

In the Habit: Series Overview

Philippians 4:8-9

Paul Gauche

I have two questions for you. Show of hands: who of you here has ever taken piano lessons; or ever taken lessons to learn any instrument? Wow! Nice! Now, second question: who of you here – no judgment, no guilt or shame – who of you here quit taking those music lessons? Hmmm. That’s rather interesting!

Music has been a central, if not vital part of my life from the very beginning. Even before I was born, I was surrounded by music. Both of my parents were musicians. My mom was a singer and my dad played reed instruments – mostly the tenor sax, which he played nearly right up to the end of his life. When he was young, he had own band and played gigs in VFWs, church basements and dance halls. He came by that rather naturally. His dad, my grandfather, sat in and played in some dance halls with a guy named Larry, although most people called him Lawrence Welk.

I’ve been playing the piano since I was 6 years old. I’d say it’s been a good habit in my life. You might say that I got into music so that the music that being poured into me could find creative ways to get out. My mom made sure that happened. Piano lessons started early which meant that not only did I have weekly lessons, but the habit of practicing every day was set into place early on. That went fairly well until it didn’t. Of course there were days when I simply did not want to practice. But Joyce Gauche – all 5’2” of her made it clear that not practicing was not an option. She knew that developing the habit of daily practice would eventually pay off. There were days when that was a huge challenge for me and for her. While I’m not completely sure, there may be some truth to the rumor that someone that looked just like the 4th grade version of me and sounded just like the 4th grade version of me may have told my mom that if her 4th grade son had to practice any more that his leftover firecrackers would do damage to the piano. To which she might have responded with something like, “Go ahead. Then you’ll just have to practice on a really out

of tune piano.” Long story short, knowing that I wasn’t going to get out of it and that my mom was serious about developing the habit of practice, I quietly put away all of the firecrackers and practiced for the 15 minutes. The rest is, as they say, history.

Friends, here’s the wisdom in all of that; here’s the most important lesson of the habit of practicing the piano: In my life as a musician, I’ve never, ever even once heard anyone ever say, “You know, I used to take lessons, but I stopped. And to this day, I’m so glad that I quit.” I know it’s crazy, but no one has ever said that. No one has ever given up the habit of practicing and been glad they did!

We’re beginning a 5-week series called “In the Habit.” Holy habits. Spiritual habits. Discipleship habits. We’re going to explore the habits that help us develop our Christ character, habits that help us become more like Jesus, the habits of Connecting, Dwelling, Praying, Sharing Your Story, and Worshiping.

Behind the importance of building habits into our lives is the concept of apprenticeship. And this is important when we think about building spiritual habits. When Jesus calls us to follow him, he’s calling us to apprenticeship. An apprentice watches what the master does, and then imitates him. At first, it’s awkward and the work is imperfect. But with enough practice, an apprentice develops skills that become habits. The work, once challenging and requiring concentration, becomes effortless. This principle holds true in so many areas of life. Want to get better at tennis? Practice the basics until they become habit. Want to play the piano well? Practice the basics until they become habit. Want to become a more fruitful follower of Jesus? Practice the basics until they become habit. In this series we’ll explore some of the core habits that can enrich our daily faith walk and make us more fruitful for the Kingdom.

When I think about the importance of creating habits that not only make a difference in the world, but habits that help create a different world all together, there is no other place to look than in the book of Philippians. In chapter 4, there are two verses that give us a clear picture of the habits of discipleship.

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy

of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

The heart of what Paul was writing about is this: *"Keep on doing the things that you've learned and heard and seen in me and the God of peace will be with you."*

What were those things? Why were they important enough for Paul to insist on them? What would it mean for us as a community of Jesus followers if we did the same? The Apostle Paul was an apprentice of Jesus. That meant that Paul patterned his life after Jesus. He wanted to be like Jesus in every way: Paul wanted to think like Jesus, pray like Jesus, serve like Jesus. Paul wanted to walk and talk like Jesus. He wanted to worship God like Jesus. The habits that Paul built into his life provided the foundation for him to become more like Jesus in every way. That's what we're going to be looking at over these next several weeks. So today I'd like to walk you through what it means to "become apprentices;" to build habits into our daily lives.

