**Kingdom Habits**

Matthew 6:1-8,16-18

Fully **43% of what we do everyday is by sheer habit**, without a conscious thought. The human body is profoundly efficient and any way that it can conserve energy it will - including by filing any task possible into the category of ***MUSCLE MEMORY***. For example:

* Do you THINK about how you brush your teeth? Do you analyze the movements, left right, top bottom.
* Do you self-consciously decide the steps involved in shaving or doing your hair?
* Do you have a decision-making process to determine your breakfast? Or do you just grab a bowl and pour the cereal?
* Do you pause to consider what you will do first thing when you get out of bed? What comes second and third?
* Or fast forward to the end of the day - do you assess a matrix of options for “best activities before you sleep,” fill out some pros and cons and then land on the best choice for that day?

***Habits become a lifestyle and lifestyle becomes character.***

So as you think about your daily habits, your hardly conscious routines - where do the three disciplines Jesus names here come in? ***Giving, praying and fasting***. We would add Bible reading today, but no one owned a Bible and most weren’t literate anyway, so Bible reading was called Bible listening and it happened in the synagogue where the Jewish people collectively held their Torah scrolls and other parts of the Bible.

Giving, praying, reading the Bible and fasting. For some of you, ***these habits are ingrained in your lifestyle*** and at this point would be impossible to remove. You just get up, make your coffee and sit down with the Lord in that comfortable, familiar place. **Giving** is probably one of those that is just **programmed into your banking app**, or into your bi-weekly budgeting process. You get paid, most likely via direct deposit, and then you fire off your gift to the church, whether every time you get paid or once a month on a certain day.

These three or four disciplines are not the only ones, but they are ***important habits to develop in the Christian life***. Here in Matthew 6 Jesus shows us both what NOT TO DO and what TO DO as we develop kingdom habits. But look at the context as we begin, glancing back at Matthew 5:48:

“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.” Matthew 5:48-6:1

Jesus summarized his teaching on pride, lust and anger - matters of the heart - with that statement - “You therefore must be perfect.” That is **God’s standard** - that we would be like Him. How are we supposed to become like God? ***How can we pursue this standard of PERFECTION?*** By developing habits. By PRACTICING righteousness. If we don’t practice righteousness guess what… we are practicing UNrighteousness - which is called sin.

But there are ways to practice righteousness, ways to implement these disciplines that have a negative effect. So let’s look at the **what not to do** and then the what to do.

**How NOT TO Give, Pray and Fast:**

* To **Impress** others

“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you as the hypocrites do… that they may be praised by others.” Matthew 6:2

It’s hard to imagine ***trumpets being played as part of the offertory*** at church - but in ancient times, sadly, this practice developed among the Jewish people. I suppose it started more or less like the bell ringers of the Salvation Army - just a reminder to give and a celebration that someone dropped some money in. But it grew into a whole fanfare to acknowledge the most wealthy givers who supported the local synagogue and the temple area.

Wealthy benefactors were a big part of the economy of the first century. ***Luke acknowledges his patron whom he calls “Theophilus,”*** meaning lover of God or friend of God - in the opening of the book of Acts. That was almost certainly a pseudonym for a patron who wanted to remain anonymous - but it shows that someone sponsored Luke’s work of drawing up an orderly account of the life and ministry of Jesus and then the development and explosive growth of the early church.

Theophilus followed the teachings of Jesus in this area. He did not ask for or want an elaborate attribution - a plaque with his name on the temple wall or anything. He simply provided for Luke’s travel expenses and other necessities while he was writing. We hear ofa centurion in Acts 9 and 10 by the name of **Cornelius**. The Holy Spirit sent Peter to share the gospel with this god-fearing Gentile who was known to the Jews as a patron of their local synagogue. The Lord had been working in his heart and moved him to invest financially in a Jewish congregation, paying for some or all of their expenses - regularly.

That kind of ***generous support was commonplace*** and was how ministry functioned for Jesus and later for Paul on his missionary journeys. Jesus did not have a board of directors and a fundraising team channeling money his way for his three years of ministry. There are a couple of passing references to the fact that some women traveled with Jesus and the twelve disciples and provided for their needs out of their own means.

