

The Nine Habits of Highly Effective Christians



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INTRODUCTION

*We are what we repeatedly do.
Excellence then, is not an act,
but a habit.* —Aristotle

TWO cars were at an intersection when the light turned green. The man in the first vehicle didn't notice that the light had changed so the woman in the car behind him began pounding on her steering wheel, screaming at the man to "get moving" and directed obscene hand gestures toward him. Still, the man didn't move. Finally, he looked up, saw an orange light and accelerated through the intersection just as the light turned to red. The woman behind him was furious and began screaming in frustration because she missed her turn to get through the intersection. While she was venting, she saw someone approach her vehicle. It was a police officer with his hand on his gun. The officer instructed the woman to turn off her car and keep both hands in sight. She complied. The police officer ordered her to exit car with hands raised.

When she got out, he instructed her to turn around and place her hands behind her. Then he handcuffed the woman and frisked her. He took her to the police station where she was fingerprinted, photographed, searched, booked, and placed in a cell. After an hour, another officer approached the cell, opened the door, and escorted her back to the booking desk. There, the arresting officer was waiting with her personal belongings telling her she was free to leave. He offered this

explanation: “I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, making obscene hand gestures, swearing and shouting at the man in front of you. I noticed the ‘Choose Life’ license plate holder; the ‘What would Jesus do?’ bumper sticker; the ‘Follow me to Sunday School’ bumper sticker; and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car.”

Though that story may be an urban legend, it does point out that some Christians—perhaps even many Christians—do not live out their faith. Their creeds don’t match their deeds and their belief does not shape their behavior. Anticipating that this could happen, the Apostle Paul wrote to the earliest Christians encouraging them to fully embrace nine spiritual practices. Calling them the “fruit of the spirit” Paul identified these as the habits of highly effective Christians: *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* (Gal 15:22-23).

Although this book can be read in one sitting from beginning to end, the intent is that the reader will view this as a devotional book. That means reading one habit and then pausing for a few days, allowing the message of the Apostle Paul to enter and grow in the soul. After reading my reflections on the habits cited by Paul, it is my hope readers will apply the habit they have just read and reflected upon using the Seven Further Considerations at the end of each chapter as a starting point.

What this weary world needs now are women and men who will live out these vital spiritual disciplines. In so doing, they will indeed make the planet a kinder, gentler place.

—Victor M. Parachin

HABIT #1 - LOVE

The Fruit of the Spirit Is Love

*They are the true disciples of Christ,
not who know most, but who love most.*

—Frederich Spanheim The Elder

ONE day in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania a car was stolen. As the thieves began stripping the vehicle they came across papers identifying the owner as Fred Rogers. Immediately, they knew the car belonged to the man who was a television host to millions of children via his program “Mr. Rogers Neighborhood.” Quickly, they reassembled the car, cleaned, vacuumed, and returned it leaving this handwritten note of apology under the wiper: “We’re sorry. We didn’t know it was *your* car.”

Except for Mr. Rogers, who else in our modern times could have such an effect on a group of thieves? What was it about Fred Rogers that could make criminals reconsider their actions? What did those thieves see in Mr. Rogers that made them want to be better people? The answer is this: Fred Rogers was a man of immense love for humanity, especially children. His life eloquently reflects the clear, consistent, command of the bible to be people of love. Jesus said: “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34). St. Paul prayed: “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for one another and for everyone else” (1 Thes 3:12). St. Peter wrote: “Love one another deeply, from the heart.” Scripture states: “All that matters is faith expressing itself through love” (Gal 5:6). Love is some-

thing anyone can express and everyone can experience. The Apostle Paul lists love as the first spiritual fruit: “The fruit of the Spirit is *love*” (Gal 5:22). Here are some ways to maximize your power of love.

- *Don't be yourself; be someone a little nicer.* That's the intent of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount when he said: “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” That teaching is the source of the phrase “going the extra mile.” If you truly wish to maximize your power of love, go the extra mile. Don't just be yourself. Be someone a little nicer. Alma Barkman, a resident of Winnipeg, Manitoba had the pleasure of being on the receiving end of someone who went the extra mile. She says: “As I tumbled wet laundry into the automatic dryer, my thoughts went back to a windy spring day more than forty years ago.” At the time she was “awkwardly” pregnant with their second son. It was laundry day and before the era of automatic dryers so she was dragging a heavy wicker basket full of wet clothes outside to hang on the wash line. The squeaking of the clothesline pulley attracted the attention of a telephone repairman high up on a pole in another yard. The two exchanged a neighborly wave.

