

The Simple Things | One Small Step

Fairview Missionary Church | Angola, IN

Scripture: Assorted

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So we just wrapped up our series in Habakkuk, and we're getting ready to enter the Christmas season. So we had kind of one week here for just a standalone message. And I was inspired by one of the devotionals that I had done a couple of weeks ago on getting back to the basics. If you've ever done a Google search to try to discover the most common habits of successful people in our world, you might be shocked by what you find.

The list that you will find of the habits of most successful people will be far more familiar to what your parents told you when you were growing up than to a complicated and profound system that only the smartest could come up with. We're going to look at the habits of successful people. Many of you have read the book by Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. He's writing this from a business perspective.

And so his seven habits are to be proactive, to begin with the end in mind. Put first things first. Think win-win instead of win-lose. Seek to understand and then be understood. That's good not just for business. That's good for everything. Synergize, the idea that you can accomplish more together than you can apart. And then the idea of sharpening the saw. Always be learning. Always grow.

These are all really good. And this book is really popular. It's sold millions of copies. It's successful in the business world. But I wanted to ask the question, what habits do successful people have in their lives that they do every single day? And we're going to look at the top 10 or so of what they do. Here is the first one. They make their bed every morning. Did you know this?

If you do a Google search on the number one habits of the most successful people in the world on every list somewhere is this idea that they make their bed every morning. This is what successful people do. The second thing that successful people do is they prioritize their personal care and their health. Successful people are often known to have some kind of exercise plan that they stick with. They have a healthy diet. Of course, they take care of their hygiene.

They find time during the day to relax, to unplug from technology, or to meditate, to pray. Successful people get enough sleep at night. We often have this idea of the most successful people working 20 hours a day and sleeping three or four hours. But studies have shown that the most successful people actually get between seven and eight hours of sleep a night. Another habit that most successful people have is that they are organized.

They're structured. They have a system. Successful people have to-do lists. They're goal-oriented, not just with kind of crazy goals or visions, but very specific goals with specific action steps. Successful people keep their workspaces clean. Some more habits of successful people. They have a positive attitude. Successful people see the glass half full.

They have a grateful spirit. Successful people are frugal. Do not confuse that with stingy or cheap. They just spend what they can actually spend. They don't spend more than what they make. They are frugal. Successful people get up early. I hate this one. But this is on every list. They get up early. And so I don't

know what early is. I guess I could define it however I want, right? But they get up early. Successful people are always learning.

They're always reading. They read a lot. They're always growing. They know that there's more knowledge and information they could have. Successful people have the habit of giving. This is why I said they're not stingy or cheap. They have the habit of giving. Successful people also surround themselves with positive people, encouraging people. This list goes on and on. And looking at this list, it becomes obvious to me that doing the small things consistently is what leads to success.

It's not these life-altering decisions. It's not these things that not everybody can understand or comprehend or somehow they have an advantage. They do the simple things consistently and it leads to success. It's the small everyday decisions that eventually lead to something bigger. But unfortunately, the opposite is also true. We also can have habits that develop, that put us in a situation in life that we never thought we would be.

As I talked to teenagers when I was a youth pastor and even as I talked to adults, I have not found anybody that as a child or a teen, when they grew up, they said, "You know what, Joel, when I grow up, I want to be homeless." I've never had a teenager tell me, "You know what? When I grow up, I want to be addicted to drugs or alcohol." I've never had a teen tell me after they're dating their high school sweetheart, "You know what, Pastor Joel, when I grow up, I want to cheat on my spouse one day.

When I grow up, I want to lose my family. When I grow up, I want to end up in jail. And yet, so many people find themselves in these situations. Unfortunately, because of my position here at the church, at least one person a month as I talk in my office with them and I counsel them and I try to help them through life, at least one person a month will tell me, "Pastor, I never thought that I would be here.

I never thought that I would find myself in this position." And so as we talk through their circumstance and the situation that they find themselves in without fail, we find that it started with one small, seemingly insignificant, bad decision after another. They find themselves in the situation they're currently in because of one small drink, one bad purchase, one wrong click on the computer screen, one moment in their life that they couldn't control their anger.

I will share with you today that nearly all of our biggest issues and struggles in life happened by death by 1,000 cuts instead of one huge bad choice. It's death by 1,000 cuts. It's one bad decision, leads to another bad decision, leads to another bad decision. And most people don't realize until it's too late that they were speeding down a dead-end road. It's like the story you hear about frogs, which I've not tested, and I hope none of you have either.

But you've heard this story that if you put a frog in a boiling pot of water, it will jump out. But if you put that same frog in a pot of water and you put that pot of water on the stove and you gradually increase the temperature, the frog will stay in the water until it dies. It gets so hot because it just gets used to the comfortable water as it's getting warmer. Again, I've never tested it. I hope none of you have either. But it's death by 1,000 cuts. Some of you may be wondering, "Pastor, why the long introduction? What does this have to do?

I'm grateful that you want me to be successful in life. I understand that. But I want to share with you my goal is not that you would just be successful in life. Yes, that's my desire, but my goal is that you and I would be known as men and women of God. And if you and I want to be known as men and women of God, these same rules that apply to the business life and your relationship life also apply to your spiritual life.

