

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to 2016. This is going to be an interesting year. It's a leap year, and we will be inaugurating a new U. S. President in only 353 days. The stock market is erratic, oil prices are falling, and the fears of the American people are rising. According to a poll conducted by the *Washington Post*, a large majority of Americans believe that we are at war with "radical Islam." In the same poll, 83% of Americans believe there will be another major terrorist attack on our soil in the next twelve months. Are you ready to face the challenges ahead?

A man was walking along and he saw a guy getting ready to jump off a bridge. He ran up and said, "Wait, what are you doing?" The guy said, "Life isn't worth living. I'm getting ready to jump off this bridge." The walker said, "Let's make a deal. You give me five minutes to tell you why life is worth living, and I'll give you five minutes to tell me why life isn't worth living." They agreed. And according to the story, after ten minutes, both of them jumped off the bridge.

Well, I'm here to say it loud and clear that if you know Jesus Christ, life is worth living. But as the New Testament says, in this world we will have tribulation, so we must be strong in the Lord and the power of His might. To face the challenges ahead, we need to be healthy, strong, fit believers. This month, we've been looking at Ten Habits of Healthy Believers.

I'm here to "pump you up" spiritually so you can be ready for what's ahead. How many of you have had perfect attendance in January? Great! Our model for a healthy church and healthy believers is found in Acts 2. Peter preached the Gospel and 3,000 people were baptized in one day. Then we see how these Believers related to God and to each other. Let's read our text again.

Acts 2:42-47. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching [that's applying the Bible to my life] and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread [engaging in Christian fellowship is healthy] and to prayer [Is prayer a personal priority for you?]. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. [Are you trusting God for the impossible?] All the believers were together and had everything in common [that speaks of the beauty of unity]. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. [Generosity is a healthy habit]. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. [That's large group worship] They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God [That's connecting through smaller groups] and [Our final two habits are] enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Habits are powerful things. Like ruts in a dirt road, habits are neural pathways of behavior that you drive over again and again until they become conditioned behavior. There are good habits to embrace and bad habits to avoid.

I found a poem about habits from an unknown writer:

I am your constant companion.

I am your greatest helper or heaviest burden.

I will push you onward or drag you down to failure.
I am completely at your command.

Half of the things you do you might as well turn over to me and I will do them—quickly and correctly.

I am easily managed—but you must be firm with me.
Show me exactly how you want something done and after a few lessons, I will do it automatically.

I am the servant of great people, and alas, of all failures as well.
Those who are great I have made great.
Those who are failures, I have made failures.

I am not a machine, though I work with the precision of a machine plus the intelligence of a person.

You may run me for profit or run me for ruin—it makes no difference to me.

Take me, train me, be firm with me, and I will place the world at your feet.
Be easy with me and I will destroy you.

Who am I?

I am Habit.

Author Unknown

You will control your habits or your habits will control you. Will you make a commitment to these healthy habits? We've already studied eight Healthy Habits of Believers. Each one is stated as a personal confession. I encourage you to keep this list in your Bible and practice them habitually.

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.
7. I actively participate in large group worship.
8. I am connected to others in a smaller group.

Now we come to habit #9.

9. I CONSISTENTLY SHARE MY FAITH STORY WITH NON-BELIEVERS

The Bible says these believers were, "...enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." The Book of Acts can be summarized in three prepositions: UP, DOWN, and OUT. Jesus went UP, the Holy Spirit came DOWN, and the people went OUT. They went out sharing the good news about Jesus with their family and friends.

The members of the church in Jerusalem had such a positive impact on their community; it says they enjoyed the favor of all the people. The word favor means these healthy believers were a blessing to the people around them. Once they came to know Christ, they wanted others to experience the abundant life and joy they were enjoying.

The word evangelism means, "sharing the good news." In the church in Acts 2, there were two kinds of evangelism. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached the Gospel, and 3,000 people came to Christ. That's called mass evangelism. Throughout the years, God has used mass evangelism to bring people to himself. He has used evangelists like Billy Graham and Luis Palau. The other kind of evangelism is personal evangelism. It's when one person shares the gospel with another person or a small group of people.

Evangelism has always been the main mission of the church. And as you've heard before the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. C.S. Lewis wrote: "The church exists for nothing else but to draw men to Christ, to make them into little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose."

I'd like to conduct an unofficial survey right now. I am going to ask those of you who were saved how you came to know Christ. I will give you two options: (1) If you primarily came to Christ as a result of hearing a sermon by a preacher; (2) or you were saved because someone (a friend, family member, or Sunday School teacher) sat down and spoke with you personally about accepting Christ. Okay, ready? If you came to Christ by hearing a sermon, raise your hand—a few people. Finally, if you trusted Christ because someone cared enough for you to personally talk to you about Jesus raise your hand. Wow! See, the vast majority of us came to know Christ because someone shared the Good News with us. Next question: Are you consistently sharing your faith story with those who need Jesus? If not, let me make two suggestions.

