every day

-Or you can buy the one-year Bible

-My favorite Bible to recommend to people is the NIV Study Bible

-it has notes at the bottom that will explain things

-that is a great Bible for people who really want to understand what they're reading

-The thing is THERE IS POWER in focusing on this one thing...

-It makes me think of Michael Phelps...

From age 14 through the Beijing Olympics, Phelps trained seven days a week, 365 days a year.

He figured that by training on Sundays he got a 52-training-day advantage on the competition. He spent up to six hours in the water each day.

“Channeling his energy is one of his great strengths,” said Bowman.

Not to oversimplify, but it’s not a stretch to say that Phelps channeled all of his energy into one discipline that developed into one habit—swimming daily.

-Can you imagine how blessed you would be if you made Bible reading a daily part of your life?

-I LOVE that promise of Psalm 1...

**² but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
and who meditates on his law day and night.**

**³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.**

-Whatever they do prospers...

-That’s why I want to encourage you to put in the hard work of creating this habit in your life.

-I love what Gary Keller writes about doing the hard work of habit creation...

The right discipline goes a long way, and habits are hard only in the beginning. Over time, the habit you’re after becomes easier and easier to sustain. It’s true.

Habits require much less energy and effort to maintain than to begin. Put up with the discipline long enough to turn it into a habit, and the journey feels different.

Lock in one habit so it becomes part of your life, and you can effectively ride the routine with less wear and tear on yourself. The hard stuff becomes habit, and habit makes the hard stuff easy.
-Gary Keller, The ONE Thing

-So, how long will it take in order to create daily Bible reading as a habit?

-Researchers at the University College of London have the answer.

In 2009, they asked the question: **How long does it take to establish a new habit?**

They were looking for the moment when a new behavior becomes automatic or ingrained.

- **The point of “automaticity” came when participants were 95 percent through the power curve and the effort needed to sustain it was about as low as it would get.**
- They asked students to take on exercise and diet goals for a period of time and monitor their progress.
- The results suggest that it takes an average of 66 days to acquire a new habit.
- **The full range was 18 to 254 days, but 66 days represented a sweet spot—with easier behaviors taking fewer days on average and tough ones taking longer.**

-So 66 days, that’s how long it would take to make daily Bible reading a habit

-I believe that would be Wednesday, March 9th

-Are you willing to give up 15 minutes a day until March 9th to change your life?

-To literally change the rest of your life?

-Australian researchers Megan Oaten and Ken Cheng have even found some evidence of a halo effect around habit creation.

In their studies, **students who successfully acquired one positive habit reported less stress; less impulsive spending; better dietary habits; decreased alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine consumption; fewer hours watching TV; and even fewer dirty dishes.**

Sustain the discipline long enough on one habit, and not only does it become easier, but so do other things as well.

- This is why researcher Charles Duhigg calls some habits “keystone habits”
 - like a keystone over a door that holds the other stones in place, some habits are more important than others
 - Daily Bible reading is more important than all of them combined

-You want to get out of debt? Read the Bible daily.

-Whatever it is that you want to do in life, the most important thing you can do is fill your mind with God's word every single day

2 Timothy 3:16-17 says,

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

-so that's the first two things necessary to create a habit of daily Bible reading

-Reminder and Reward

-Third, we need to focus on the **REWARD**

-in order to stick with a habit you have to keep before you what the reward will be

-I love what one pastor in Calgary wrote about the benefits of reading God's word

Kelly Stickel wrote,

For those of us who have forgotten these benefits, here are 6 benefits the Word promises we will receive: (points and scriptures on one slide)

It gives you the power to overcome sin.

Psalm 119:11 says, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."

It gives you direction and clarity for your future.

Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path."

It is your weapon against temptation.

Matthew 4:3-4 says, "The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

It will bring you freedom from hurts, habits, and hang-ups.

John 8:31-32 says, "So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, 'If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'"

It will lead you to prosperity and success.

Joshua 1:8 says, "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success."

-and...

It will lead you to salvation and show you how to live God's way.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, "There's nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us."

-What could you possibly be doing over the next 66 days that would be more important than making daily Bible reading a habit?

-Do this.

Reminder, Routine, Reward

-Let's pray.