

INTRODUCTION

Happy New Year! We all like the idea of new beginnings. New Year is the time for New Year's resolutions. The top five New Year's Resolutions for 2015 were: (1) Lose Weight (2) Get organized (3) Stay fit and healthy (4) Get out of debt and save (5) Quit smoking.

One of the resolutions that appears on the list every year is to be more physically fit. That's a great idea, but the Bible speaks about another kind of fitness—spiritual fitness. Paul wrote to Timothy, "For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." (1 Timothy 4:8) Physical fitness has benefits in this life, but spiritual fitness has benefits in this life and the life to come.

During January, I'm going to be talking about Ten Habits of Healthy Believers. I want to challenge you to set a GOAL (not a resolution) to be present all five Sundays in January. This would be a great way to start 2016, gathering each week with God's family to worship and study His Word. Congratulations, you are already 1/5 of your way to the goal!

This study is based on a training curriculum I have written to train pastors around the world called "What Healthy Churches Do." Healthy churches are made up of Healthy Believers.

In Acts 2, the church was born when Peter preached the gospel on the Day of Pentecost. There had been 120 believers praying, and in one day, the church exploded to over 3,000 members. At the end of Acts 2 we discover the pattern for Healthy Churches and Healthy Believers. There are ten characteristics of these first Christians. All ten habits of healthy believers are previewed in Acts 2:42-47.

"They devoted themselves (continued steadfastly) to [1] the apostles' teaching and [2] to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and [3] to prayer. [4] Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. [5] All the believers were together and had everything in common. [6] Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. [7] Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. [8] They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and [9] enjoying the favor of all the people. And [10] the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

The most successful people and organizations excel at the basics. Alabama Football Coach Nick Saban has a coaching system called "the process." He doesn't focus on winning games. Instead he focuses on the very basics of the game: conditioning, tackling, blocking, teamwork, and mental toughness. He knows if his players excel at the basics, the result is usually a win. They don't use a lot of trick plays; they just perform the basics with excellence. And they beat a very good Michigan State team 38-0 on Friday.

That's what this series is all about. We're going to be focusing on ten basic Christian disciplines. You probably won't learn anything new, but it is my prayer that you'll make these ten basic practices a part of your daily life. The result will be that you will grow into Christian maturity.

I want to express each of these ten habits as a confession.

1. I APPLY THE TRUTH OF THE BIBLE IN MY DAILY LIFE

We read, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching..." The Apostles were teaching the Word of God. A healthy Christian is someone who holds the Bible, God's Word, as the source of authority for all truth and practice. A healthy Christian doesn't just read the Bible, he or she applies the Bible to every area of their lives.

But according to the latest surveys by George Barna, there is a dangerous level of biblical illiteracy among Christians. Here are some actual answers given by middle school students in a Christian school: (1) Noah's wife was Joan of Ark. (2) Moses went to the top of Mt. Cyanide to get the 10 Commandments. (3) The seventh commandment is, "Thou shalt not admit adultery." (4) Joshua fought the battle of Geritol. (5) The followers of Jesus were called the 12 decibels. (6) David killed Galahad, who was one of the Finkelsteins. (7) A Christian should have only one wife. This is called monotony.

A great goal for 2016 would be to read the entire Bible in one year. There are many great plans to help you stay on track, just Google read the Bible in one year, and there are lots of great free resources.

When I was growing up, one of the first songs I learned in Sunday School was: "The B-I-B-L-E, yes that's the book for me. I stand alone on the Word of God, the B-I-B-L-E."

That's easy for a child to sing. But can we really trust the Bible as God's Word? There are many books today claiming to be the Word of God. Muslims claim the Koran is the Word of God. The Book of Mormon claims to be the Word of God. The Hindus believe the Bhagavad-Gita is the source of eternal truth. But the Bible makes a claim about itself that no other holy writings make. The Bible says, "All scripture is God-breathed." (2 Timothy 3:16) That means God inspired the men who wrote down the Bible. It is God speaking to man through men.

Virgil or Homer never prefaced their writings with "hear the word of the gods." Shakespeare or Milton never asserted their writings came straight from God. But in the Bible, you read the phrase "Thus says the Lord" over 2,600 times. When the Bible speaks, God speaks—it is divinely inspired. How do you know you can trust the Bible?

A. Eyewitnesses of Jesus wrote the New Testament

When the early church met to study God's Word, they didn't have the Gospel of Matthew or John written down. They had something better—Matthew and John were there. When I say, "Turn to John 3" you open your Bibles. When Peter said, "Turn to John" the people literally turned to listen to John tell stories about Jesus.

