Sunday, April 6, 1997
THE SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE CHRISTIANS
Luke 2:52; Romans 12:2; Matthew 7:13-14

“And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and other human beings.” (Luke 2:52)

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)

“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” (Matthew 7:13-14)

In 1989, a best-selling book, written by Stephen R. Covey, was published with the title The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. That book has now sold millions of copies in hardcover and paperback. It’s a book that has been and continues to be a big help to me. I keep a copy near my desk and refer to it frequently.

For the purposes of this sermon, however, I am primarily borrowing the title of the book and changing the last word from “people” to “Christians"—The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Christians.

Today, in the 10:30 worship service, 49 young people will be joining this congregation through the Rite of Confirmation, so this sermon has been prepared with that in mind. However, the 7 habits I will be describing are not only for them but for all of us as we continue to grow and mature in our faith.

Why are habits important?
They are important because our character is a composite of our habits. There’s an old saying, “Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.”

Habits are powerful forces in our lives. They are what pull us or push us in one direction or another. We have bad habits and good habits. Habits can be learned and unlearned, and it always takes time, desire, and willpower — especially to form good habits.

For some reason, it seems to me that bad habits are easier to form than good habits, and conversely, bad habits are harder to break than good ones. Forming a good habit involves a process and tremendous commitment, whereas with most bad habits, we kind of fall into them. They come into our lives because of our lack of commitment, our laziness.

Now let’s look at the 7 habits of highly effective Christians. All these habits come directly from the life and teachings of Jesus. They are not arranged in any priority order; no one of them is more important than the others. It is helpful to think of them arranged in a circle like spokes in a wheel. If any one of them is broken, it weakens the entire wheel.

1. Continual growth and learning in the faith
One habit of being an effective Christian is the commitment to and practice of continual growth and learning in the faith. You never arrive at a point in life where you can say, “Now I know all I

need to know about God, or what it means to follow in the way of Jesus." The habit of continual growth and learning needs to be practiced until the day you die. The Christian life is a journey, a process, a pilgrimage. The gospel of Luke reports that "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and others."

2. Acting instead of reacting
A second habit of highly effective Christians is that of acting instead of reacting. This takes daily practice and commitment. Jesus acted toward people instead of reacting. Here's a story from Sydney Harris that has been of immense help to me over the years.

Harris said, "I walked with my friend, a follower of Jesus, to the newsstand the other night after work, and my friend bought a newspaper from the stand on the corner and thanked the newsman politely. The newsman didn't even acknowledge it. 'He's a sullen fellow, isn't he,' said Harris. 'Oh, he's that way every night,' shrugged my friend. 'Then why do you continue being so polite to him?' Harris asked. 'Why not?' said my friend. 'Why should I let him decide how I'm going to act?'"

The key word here is "act." This follower of Jesus acts toward people; most of us react. People who act toward others do so from an inner sense of balance. They refuse to return incivility with incivility, because that would mean relinquishing control of their own conduct.

No one is unhappier than the perpetual reactor. If you are a reactor, your sense of emotional gravity is not rooted within yourself but in the world outside. Your spiritual temperature is always being raised or lowered by the social climate around you, making you a mere creature at the mercy of these elements.

Practice the habit of acting, not reacting, and you will become a highly effective Christian.

3. Making and keeping good commitments
A third habit is the ability to make good commitments and keep them. Too many people today live their lives based on feelings rather than commitment.

Harry Emerson Fosdick tells a story that illustrates this. One day, when Harry was 14 or 15 years old, he overheard his father say to his mother as he was leaving for work, "Tell Harry to cut the lawn today after school, if he feels like it." His dad took a few more steps down the walk and then turned back, saying, "Tell Harry he'd better feel like it."

Fosdick said he never forgot that comment. He said that many times in his life, when commitments needed to be kept but he didn't feel like it, his dad's statement would come back to him: "Tell Harry he'd better feel like it."

Highly effective Christians cultivate the habit of making strong commitments and keeping them, regardless of their feelings at the moment.

4. Being of service to others
A fourth habit of highly effective Christians is the habit of being of service to others. Jesus said, "You find your life in giving it away, in serving others." You've heard me say many times that giving people are the truly happy people. This is counter to what our culture teaches us.

The world is filled with voices that try to convince you that you will find meaning and happiness by buying, hoarding, and consuming. But highly effective Christians develop the habit of giving and being of service to others.

5. Distinguishing between needs and desires
A fifth habit is the ability to distinguish between needs and desires. Many people confuse the two. You may desire a new stereo or CD player, but that doesn't mean you need it. There's a lot of confusion in today's world between needs and desires.

Highly effective Christians know the difference between needs and desires.

Along with this habit is the practice of deferred gratification. Delaying gratification involves scheduling the pain and pleasure of life in such a way that enhances the pleasure by meeting and experiencing the pain first and getting it over with. It's the only decent way to live.

6. Living life as a "win/win" situation
A sixth habit of highly effective Christians is living life in a way that seeks a "win/win" outcome in relationships. Win/win is a frame of mind and heart that seeks mutual benefit in interactions. It's based on the principle that there's plenty of love for everyone. When God loves us, God doesn't take love away from someone else in order to love us. Win/win is about abundance, not scarcity.

The abundance mentality flows from a deep sense of personal worth and security, while the scarcity mentality breeds comparison and competition. Highly effective Christians live with a win/win attitude.

7. Regular participation in worship and prayer
The seventh habit is regular participation in worship and prayer. Systematic participation in worship and prayer helps keep your life and values in perspective. It reminds you that there is a spiritual dimension in your life that needs to be cultivated.

An illustration that has been helpful to me is this: Suppose you come upon someone in the woods, working feverishly to saw down a tree. "What are you doing?" you ask. "Can't you see?" comes the reply. "I'm sawing down this tree." "You look exhausted. How long have you been at it?" "Over five hours," he answers, "and I'm beat." "Why don't you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen the saw?" you ask. "I don't have time to sharpen the saw," the man says. "I'm too busy sawing."

Taking time to nourish your spiritual life is like sharpening the saw. This habit surrounds and empowers all the others.

As you go about living your life as a Christian, these seven habits are what will make your faith effective and joyful. Amen.