Sunday April 6, 1997

THE 7 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 hard-cover 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 will power 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 7 habits comes directly from the life and teachings of Jesus. They are not arranged in any priority order, that is 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. 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 the point in life when 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 continued 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. 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 people do so from an inner

sense of balance. They refuse to return incivility with incivility, because then they would no longer be in command of their own conduct, but would be mere responders to others.

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

If the weather is good, you feel good. If it isn't it affects your attitude and your performance. People who "act" and not "react" carry their own weather with them. They are value driven; and if their

value is to produce good quality work, it isn't a function of whether the weather is conducive to it or not.

As I said earlier, reactive people are affected by their social environment, by the social weather. When people treat them well, they feel well; when people don't they become defensive or protective. Reactive people build their emotional lives around the behavior of others, empowering the weaknesses of others to control them. To let another person determine whether you will be rude or gracious, elated or depressed, is to relinquish control over your own personality to others.

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

3. A third habit of highly effective Christians which is related to acting toward others rather than reacting, is the habit of making good commitments and keeping them. Too many people today live their lives on the basis of "feeling" rather than commitment.

Here's another story, this one told by Harry Emerson Fosdick, which I hope will be as much help to you as it has to me.

One day when Harry was 14 or 15 years old, he overheard his father say to his mother as his dad was leaving the house for work one morning, "Tell Harry to cut the lawn today after school if he feels like it." His dad took several more steps down the walk and then turned and said to his mother, "Tell Harry he'd better feel like it."

Fosdick said he never forgot that comment, "Tell Harry he'd better feel like it." He said that many times in his life there were things that needed to be done, commitments that needed to be kept, and he didn't feel like it, and then 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 in spite of their feelings of the moment.

4. A fourth habit of highly effective Christians is that 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 tries to teach us.

Over and over there are strong voices in the culture which try to convince you that you will find meaning and happiness in life by buying, hoarding and consuming. The world is filled to overflowing with stingy, hoarding people, many of whom seem to truly believe that what they have belongs to them and not to God and that they can take it with them when they die.

Highly effective Christians have developed the habit of giving and of being of service to others.

5. A fifth habit of highly effective Christians is that of being able to distinguish between needs and desires. Many people get them confused. There are many things you desire, but do not need. You might desire a new stereo or CD player but that does not mean that you need it. There's

probably more confusion in today's world between needs and desires than almost anything else. I hear people continually say they need some object, when what they really mean is they desire it.

Highly effective Christians know the difference between needs and desires.

A corollary of this fifth habit is that highly effective Christians know how to practice the discipline of deferred gratification. This is especially important in dealing with our desires. You've heard me say in sermons before that delaying gratification is a process of scheduling the pain and pleasure in life in such a way so as to enhance the pleasure by meeting and experiencing the pain first and getting it over with. It is the only decent way to

live.

As a student, for example, are you able to do your homework first without any parental prompting, before you watch television or hang out with your friends? Highly effective Christians are able to distinguish between needs and desires and in so doing to practice deferred gratification especially with our desires.

6. A sixth habit of highly effective Christians is that of living life in relationship to others as a "win/win" situation. In some ways life is like a game but in other ways it is not. The main difference is that in life we do not win because someone else loses. Win/win is a frame of mind and heart that constantly seeks mutual benefit in human interactions. Win/win is the way of love.

It is based on the principle that there is plenty of love for everyone. When an additional child is born into a family, the parents do not take some of the love from the children they already have and use it to love the new child. When God loves us, God does not take love away from someone else in order to love us. God has plenty of love for everyone. Win/win is based on the principle of abundance, the belief that there is plenty for everyone. Too many people base their lives on the scarcity mentality. They see life as having only so much, as though there were only one pie out there. If someone else were to get a big piece of pie, it would mean less for everyone else.

Often people with a scarcity mentality harbor secret hopes that others might suffer misfortune--

-not terrible misfortune, but acceptable misfortune that would keep them "in their place." They're always comparing, always competing. They give their energies to possessing things or other people in order to increase their sense of worth. They believe they can only win if someone else loses.

The abundance mentality, on the other hand flows out of a deep inner sense of personal worth and security. It is based on the principle that there is plenty out there and enough to spare for everyone.

Approaching life with the attitude of Win/win is one of the habits of highly effective Christians.

7. A seventh habit of highly effective Christians is

that of regular participation in worship and prayer. It is the habit of the nourishment of our spiritual selves. Systematic participation in worship and prayer will help keep your life and your values in perspective. It is a continual reminder to you that there is a spiritual dimension in your life that needs to be continually cultivated.

Here's an illustration that's been helpful to me. Suppose you were to 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 impatient 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. This is hard work." "Why don't you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen the saw?" you ask. "I'm sure it would go a lot faster

and easier." "I don't have time to sharpen the saw," the man says emphatically. "I'm too busy sawing."

Taking time to keep your spiritual life nourished is like taking time to sharpen the saw. This habit surrounds and gives you the power to make all the other six possible.

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