The Apostle's teaching came from two sources. First, they used the Old Testament to prove Jesus had fulfilled all the prophecies about the Messiah. Second, they simply talked about what they had heard Jesus say and seen Jesus do. From the very beginning, this oral tradition was

repeated hundreds of times as new believers were added to the church. Only years later did they start writing these stories down since they realized the original disciples wouldn't be around forever.

There are many critics today, who try to dismiss the New Testament as being a fictional account. Many Christian High School students arrive as freshmen in college and have some professor tell them the Bible is just a bunch of fairy tales—and they believe it. For instance, Richard Dawkins, an aggressive atheist has written a book entitled, *The God Delusion*. He makes this claim about the four gospel writers: "Nobody knows who the four evangelists were, but they almost certainly never met Jesus personally. Much of what they wrote was in no sense an honest attempt at history. The gospels are ancient fiction."

I wouldn't mind if Richard Dawkins said he didn't believe the stories about Jesus, but to claim nobody knows the identity of four Gospel writers is pure ignorance. Even secular historians who are honest admit there was a man named Jesus and His followers reported his words and deeds. Any honest scholar must agree there is a strong oral and literary connection between the message of the early Church and the writings of the New Testament.

Peter made this claim about what was written in the Gospels: "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty." (2 Peter 1:16)

If you apply the same literary standards to the Bible that are applied to other historical literature, you find there is no other writing that can compare with the textual integrity of the Bible. For instance, you seldom hear philosophers or historians claim Plato never lived or he never actually said some of the quotes attributed to him. Yet there are only seven existing manuscripts containing information about Plato. At the same time, there are thousands of manuscripts containing New Testament writings. Yet some scholars continue to question the reliability of the Bible.

For instance, Julius Caesar wrote a lengthy account of the Gallic Wars, which is still used in West Point to teach strategy. Yet there are only 10 supporting manuscripts (none original) and the oldest dates back to 1,000 years *after* the life of Caesar.

In comparison, the New Testament has over 5,500 supporting manuscripts, and the oldest extant manuscript is dated to only 70 years after the crucifixion. Which of these documents would you judge to have the most textual integrity? Dr. William F. Albright, a Fulbright Scholar at Johns Hopkins University wrote: "No other work from Greco-Roman antiquity is so well attested by manuscript tradition as the New Testament." You can trust that what you have is a true recording of the words and activities of Jesus.

B. The theme of the Bible is finding life in Jesus

The amazing thing about the Bible is that it is actually 66 books written over a period of 1,600 years by forty different men, yet it has one unified theme: God's redemption of the human race by sending Jesus. You find Jesus in all 66 books of the Bible. When addressing the Jewish

leaders Jesus said, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life." (John 5:39-40)

God gave us the words of the Bible, not to just give us a lot of great stories, but that we might have life. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10).

The Bible is an amazing book. The truth in it can change a life, change a community, and change a culture. Here's a true story about the power of the Bible to change lives. In 1951 Dr. Julius Hickerson, a physician, was serving as a Southern Baptist missionary in Columbia. He was flying from Columbia to Venezuela when his plane went down in a remote area of the Andes Mountains. His body was never recovered. Some people who knew him as a brilliant physician talked about a wasted life.

But two years later, a delegation of natives from the interior came to our Baptist Mission station in Barranquilla. The missionaries found that these natives were Christians, but they were bewildered because no mission work had been sent into the dangerous interior of Columbia. When they asked how the natives were Christians, they produced a beautiful leather bound Spanish Bible. The name of Julius Hickerson was written on the flyleaf. The natives had found the book lying open on the ground several miles from where Julius Hickerson's plane was lost. They called it "the book from heaven." Only one member could read Spanish, so he read it to the entire tribe, and they all became Christians, and they had started dozens of churches.

God says, "So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:11)

The second habit of healthy believers is:

2. I REGULARLY ENGAGE IN CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

"They devoted themselves...to the fellowship to the breaking of bread." Christian fellowship is more than two fellows in one ship. The Bible word for fellowship is *koinonea*, which literally means, "sharing life together." The Bible says they had fellowship through the breaking of bread. From the very first, some of the best Christian fellowship has been enjoyed around a meal. If there's one thing Baptists are known for, it is our covered dish suppers. When someone is sick, we take him or her food. When someone experiences the death of a loved one, we take him or her food.

In a second grade class, each student was asked to bring something to represent their faith. A Jewish boy brought a Star of David. A Catholic girl brought a crucifix. And a Baptist boy brought a casserole dish! Meeting and eating is a part of Biblical fellowship. Fellowship is when Christians come together in community. The word community means that we share something in common; we all have Jesus as our Lord. Let's explore the idea of community from two different perspectives.