After she hung out the wash to dry, she went inside to make lunch for her toddler son. Inside she could hear the clothing snapping in the wind on the line outside. Suddenly there was an ominous silence. Looking out, she was dismayed to see the clothesline had broken and most of her snowy white wash had fallen onto the garden plot. Already exhausted, she pulled on rubber boots, picked up the clothesbasket and trudged back outside. Coming around the corner she was star-

tled to meet the telephone repairman, face to face. "I saw the whole thing happen," he explained, "So I came down the pole to give you a hand. Free service and lifetime guarantee!" he smiled pulling a pair of pliers from his leather tool belt. With a few skillful twists, he quickly mended the broken clothesline. "Forty years later I think about that kindly repairman so unselfishly giving of himself to help a stranger in her plight."

- *Nurture a child's capacity to love.* Many parents and other adults seem to reserve their highest praise to a child for their intellectual or athletic accomplishments. These children are most complimented when they achieve distinction in one of these two areas. "David, I'm so proud of how smart you are! This is a great report card." or "Kelley, you're an incredible athlete. What a basketball player you are." Commenting on this issue, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin says: "Is it healthy for children who are very smart or athletic to be raised to believe that these talents and abilities are truly what is most important about them?" So, Rabbi Telushkin offers this advice to parents and other adults such as coaches, youth workers, Sunday School teachers: "Here is a simple suggestion, one that has the capacity to make both your children and the world happier and kinder: *Reserve your highest praise to your children for when they perform kind deeds.*" The ideal time to compliment a young person is whenever he or she acts in kind, compassionate, loving ways. That way you extend and expand loving attitudes through another generation. "Think about that for a moment," says Rabbi Telushkin: "a generation of people who most like themselves when they are doing good. What a world that would be!"

- *Help another person flourish when they flounder.* When you see someone floundering, reach out with love to help that individual flourish. Every time we stretch ourselves on behalf of another, it is a form of love in action. Often the difference between a person floundering and flourishing is the action of one person. Consider the difference one person made on the life of Henry David Thoreau. On July 4, 1845 Henry David Thoreau moved into his isolated cabin on Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts. He was 27 and wanted to experiment with living simply. His inspiration came from a memorable trip he took with his beloved brother, John. During the summer of 1839 he and John built a boat, sailed it down the Concord River, and took a two-week walking tour around Mt. Washington. That trip and time with his brother became a highlight in Thoreau's life and took on greater meaning when John cut himself shaving in the winter of 1841, caught lockjaw, and died in Thoreau's arms.

Thoreau was devastated. For weeks after his brother's death, Thoreau was unable to write, talk to family or friends, and even experienced symptoms of lockjaw himself. It was a family friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who reached out suggesting Thoreau take his mind off his grief by writing reviews of natural history books. Thoreau responded positively and received great comfort from the task of writing: "Books of natural history make the most cheerful winter reading. To him who contemplates a trait of natural beauty no harm nor disappointment can come." The essay Thoreau wrote about the natural history books was published and became one of Thoreau's early literary successes. He continued writing

essays for several years always recalling the summer he spent with his brother and the renewal he experienced living in the wilderness. Thoreau wanted to re-create the experience but on a deeper level so he began looking for a place where he could build a small cabin in the woods. Again, his friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson responded by generously giving him a few acres of land on Walden Pond, a place Thoreau had been visiting most of his life. There, Thoreau built a tiny cabin—ten feet wide and fifteen feet long—living alone at Walden for two years, two months, and two days.

Based on that experience he published his book *Walden*, a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings. Though it only sold 256 copies in its first year, the book has never gone out of print and has been translated into hundreds of languages.

- *Practice forgiveness.* The humorous but sad story is told of a very sick man who finally sought out doctors. After examining him and running some tests, the physicians said: "I'm sorry, sir, you have rabies and because you waited so long, there's nothing that can be done for you. You will die in a few days." The man was stunned so the doctor withdrew himself giving the man time to compose himself. When the doctor returned, the man was writing furiously on a sheet of paper. "Are you making a will?" the doctor asked. "No!" said the man, "I'm making a list of all the people I'm going to bite!"

Resentment, revenge, rage, may feel good initially but in the long run holding a grudge simply freezes us in place, destroys peace of mind, and erodes our capacity for loving