Anyone who says the Bible is sexist or anti-women just hasn’t studied the Bible. ***Jesus was amazingly supportive of and empowering to women***. And he happily accepted their financial support, as we still do today. But that financial support is very much in the background of the life and ministry of Jesus. We don’t know the names of these women. We can pretty safely guess that Mary Magdalene was not one of the wealthy benefactors given her vocation before following Jesus. We know some other women like Mary and Martha, Salome and Mary the mother of Jesus - but have no way of knowing who the rich ones were. Nor does it matter. The point is that God provided for their needs and the ones who gave the funds weren’t doing it to get named in the history books.

So first of all, don’t give, pray or fast to impress people. Second:

**How NOT TO Give, Pray and Fast:**

* To feel **Superior** to others

“And when you pray you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray… that they may be seen by others.” Matthew 6:5

The Jewish synagogues and the temple area especially developed **regular patterns of worship and prayer** - daily, weekly and monthly. The priests were a special genetic line not only descended from Levi but specifically from Aaron the original high priest - so they were set apart by blood and by tradition to serve God’s people with the most holy places and practices. Alongside the priests were levites and scribes, rabbis and teachers of the law. And in the Jewish culture, these were at the very top of the social ladder - they were among the most respected and well known people in a given town or region.

Really, it wasn’t that different from our church system today in America - that certain pastors of large, prominent churches, become very well known and have national or even international followings with their books, sermons and ministries. So the danger of being a HYPOCRITE continues to this day for church leaders in particular but for all regular churchgoers as well. ***Do we love to PRAY or do we love being HEARD when we pray?***

A penetrating question to consider is - ***how much do you pray in PUBLIC versus how much you pray in PRIVATE?*** This week in Community Groups everyone is going to be all reluctant to pray out loud. I’m not saying that it’s bad to pray out loud in a worship service or small group - someone has to do it! Hopefully several people will be willing to do it.

The point is to check our hearts and ***evaluate WHY we pray***. Is it to impress people with our spiritual vocabulary or theological insight? Or is to feel superior over new believers or other believers who just prefer to pray in private? Those are more wrong motives to practice these acts of righteousness. One more.

**How NOT TO Give, Pray and Fast:**

* To **Manipulate** God

“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.” Matthew 6:7

***Prayer is not MAGIC.*** It’s important to say that out loud and make it clear. Prayer is not about getting the formula right so the Divine Vending Machine works for you. You look at the selections - healthy body, loaded bank account, new hot wife, successful children - press the option you want and then put in the **properly calculated payment** of time in prayer, number of words prayed, appropriate amount of sincerity, including some actual tears, number of other people you’ve enlisted to pray, and the number of Bible studies where you mention the same request.

***Aren’t you glad that prayer doesn’t work that way?*** Think how stressed we would always be, worrying about whether we had done enough! Imagine if God set a time amount - like 20 minutes - and as soon as you failed to pray for your child or grandchild for that exact amount of time, bad things would then happen to that child. That isn’t Biblical Christianity, that is black magic from the dark ages.

Don’t think that your praying, your giving, your fasting, your Bible reading, your church attendance, your gospel sharing, your community service - don’t think that any of that or the sum total of all of it ***is scoring you points with God*** that you can cash in later for stuff that you want. That misunderstands both the gospel and our relationship with God.

The gospel reminds us that all of our points we might try to score would not be enough even if we gave it a real hard go like the Pharisees. In fact, we all start really deep in the hole when it comes to points, so our best efforts at giving, praying and fasting can’t even zero out the red in our ledger much less start earning us positive credit with God. ***That’s why Jesus came to die for us - to give us credit for the righteous life we could never live.***

“You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,” is a gospel wake up call to make it clear that no one goes to heaven on their own. ***The only way to earn your way to heaven is to be absolutely PERFECT.*** Once you commit a single sin you’re out - done - disqualified. Game over.