A. God has always created a loving community

God lives in community with Himself. The Lord is One God, but He exists as a Tri-unity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When God was ready to create humanity, He said, "Let us make man in our own image." He didn't say, "I will make man in my own image." I don't understand all the depths of meaning of the Trinity. It's beyond human comprehension. John Wesley wrote, "If you can explain to me how you can have three candles in one room, and only one light, I will explain the Trinity to you."

God saw that it was not good for Adam to be alone, so He created a community for him called a family. Then when God was ready to form a nation, He started with a family. God said to Abram, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:2-3)

That was a promise that wasn't fulfilled for many generations, but eventually, the descendants of Abraham came together and formed a community called the nation of Israel. When Jesus began His ministry, He didn't try to ride solo. He gathered twelve disciples around Him to form a community. And we see that the church in the book of Acts continued this wonderful relationship of being in community. And that's what we are today—a community of faith.

So what is the benefit of living in fellowship with other Christians?

B. We will grow stronger when we live in community with other believers

The point of this is that you can't really exist as a Lone Ranger Christian. You must live out your faith in community with others. Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto!

It is a sad truth that many people calling themselves Christians have gotten out of the good habit of attending church on a regular basis. Every church roll in America is full of people who haven't shown up in years. Years ago, I was visiting in a pastor's study in Alabama and his church roll was open on his desk. I noticed he had written the letters FBPO beside the names of many of the members. I asked him what that stood for. He said, "For Burial Purposes Only." Folks, that's a sad reason to be a member of a church so that when you die your obituary will list you as a member of that church.

Why don't people attend church? A few years ago, a poll listed the top seven reasons people gave for not attending church. And I have an answer for each one.

#7: *The church is full of hypocrites.*

That may be true, but we've always got room for one more.

#6: *I'm against organized religion.*

Show up here and you'll find that we can be pretty disorganized at times!

#5: *I don't believe in God.*

That's okay because God believes in you.

#4: *Church members are so judgmental*

Actually, we're all carrying so much baggage we can't throw stones at anybody

#3: *I think I should get right with God before I come to church.*

You've got it completely backwards

#2: *I'm just not being fed.*

We're not here to feed you, but to equip you to feed yourself and others

#1: *Churches just want my money.*

Actually God just wants you. God and the church can make it without your money. But you can't make it without a loving relationship with your Creator.

There are bad habits and good habits. And the Bible says gathering with other believers is a good habit. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way, "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:24-25) Even back when Hebrews was penned, there were believers who had developed the bad habit of not gathering with other believers. I'm so thankful we have this television ministry for those who are physically unable to attend church. We are happy to be your church connection. But if you are healthy enough to attend a church, show up and encourage others and be encouraged. Watching a worship service on television or listening to a message from a podcast will never substitute for gathering face-to-face with God's people.

Dale and I just returned a couple of weeks ago from another trip to the Philippines. There is a spiritual awakening happening there in those islands. Thousands are coming to Christ. The Philippines have an average of 20 typhoons a year, but that doesn't stop them from worshipping. These folks love to gather for fellowship and worship. Someone sent me a picture of a congregation meeting in a flooded church. That's fellowship. And all it takes for some of us is to hear a weather forecast halfway through the week that it might rain on Sunday, and we make up our minds, "Oops, no church for me this Sunday."

I had a drug problem when I was growing up: My parents drug me to church. Even when I was a teenager and didn't want to go, they drug me to church. It wasn't an option. As I prepared for this message, I remembered something from my childhood that seemed insignificant at the time. We had a Saturday night ritual at my house. Every Saturday evening, my dad would have my brother and me bring him our Sunday shoes and he would shine them for us, and later show us how to shine them. He'd shine his Sunday shoes, too. Looking back on that, I discovered a very important family lesson. My dad started preparing to take his family to church on Saturday night. We never woke up on Sunday morning and wondered if we were going because of the weather or we overslept. The decision was made on Saturday night with the shining of the shoes. Dads and moms: What a great lesson to teach your kids. Start preparing them to go to church on

Saturday night and it will be a lesson they will take with them through life. Showing up for Christian fellowship is an important habit for a healthy believer.

Can you have Christian fellowship outside of the church? Absolutely, but it is always an outflow of your fellowship in the church. Jesus is coming back, and that day is approaching. The Bible says we should be even MORE committed to gathering and encouraging one another. Is your attendance and fellowship trending up or has it been trending down?

CONCLUSION

I told you these were basics. Do you hold believe and trust the Bible for your source of authority in your life? Are you faithful to be a part of the Christian community? We use the wrong language, which leads to wrong understanding. You don't go to church on Sunday; you *are* the church. Say that with me. I don't go to church; I *am* the church.

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



*David O. Dykes, Pastor
Green Acres Baptist Church
Tyler, Texas*