A. Ask God to give you a burden for people without Christ

I want you to think of someone in your circle of relationships right now who might not be a follower of Jesus. They probably aren't attending church today. They might be a good person, but you aren't sure that if they died they would go to heaven. Do you care that this person might spend eternity in a place that Jesus called hell? The reason Jesus came to planet earth was to save people from a place called hell. He said, "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost." Luke 19:10.

The Apostle Paul was so burdened for the lost condition of his fellow Jewish brethren that he made an amazing statement. "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could

wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel." (Romans 9:2-4)

Paul is saying, "I am so burdened over my Jewish brothers and sisters without Christ that I would be willing to give up my salvation and to go to Hell if it would mean that they would be saved." Don't miss what he is saying here. He is speaking emotionally. He is not speaking theologically. Theologically, it is impossible for someone to give up their salvation and be cut off from Christ. He just wrote in Romans 8, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God." but he is saying, "Listen. My burden is so heavy that if I could, I would say 'All right. You folks go to heaven. In order for you to go to Heaven, I would be willing to go to Hell.'" He is so full of the spirit of Jesus and the mind of Christ that he is talking like Jesus did. Isn't that exactly what Jesus did? Didn't Jesus hang on the cross and literally baptize his soul in Hell? Wasn't he literally cut off and separated from God the Father on the cross so you and I could go to Heaven. He is so full of Jesus he is saying I'm willing to go to Hell that they could be saved. I'll be honest with you. I haven't reached verse 3 yet personally. I can't think of any person on earth I would be willing to give up my salvation for so they could go to Heaven except, perhaps, my wife and my two daughters. Would you ask God to burden your heart for those in your circle of relationships who need Jesus?

B. Always look for opportunities to start conversations about Christ

If you're sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, God will give you opportunities to talk about the Lord. I've been preaching for forty-six years, but when I was in seminary, I had a real job. I worked at an airport in Louisville, Kentucky. My job was to help in the shop, fuel the airplanes, and park them in the hangars. After I had been at the job for about a year I was helping one of the old mechanics overhaul an engine. The cowling was open and in the middle of the work, he stopped and looked up and me and said, "Dykes, what is it about you? You seem to be different. I've never heard you cuss, and you always seem to be happy. What's your secret?" Right there with our hands covered in grease and oil I got to tell him about Jesus.

Are you ready to give someone an answer if they ask you? The Bible says, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." (1 Peter 3:15-16)

If you know the Lord, you have a testimony. You may not think it's a dramatic testimony, but it's your personal faith story. It doesn't need to be more than two or three minutes long. A testimony has three parts: your life before Christ; how you came to know Christ; and the difference the Lord has made in your life. I'll model my short testimony right now. I was raised in a Christian family and went to church all my life. But when I was nine years old I realized my parents' faith wouldn't save me. I understood that I was a self-centered person. The Bible says that we have all sinned, and I came to understand that meant me. One Sunday night I heard my pastor talk about Jesus dying on the cross and for the first time I understood that He suffered and died for my sins. I decided to trust my life and my future to him. Since then, my life hasn't been perfect, but I've had God's joy and peace to carry me through every challenge of life. He's always with me. Have you ever had a similar experience?

When you come to the end of your life, how many people have you touched with the Gospel? At the end of a movie, they roll the closing credits. They list the name of anyone who had a part in the making of the movie. For instance in Iron Man 3 there were over 3,300 names rolling after the picture. Any person's salvation is like that—it's a team effort. Paul wrote, "I planted the seed, Apollos water it, but it was God who gave the increase." By sharing your faith story or just planting a seed about your relationship with Jesus, you can play a part in someone's salvation. So when the credits roll in heaven, will your name be listed? Whose salvation story have you been a part of? Healthy Believers share their faith story and have a positive impact on their community.

10. I GLADLY WELCOME NEWCOMERS TO MY CHURCH

"The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." Remember, the church started with just 120 people praying in an upper room in Acts 1. On the day of Pentecost, 3,000 people were saved. Luke tells us in Acts 4:4 the number of believers had grown until there were 5,000 men, not counting wives and children. Dr. Luke, author of Acts, kept an accurate record. Finally it had grown so much by the time Luke reported the number of believers in Jerusalem in Acts 21:20, he uses the word myriads which means "tens of thousands" or too many to count. Wow! That's what I call church growth—and that's just in Jerusalem. Since God was bringing multitudes of new people to the church every single day, these believers had to demonstrate a welcoming spirit to all the newcomers.

Some churches are very welcoming to new people, but some churches have a holy huddle mentality and they treat newcomers with suspicion. A lady who showed up in the foyer of an unfriendly church. The usher didn't recognize her and said, "Where would you like to sit." She said, "I'd like to sit down on the front row." The usher said, "I wouldn't do that if I were you. Our preacher is REALLY boring." The lady said, "Do you know who I am?" The usher said, "No." The lady said, "I'm the preacher's mother." The usher said, "Well, do you know who I am?" She said, "No." He said, "Good!" And he turned and walked away.