So quit trying to earn God’s favor and stop trying to manipulate Him with your spiritual rituals. The gospel truth is that if you belong to Jesus by faith, ***you HAVE His favor, and nothing can change or reduce that - ever!***

So why give at all? Why pray at all? Why bother with the discomfort of fasting?

Not IN ORDER TO win God’s favor - but ***BECAUSE WE HAVE His favor***. Not to manipulate Him to bless us, but in gratitude for how much He already HAS blessed us!

**The Lord’s prayer** is embedded in this section to remind us of the beauty and simplicity of praying to our Father in heaven - who knows what we need before we ask Him. So just ask. Just pray. Just lay your needs and desires down before the God who knows and loves you - and leave them there. It’s not about a magic formula. It’s about a relationship. Trust in God your FATHER. If you had a lousy Dad, you might think instead of your Mom or Grandma or Grandfather or your favorite uncle - or a spiritual mentor who has shown you what unconditional love looks like. Think of your best relationship on earth - God is like that, times a zillion.

So don’t practice your spiritual disciplines to impress others, to feel superior to them or to manipulate God. Instead, here’s what TO DO:

**How to Give, Pray and Fast**

* **Secretly**, just for God’s approval

“And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Matthew 6:4,6,18

***That phrase is repeated completely***, verbatim three times. Jesus closes each section with that sentence. When you give - your Father sees. When you pray - your Father sees. When you fast - your Father sees. When you read the Bible - your Father sees. When you change a lightbulb here on campus - your Father sees. When you clean out a gutter - your Father sees. When you coach kids in soccer - your Father sees. When you teach an ESL class - your Father sees. When you love on the preschoolers - your Father sees. When you stay for an entire youth lock in - your Father really sees that.

We’ll talk about the word “reward” in a minute, but for now think about ***how God feels about your spiritual habits***. We don’t give, pray, fast, serve, go on missions trips to win God’s ACCEPTANCE - we already have His acceptance forever. But we do practice our righteousness and seek to grow in character and calling to PLEASE HIM more - to win more of His approval, more of a sense of “well done, good and faithful servant.”

We want to be that servant with the five talents who used everything he was given by his master and turned the results back in. **We are STEWARDS** - we are managers of time, talent and treasure that are gifts from God for a limited time - and we will answer to Him for how we use all of that.

**The judgment of the Christian will not include any CONDEMNATION - but it will be an EVALUATION**. And some - probably a lot - of what we have done will be burned up in that final analysis. Our efforts here in this life are preparing us for that moment when King Jesus will look through our minutes and days - skipping over the bad stuff that was all paid for on the cross and zooming in on the good parts - the parts no one has ever seen.

I like to think of the Judgment seat of Christ - the judgment of the Christian - as ***a stadium event***. All believers throughout all time are gathered in a giant stadium with huge jumbotrons and Jesus is in the middle, at the 50-yard line, taking people one at a time.

He is NOT going to play your shameful, sinful moments on the big screen - those were all projected onto the cross and are separated from you as far as the east is from the west. They were sealed away in His tomb and will never be pulled back out to be used against you. There is no double jeopardy in judgment - ***if Jesus paid for your sins, you cannot be charged with them.*** That would violate the justice of God.

But Jesus IS going to play those special moments no one ever saw.

I picture them as **little jewels in Jesus’ hand**. Your entire life puffs away into dust and what remains is a little handful of diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, and rubies. And when he holds them up and shines his light through one, a scene is projected onto the heavenly jumbotron, and Jesus will narrate what you did.

“Look at my precious one ***on her knees in her closet***. Day in and day out - no one knew, no one saw. But my Father saw. He knew. And there she is calling on my Name for her children, her grandchildren, her friends, and neighbors. There she is praying for the one who hurt her. She is asking for help to love her enemy.”

“Look at this - my brother - locked in a ***battle with his sinful, selfish desires*** - and this is the moment that HE WON. He felt the full force of the temptation but right HERE, he closes the browser and falls to his knees in prayer. He walks out to the street and reads his Bible. He texts his accountability partner.”

