

INTRODUCTION

During January, we've been examining the Ten Habits of Healthy Believers. A habit is something you do over and over. Of course, there are good habits and bad habits. Recently, *Reader's Digest* published an article on the top ten bad habits of Americans. See if you have any of these habits: (1) Snacking non-stop, even when you're not hungry. (2) Spending too much time on the couch watching TV. (3) Overspending your way into debt. (4) Eating too much fast food. (5) Getting sunburned a few times every year. (6) Nail-biting. (7) Skipping breakfast. (8) Drinking too much alcohol. (9) Smoking cigarettes. (10) Overusing pain killers and sedatives.

The 18th Century English writer Samuel Johnson wrote: "The chains of habit are generally too small to be felt until they are too strong to be broken." A Chinese proverb says, "Habits begin as cobwebs, but they soon become cables."

During this series we're talking about ten good habits. The way you make a single action a habit is to continue to do it over and over until it becomes natural. Physical health is very important for this life, but the Bible says spiritual health is important both for this life and for the life to come. Our pattern for healthy churches and healthy believers is found in the last verses of Acts 2. This describes how the early church functioned.

On the Day of Pentecost Peter preached the gospel with power and boldness. I want us to begin our reading in Acts 2:41 so we can see the results of Peter's message.

"Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

How many of you have had perfect attendance for all four Sundays in January? Great! It's going to be a great year for you if you embrace these ten habits. Let's review them.

1. I apply the truth of the Bible in my daily life.
2. I regularly engage in Christian fellowship.
3. I make prayer a daily priority.
4. I trust God to do the impossible.
5. I jealously guard the unity of my church.
6. I joyfully share the financial resources God gives me.

Now we come to the next Healthy Habit for believers.

7. I ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE IN LARGE GROUP WORSHIP

The Bible says, "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts." We're going to see that the early church met in two different settings, large group worship when everyone came together and then they broke off into smaller groups. The first large gathering must have been to baptize those 3,000 new converts on the Day of Pentecost.

Peter preached at 9:00 in the morning, so I'm sure the Apostles spent the rest of the day baptizing converts, probably in the Pool of Siloam, less than a quarter mile from the upper room where they had been praying. The Pool of Siloam was about 225 feet long, which is about a third longer than an Olympic sized pool. I did the math. If all 12 Apostles were baptizing at the same time—Judas had been replaced by Matthias—baptizing one convert every two minutes, it would have taken over eight hours to baptize 3,000 people! That's a lot of dipping! I'm sure there was a lot of celebration as well.

But then we see that the growing church would gather every day (not just Sunday) in the Temple Courts. There were really only two possible places where a crowd of over 3,000 people could gather. First, they could have gone outside the city walls and met outdoors on the side of a hill. The option they chose was to meet in the Temple courts. When Herod the Great renovated the Temple he brought in thousands of cubic tons of dirt and rocks and built a large flat platform around the Temple. This large open area was called the temple courts. It was the size of about 14 football fields. There was a porch running around the top of the outer temple walls, so I can easily picture several thousand of these new believers gathered in the corner with the Apostles up on the raised porch. They gathered there because the Temple was known as a place of worship. It was where they knew the presence of God had been. It was important for them to worship in a place dedicated to worship. So what did they do? They sang the Psalms of worship, and the Apostles preached the Word of God. And those are still the twin towers of all group worship. Why did you come to worship today? Let me give you two reasons.

A. We gather together to praise God

I love the word "together." Did you notice the Bible says they "met together." Many people justify never coming to church by saying, "I can worship God just as well out on the lake, or while I'm sitting alone in my backyard." Of course we can worship the Lord personally, and we should do that every day. But there is nothing in the world that can take the place of meeting together with other believers to praise God. We are commanded to praise the Lord over 300 times in the Old Testament alone.

Worship should always be God-centered not person-centered. Our choir and praise team aren't up here performing to you. They are leading all of us to sing songs of joy to an audience of One. Worship is primarily to express our love and adoration to God. But there is a side-effect of worship: It creates an atmosphere of joy. David knew this when he sang, "My soul will boast in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together." (Psalm 34:2-3) There's that word together again. Some days, you might come to worship with pain and affliction, but David said when the afflicted hear us worshipping God, it causes them to rejoice.