First, being an apprentice of Jesus means practicing habits of connecting with God and others for spiritual growth. Ultimately, the purpose of every spiritual habit is to transform our lives into the likeness of Christ.

At the foundation of every habit is bringing us into an ever-deeper relationship with Christ. Jesus called this "abiding." Paul refers to it as "walking" (Romans 6:4). Who we hang out with, matters. It's been said that you are the average of the five people you hang out with most! While there are endless ways to connect with God, what matters isn't so much HOW you connect with God, but THAT you connect with God. Even though we trust that God is with us all the time, growing in our awareness of God's presence and intentionally connecting is what shapes us in the long run.

Second, being an apprentice of Jesus means practicing habits of dwelling in Scripture in ways that help that Scripture get into us. The purpose of spiritual habits or practices is to connect us more deeply with Christ in a way that shapes our lives into Christ's likeness. St. Paul talks about the transformation of our minds... our way of thinking (Romans 12:2) and having the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5). Dwelling in the Word is a powerful habit that roots us in Christ in a way that enables us to bear fruit in daily life (Psalm 1). Through Scripture we come to know God more...God's values

and priorities. While reading, studying and meditating upon the words of Scripture is helpful, these aren't the only ways to dwell in the Word. Lectio Divina, Visio Divina, even meditating upon nature (the first "bible") can transform us when we do these practices with regularity and intention.

Third, being an apprentice of Jesus means practicing habits of prayer. Our image of God and our image of prayer are intimately linked. Most people have what I would call a "distant interventionist" image of God, far off in a cosmic control room deciding which prayers to answer. But what does prayer look like when our image of God is the one "in whom we live and move and have our being"? Paul's command to the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing" implies that prayer is more than making requests. It's also about a growing awareness of God's constant presence and loving intention toward us and all creation. That kind of prayer doesn't change God; it changes us. The purpose of this message isn't to say that one way of praying is better than another, but that all ways of praying are meant to connect our hearts with the heart of God.

Fourth, being an apprentice of Jesus means practicing habits of sharing your story that help us to know God well enough to actually talk about God outside of church. Have you noticed that grandparents have no reservations about telling others about their grandchildren? Even perfect strangers are not protected from pictures, stories and endless accolades. And for good reason. Grandparents love and adore their grandchildren. Why don't we talk about God that way? Heck, why don't we talk about God at all outside of church? Perhaps it's because we don't feel we know God well enough (which is why the above habits are so important!). Perhaps because we believe that talking about God is synonymous with trying to convince others to believe. But what if, out of our lived experience with God, we simply and naturally talked about God as a grandparent talks about their grandchildren (sans pictures)? In the same way that a grandparent's love for their grandchildren grows the more they "gush" about them, the more our love for and faith in God grows as we talk about God.

Finally, being an apprentice of Jesus means practicing habits that lead us into a deeper, more robust worship life together. This series has been about developing habits that connect us more deeply to God, and that connection transforms our lives by aligning them... heart, mind, soul and strength...with God. The natural outflow of that kind of life is worship, a life of literally

“ascribing worth” to God. What a crime that we’ve sometimes made worship little more than a weekly obligation, rather than a life-giving, faith-developing lifestyle. Let’s use this week to tune up our corporate worship (coming prepared, recognizing that worship is about God and not about us, bringing our whole selves to worship, etc.) as well as explore ways to worship in our everyday lives.

I just love the story that Pastor Jeff tells about the opportunity he had to play at Carnegie Hall. Like thousands of others who have ever had a shot at that opportunity, Jeff wondered how on earth one gets to Carnegie Hall. The answer of course is simply this: “Practice, practice, practice.” That’s what we’re going to do together over the next several weeks as we learn about the habits of becoming apprentices of Jesus.

So I have two questions for you: The first question is this: show of hands... how many of you who took music lessons stopped and wish you hadn’t? It’s never too late. The second question: How do we become apprentices of Jesus? How do we become more like Jesus in every way? How do we think, pray, serve, walk, talk and worship more like Jesus? We become apprentices. Over the next five weeks we’re going to learn together how to do that.