“Watch this moment. Here is a dear older saint in the church who can’t take care of himself anymore. He’s ***fallen in the bathroom*** and made a mess. But here comes my servant, dropping by to check on this man. He doesn’t complain. He doesn’t hesitate. He rolls the older man over, cleans him up and helps him stand - limping slowly back to his easy chair. There’s my servant, back in the bathroom cleaning it up - no one ever knew. But Papa and I - we saw.”

“Oh, here’s one. This ***dear sister was out of money***. Credit cards maxed out. Nothing in her bank account. Not a single penny. She had two twenties in her purse to get her through the next five days. But here she is at the youth shelter - meeting again with that high school dropout who just got the job at Wendy’s. She’s praying with the young girl, she’s listening to her. She’s encouraging her. And there she goes, reaching into her purse - wrestling with how much faith she has. Does she give one of the twenties? No. She gives both. She folds them out so the teenager can’t even see and presses them into her hands as she says good-bye and see you next week. She drives home wondering what she’ll eat tonight. Guess what is waiting in her mailbox? Oh, my other servant heard me three days ago and dropped a card in the mail, his bank accounts were full and his family taken care of so he prayed with his wife about it and they agreed - folding three hundred dollar bills into that little note of encouragement.”

These are fictional stories based on real situations that happen every day, all over the world. Isn’t heaven going to be amazing? It might take the first 10,000 years for Jesus to project through all of these jewels. But it will be an amazing 10,000 years!

Do you see the point? When you give or pray or fast or serve and it’s not about you, it’s not for attention or to make you feel better - it’s simply you obeying the Holy Spirit and doing what you know you need to do - ***that gets God’s attention, and He smiles***. Jesus files that moment away as it forms into a diamond in his hand. Don’t you want him to hold a good fistful of jewels for you? Oh, I know he will!

**How to Give, Pray and Fast:**

* **Humbly**, knowing even your efforts are a gift from God

“Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” Matthew 6:8

Oh brothers and sisters, ***let’s not be like the Pharisees***, the religious hypocrites who said all the right words and did all the right things but for all the wrong reasons! Ultimately **RELIGION is all about YOU**. You pray, you give, you sacrifice, you recite - you, you, you. Christianity is all about God. God calls you to pray. God moves you to give. Jesus sacrificed everything for you. The Holy Spirit brings Scripture to mind. A brother or sister in the Lord encourages you and challenges you to take that next step of faith and obedience.

Jesus applies this so powerfully to prayer. It’s not about us. It’s not about our words. ***Even prayer is about God*** - His will, His leading, His power. We have to do our part by showing up and actually praying. But isn’t this your experience - that after you’ve spent time with the Lord, after you’ve prayed for wisdom and direction, after you’ve gone through your prayer list or prayed through a missionary report or spent your drive home praying for the people in your life - you just get this strong sense that even that prayer time was a gift from God TO YOU.

The book of Revelation describes ***the prayers of the saints as incense in bowls*** that rises to God as a sweet fragrance. So our prayers do please God - they are a sweet offering to Him. But aren’t they also like incense to us? As you cry out to God in faith don’t you breath in the aroma of His love?

You might try a little spiritual exercise this week - **spiritual breathing**. Take a long, deep breath in - asking for all that you need and want from the Lord. Then slowly exhale, giving Him all of your worries and fears, all of your needs and concerns. Just breath in the grace and power of God. Breath out your selfishness, distractedness, and weariness. Let Jesus fill your lungs, literally!

Or think about **GIVING** - probably the most obvious of these habits that should be done humbly. How are any of us in a position to give financially? ***How did you earn that money?*** How did you get your education? How did you start that business? How did you grow the business? Don’t you see, looking back, that everything you have - ***literally every single, solitary thing - was a gift from God to you?*** Your life. Your mind. Your talent in school. Your relationships. Your mentors. Your teachers. Your parents. Your first job. Your big break. Your good investments. Even your bad investments.

So, GIVE HUMBLY - knowing that every penny you pass on was a gift to you anyway.