Everybody worships something or somebody. Louie Giglio's definition of worship is, "Worship is our response to what we value most. Everyone has an altar and every altar has a throne. How do you know where and what you worship? It's easy; you simply follow the trail of your time, your affection, your energy, your money and your allegiance. At the end of that trail you'll find a throne; and whatever, or whoever is on that throne is what's of highest value to you." (*The Air I Breathe*)

I watched a video once of an Elvis concert. It was a lot like church. People were standing, swaying, lifting their hands, and singing along. The camera zoomed in on one female fan. She had a look of utter awe and adoration on her face as tears rolled down her cheeks. That's worship, but that's worshipping the wrong King.

When you gather together here at Green Acres we're going to worship the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, whether it's GABC South, Crosswalk, or Celebration, we're going to lift up the matchless name of Jesus. But we meet together for another important reason too.

B. We gather together to hear from God

In healthy churches, the pastor always preaches the word of God. Healthy believers always bring their Bibles with them, whether it's in their hand or in their digital device. Preaching the word of God is central to healthy worship.

We've made a lot of technological advancements over the centuries, especially over the past forty years. There are podcasts, telecasts, and videos galore. But there is nothing that replaces gathering with God's people to hear God's Word proclaimed. From the beginning of the church until 2016, there has never been anything to replace a man of God standing before the people of God sharing the life-changing Word of God.

Paul mentioned the value of preaching when he wrote, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Romans 10:14) And the most important thing about preaching is NOT the person who is doing the preaching. It is the powerful Word of God that is taught. I hope you never come to church to hear me or any other preacher. I hope you come with a desire to hear from God.

Henry Ward Beecher was a famous preacher in New York City in the late 1800s. He was like the Charles Stanley of his day. Many people traveled to New York to hear Beecher preach.

One particular Sunday Beecher was gone and had invited his brother, Thomas, to speak in his absence. When it came time for the message, Thomas walked into the pulpit. Many people were disappointed that Henry Ward Beecher wasn't preaching, so a large number of people got up to exit. Thomas raised his hand for silence and said, "Everyone who has come to hear Henry Ward Beecher may leave. But those who have come to worship God and to hear from God may remain." And many people returned to their seats having been reminded of the real purpose of worship.

I hope that never happens here. If you read on Thursday in the Life Support newsletter that someone else is preaching the following Sunday, I hope you never say, "Well, I won't go this Sunday because Pastor David isn't preaching." We meet together to praise God and to hear from God. Is that a habit that is part of your life? Or is it something you do occasionally or rarely?

8. I AM CONNECTED TO OTHERS IN A SMALLER GROUP

The Bible says, "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God." It's very clear the first believers gathered together in two settings, just like we do on Sundays. They met together to worship in a large group. Then they ate together in homes around the city. A healthy believer needs BOTH experiences. At Green Acres, worship happens at 9:00 and 10:30. Smaller groups also meet across our campus at 9:00 and 10:30. We call these groups SMBS, which stands for Sunday Morning Bible Study. Years ago, it was called Sunday School, but we have many teenagers and adults who think Sunday School is only for kids.

According to our records, there are about 1,000 people who attend worship, but aren't connected in a Sunday Morning Bible Study group. After the 9:00 Worship ends, there are lots of people who head for the parking lot instead to an SMBS group. And there are people pulling into our parking lot for the 10:30 worship who didn't benefit from an SMBS group. If you're one of those who haven't yet connected to an SMBS, the best thing you can do to improve your spiritual health is to connect with one of these groups. Let me give you four important reasons why everyone needs a SMBS group. These are four ships you don't want to miss.

A. FRIENDSHIP: You know people by name

If you only attend worship, and you sit in the same spot as most people do, you may or may not know the names of those who sit around you. It's good we greet each other during worship, but it's impossible to build deep friendships when you only attend worship. I certainly don't know every member of our church by name. But I can promise you that for every person who is a part of a SMBS group, they are known by name in that group. In fact most of our groups use nametags every Sunday. They are always open to new people to join them.

In his third letter the Apostle John indicates the value of friendship. He closed his letter by writing, "I hope to see you soon, and we will talk FACE TO FACE. Peace to you. The FRIENDS here send their greetings. Greet the FRIENDS there by NAME." (3 John 14)

John was using the most technologically advanced method of communication at the time. He or a scribe was writing it with ink on dried papyrus; then it was to be hand delivered hundreds of miles away. But John said the best way to communicate is face to face. Millions use social media to connect, but there's no substitute for personal interaction.

In light of social media, let me remind you of these three truths: Fact-to-face is better than cyberspace; face look is better than Facebook; the best face time is not a video chat. That's what you get in an SMBS group.