Green Acres is a friendly, welcoming church. That's why it's very important for you to adopt a habit of welcoming new people when God brings them our way. Let me tell you how we can all do a better job of welcoming new people into our fellowship.

A. Let's treat guests like we would treat Jesus

That's not farfetched. It's what He taught when Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me." (Matthew 18:5) That doesn't just apply to children; it applies to people of all ages. In Matthew 25 Jesus predicted a time in the future when He will say, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." He predicts we'll say, "Lord, when were you a stranger and we welcomed you?" He'll say, "When you did it unto one of the least of these you did it unto me."

We must always be mindful of newcomers to our church. Do you remember the first time you came to Green Acres? It can be scary. Imagine someone who has never been to Green Acres showing up here for the first time. They may not know where to go, or what to do.

That's why one of our most important ministries is our First Impressions Ministry. It's where we meet people in the parking lot, and at our entrances. You only get one chance to make a first impression. We need more volunteers for First Impressions, and the only qualifications are a warm smile and a friendly handshake. If you aren't yet working somewhere at Green Acres would you pray about volunteering to help us make a good first impression? There is an info table in the Worship Center foyer.

Vernon Harrison was a big, red-faced deacon in my first church out of seminary. He climbed power poles for the electric company. He was the kind of guy with a big belly and a short tie. He and his wife were our neighbors and they welcomed our little family of me, Cindy, and baby Jenni. I led the church to buy a 15-passenger van so we could pick up kids in a trailer park and bring them to Sunday School. Vernon was also our Sunday School Superintendent. Things went great with the van ministry until one Sunday I showed up for Sunday School and Vernon stormed into my office and slammed the door. He said, "Preacher, that van brought a couple of black kids to our church (except he didn't use the word "black kids.*)" I said, "Vernon, Jesus loves people of all races, and we should too." He was getting redder by the second. He said, "Well, all I have to say is that either those kids go, or I go!" I prayed for wisdom and said, "Vernon, what would Jesus do?" He didn't answer and stormed out and didn't stay for church.

These were precious little brothers who were about six and seven years old and they were neighbors and friends of one of the family of children we picked up on the van. As I preached that Sunday morning, I wondered which church Vernon was going to join next, because I wasn't going to tell the van driver not to pick up those or any kids.

On Monday night, Vernon was at my back door. He came in and it looked like he hadn't gotten much sleep the night before. I didn't know if he was going to hit me or cuss me out. He plopped down on our couch and that big old man broke into tears and said, "Preacher, I haven't been able to forget what you said. I figured Jesus would welcome those boys, so I guess I can too." And the next Sunday he was the first to welcome those little boys to Sunday School.

B. Let's welcome people who are still far from Christ

John described Jesus with these words, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) Jesus never compromised the truth, but He also embodied grace. He was the perfect combination, full of both grace and truth. He refused to condemn a woman caught in adultery who was about to be stoned. That's grace. But He said, "Go and sin no more." That's truth."

I want our church to be the kind of place where we never compromise the truth, but also a place of grace where we throw open our arms and welcome the people in our community who are far from Christ. Many churches aren't that way. They require people to CLEAN UP their act before they can come to their church. Jesus told us to be fishers of men and He says, "If you catch 'em, I'll clean 'em." I want us to welcome people regardless of how they dress, where they've been, and whatever baggage they may be carrying. Here are three words that start with B. Put them in the correct order for people to attend our church: Behave; belong; believe. Some churches are very strict and here's their order: You must first believe, then you must behave, then and only

then will we let you belong to our group. Let's change that. I want us to tell everyone in East Texas, it doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. Come to Green Acres. We're going to welcome you; you will instantly BELONG and then over a process of time with you, we know that you will come to BELIEVE and as God changes your life, then you will start BEHAVING.

CONCLUSION

Will you commit to these Ten Habits? If so, look for opportunities to share your faith story and have positive impact on our community. And let's be the arms of Christ and open wide to welcome new people God sends our way.

Mahatma Gandhi has been called the Father of India, because he led the movement for independence from Britain. In his autobiography he writes that as a young man he was interested in many different religions. He read the four Gospels and gained a deep appreciation for the life and ministry of Jesus. He came to believe that Christianity might hold the answer to the divided caste system that was part of their culture.

He decided to visit a Christian church in Punjab, Northern India one Sunday. However, when he entered the church foyer a British usher said, "This church is for Europeans and high caste Indians only. You are not welcome."

Gandhi turned away and never visited another church. He later wrote: "If Christians have caste differences also, I might as well remain a Hindu."

Today, 1.2 billion people live in India and most of them are Hindu. Imagine what a difference there might have been in that nation if that usher had welcomed Gandhi as if he was welcoming Jesus.

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



*David O. Dykes, Pastor
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