And finally:

**How to Give, Pray and Fast:**

* **Faithfully**, knowing God rewards those who seek Him

“But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face that your fasting may not be seen by others… And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Matthew 6:18

Yes, we have to talk about **fasting**. We were all hoping that one could just skate by. The Holy Spirit won’t let us. Notice that important little word “WHEN.” Oh, I wish I could change that into an IF, but it isn’t. And Jesus says it explicitly elsewhere. The Pharisees - the religious ones who fasted three times every week - asked why Jesus’ disciples were not fasting that much. And Jesus said, “because I’m still with them. Now it’s a time of celebration and feasting. But when I’m gone - ***that is when they will fast***.”

Guess what. When Jesus comes back, we will get back to that whole time of feasting - in a big way. But at this moment, while we are apart from the Lord, Jesus expects us to fast.

***What is fasting?*** The main biblical meaning is to refrain from eating food for a period of time - usually a day or three or seven or sometimes more. A few times in Scripture we see more extreme fasts - like with Queen Esther when she asked her friends and family to fast on her behalf, so the King wouldn’t have her executed. She requested that everyone abstain from food and water for three days. But that’s not the usual way. Usually it’s just go without food - but drink lots of water.

And it turns out - shocker - that is actually a really healthy thing to do! Not for everyone - some people have significant health conditions that make it unwise to fast.

But all of us can practice the IDEA of fasting ***by STOPPING a regular practice we enjoy to spend more time in prayer.***

It’s not a fast if you stop eating for a day but don’t pray. ***That’s called a diet.***

It’s only fasting if you use the time you otherwise would have watched TV or played a game - to PRAY, to draw closer to the Lord. That’s the point of fasting - to concentrate your time and attention on God instead of this world.

***Abstaining from food is very tangible*** - very practical. Your stomach will remind you at very regular intervals, to pray. Actually, it will be fussing at you for food. But those rumbles become reminders - they become little summons to prayer and the Bible - to worship and devotion.

***Do we BELIEVE that God rewards those who seek Him?*** Do we really trust that God sees our efforts - that He hears our prayers and is pleased by the time we spend seeking Him?

If we do - then we will practice these disciplines faithfully. We will keep giving, keep praying, keep fasting, keep reading the Bible, keep serving, keep reaching out to our friends and neighbors. We will persevere because we believe the Bible.

“Your Father who sees in secret will REWARD you.”

***Reward me how?*** Ah, isn’t that the beautiful kicker! I don’t know! If anyone tells you they know don’t believe them - they’re surely selling something. I don’t know how God will reward you for your prayer time this week - but this I know: ***He WILL reward you***.

* Maybe you’ll feel closer to Him.
* Maybe you’ll experience a real sense of peace where you’ve been stressed out.
* Maybe He will speak to you and call you to a specific assignment.
* Maybe He will do a miracle in your life - heal a painful illness or a difficult relationship. Maybe. I don’t know. I certainly can’t promise you that.

But I do know this. ***The “coincidences” happen more often when I pray.*** And I think that’s very simply so that we remember who gets the credit. God tends to wait until we pray about something to act. It isn’t magic. It’s just the loving favor of our heavenly Father as He works in our hearts and lives.

So here is our summary:

**How NOT TO Give, Pray and Fast:**

* To **Impress** others
* To feel **Superior** to others
* To **Manipulate** God

**How to Give, Pray and Fast:**

* **Secretly**, just for God’s approval
* **Humbly**, knowing even your efforts are a gift from God
* **Faithfully**, knowing God rewards those who seek Him

***The calling is to be PERFECT*** as our heavenly Father is perfect. As we grow up in the Lord Jesus Christ we are growing toward perfection - and one day we will be GLORIFIED when we see Jesus face to face. Until that day, we keep practicing our righteousness - we keep giving, praying, fasting, reading, serving, loving - all in Jesus, for Jesus and through Jesus.

So let’s sing that powerful song **YET NOT I** - that quotes the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 - “I worked harder than all of them - yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me” (NIV). “It is GOD who works in you… to fulfill His good purpose.” He is faithful. He will finish the work He has started in us!

Let’s pray.