B. SCHOLARSHIP: You can interact about the Bible

Bible is the middle name of our SMBS groups! The curriculum isn't politics or philosophy; it is the Word of God. Our SMBS teachers are some of the most godly people I've ever known. They dig into the word of God every week to be prepared to teach. Have you ever noticed when I preach on Sunday mornings, I don't stop at the end and ask, "Now are there any questions?" But in your SMBS class, if you have a question, you can raise your hand and ask, or the teacher may ask for feedback or discussion.

When I prepare a message I try to communicate it in a way a twelve-year-old can understand. I try to keep it simple. I don't use many double-jointed 16-cylinder words. The audience who hears me has a spiritual maturity level ranging from clueless to scholars. So I subscribe to the KISS theory of preaching: Keep It Simple & Short. In a SMBS class, you have the opportunity to grow deeper in your understanding of the Bible.

C. FELLOWSHIP: You share food and fun

Verse 46 says they ate together in their homes with glad and sincere hearts. I grew up in a small church where we often had dinner on the grounds or cover dish suppers. How many of you remember that?

Now, we'll never have a covered dish supper for our whole church. Can you imagine how long that line would be? But if you want to know where that kind of glad and happy food and fellowship happens, it's in the SMBS groups. Each group has some social coordinators who plan these fellowship events.

Every SMBS in our church is like a smaller church within the church. Most of them are mid-sized; some are large. But the large groups are divided into smaller prayer and care groups.

The largest Baptist Church in the world is Sungrak (Holy Joy) Baptist Church outside Seoul, Korea. They started with seven members in 1969 and now have over 200,000 members. How can they manage that size church? They have 63 branch campuses. In addition, they have over 7,000 cell groups that meet each week in the homes and apartments of a member. To be a member of the church you must be a member of a cell group.

The best way for our church to grow larger and to grow healthier is for every member to be involved in the fellowship offered in an SMBS group.

D. HARDSHIP: You receive/give support in times of crisis

Your life can change suddenly with one phone call. You may get a cancer diagnosis. You may have to undergo surgery or treatment. You may lose your job. You may have a death in your family. There are more different kinds of crises than I have time to mention. If you are not part of an SMBS group, and you go through a life crisis, we may not know about it unless you let us know about it. But if you're in a smaller group, chances are they are going to know about it and they will be there to support you and pray for you. I can give you a perfect example of that from

this past week. Last Monday, one of our long-time faithful members, Virbel Trotter, died suddenly. For over twenty years, Virbel and Sue have been involved in the Friendship Class taught by John Childs. They were the class coordinators for 23 years. Virbel was here last Sunday. His job was to pass around the Good News Box. It's just a wooden box and when someone in the class has praise for an answered prayer, or a new grandchild, or a graduation they put a dollar or a few into the box and make their praise report. The class uses the money to help families during grief. I visited Sue this week and her kitchen was full of food brought by class members. It was pouring rain Thursday morning at Virbel's funeral, yet the funeral home chapel was packed with class members there to support Sue and her family. And then they provided lunch here at the church for all forty family members. That's ministry in action. If you're not in an SMBS, who is going to support you in times of crisis? And you can turn that around, because this gave the class members a chance to show the love of Jesus by supporting Sue.

If you're not in an SMBS group, and would like to see which groups are available to you, just stop by the Welcome Center in the foyer of the Worship Center, or stop by the Bethany Suite beside the Bookstore. We have a menu of all our smaller groups, and you can have several options.

CONCLUSION

This world is full of lonely people and SMBS is one of God's cures for loneliness. Paul McCartney and John Lennon were amazing songwriters. Did you know they first met at a church? It was Saturday, July 6, 1957. John's group, the Quarry Men Skiffle Group, were playing at a church dance at St. Peter's Church in Liverpool. A mutual friend introduced John and Paul. After the dance Paul showed how he could play and sing some rock and roll classics. Two weeks later he joined the group and the rest is history.

In the cemetery of that church is a gravestone that has many family names on it. One of them is Eleanor Rigby, who died at age 44. Nine years later, the Beatles would record a ballad about loneliness. The last verse says, "Eleanor Rigby died in the church and was buried along with her name. Nobody came. (She didn't have a SMBS group, apparently.) Father McKenzie wiping the dirt from his hands as he walks from the grave. No one was saved. All the lonely people; where do they all come from? All the lonely people; where do they all belong?" Lonely people belong in groups of real forever friends, a spiritual family. In Psalm 68:5 the Bible says, that God is, "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families." God's holy dwelling is the Church and you'll find a forever family by worshipping in a large group and by connecting with a smaller group.

These are healthy habits that will make you a stronger Christian. But you must be committed to doing them over and over until they become a part of your regular lifestyle.

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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