It is the simple things that get us to that end goal of being a man or a woman of God. You and I either thrive or die spiritually by doing or not doing one small, seemingly insignificant thing after another. Let me say

that again. You and I either thrive or die spiritually by doing or not doing one small, seemingly insignificant thing after another.

These are not the life-altering decisions in and of themselves, but added up over the weeks and the months and the years, they change us. They form us into who we are. Solomon, many believe to be the wisest man that has ever lived, wrote the book of Proverbs for us. And at the beginning of the Proverbs, he's writing to his son. And so he's writing to us as well. And he writes this in Proverbs chapter 4, starting in verse 20.

Solomon says, "My son, pay attention to what I say. Turn your ear to my words. Do not let them out of your sight. Keep them within your heart. For they are life to those who find them and health to one's whole body. Above all else, Solomon says, "Guard your heart for everything you do flows from it. Keep your mouth free from perversity.

Keep corrupt talk far from your lips. Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. Do not turn to the right or to the left. Keep your foot from evil. I want to spend the rest of this morning unpacking what Solomon is telling us there that it is crucially important for our spiritual lives, that we are cautious of what we allow to come into our eyes, what comes into our ears, what comes out of our mouth, and where we allow our feet to go.

Those small decisions every day lead us in one of two directions. So let me pray and then we'll unpack this. Heavenly Father, every single one of us in here, if we were honest, probably have some good habits in our life, and we have some bad habits in our life. We started making one decision that led to something good. Maybe we started making one decision that led to something bad.

I pray that we would be willing to just take a step back and to make the commitment today to take another step in the right direction, to do the next right thing that's honoring to you so that we can grow closer. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. I shared with you that this entire message was inspired, given to me by a devotional that I was reading a couple of weeks ago, and I read this statement, which was kind of the foundation for this whole message.

I want to read this to you twice. If you want to be great at something, you have to make a bunch of small changes and sustain them over a long period of time. Simple, repetitive behaviors have the potential to produce tremendous long-term gains. Let me read that again and think about it spiritually. If you want to be great at something, if you want to be known as a man or a woman of God, you have to make a bunch of small changes and sustain them over a long period of time.

Simple, repetitive behaviors like going to church, reading your Bible, praying, giving, being humble. Simple, repetitive behaviors have the potential to produce tremendous long-term gains. If you want to be known as a man or a woman of God and to grow in your relationship with Him, you must pay attention to what you allow your eyes to see, your mouth to speak, your ears to hear, and where your feet walk on a daily basis.

Let's talk about the eyes for a moment because Jesus talks about all of these areas of our life. In Matthew 6:22, Jesus tells us that the eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, then your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. You and I have all heard and probably even used the phrase if we have children, garbage in, garbage out.

We've taught this to our children, to the grandchildren, that we need to be cautious of what we allow in our eyes because the things that we allow to come in often come out in the way we act. It's the small things. It's the movies that you watch. It's the TV shows that you watch. It's scrolling through Facebook and TikTok and watching videos on YouTube and what ones you click on. It's what you're looking at while you are at the beach with your family.

It's what books you are reading. It's what video games you play. It's what internet sites you go to. I could go on and on and make you way more uncomfortable, but you get the point. We need to be vigilant about what we allow in our eyes. Proverbs chapter 7, again, Solomon speaking to a young man.

"At the window of my house," Solomon says, "I looked down through the lattice, and I saw among the simple, I noticed among the young men, a youth who had no sense." Solomon's saying he was dumb. He had no sense. He was going down the street near her corner, walking along in the direction of her house at twilight, nonetheless, as the day was fading, as the dark of night was setting in.

Then out came a woman to meet him, dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent. He didn't know any better. Actually, he did. He put himself in a difficult and tempting situation. As I've watched documentaries and read books of those individuals that find themselves in jail, that have committed horrific crimes that you and I even struggle to comprehend.

When you read those books, when you watch the documentaries on those individuals, almost every single one will tell you it started with something small and it continued to grow. It was just one bad decision, one bad thing that I decided to do, one bad habit, and it just kept growing until I found myself doing things I never thought I would do. We are commanded to keep our eyes pure.

The second thing that Solomon says is to be cautious of what comes out of your mouth. Matthew chapter 5 verse 37, Jesus says, "All you need to say is simply yes or no. Anything beyond this comes from the evil one. Let your yes be yes and your no-no." Paul says in Ephesians 4:29, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." Learning to control your tongue can be one of the hardest things in life to do.

Controlling what comes out of our mouth. But it all starts with small decisions. Maybe you make the decision to say, "You know what? I want my mouth to be pure, and so I'm going to do my best not to cuss. I'm going to learn to express my emotions without using those words. There are other ways that I can communicate." You developed a habit of waiting just that millisecond before speaking or responding to somebody else so that you can process what to say.

And so you say what you mean, and you mean what you say. You know This might not be a big deal. I grew up in a home where there wasn't a lot of swearing, so this was never something that I struggled with. But I went to public schools, and you know I ate at the lunch tables there, and I hung out with friends that were not Christians. After my senior year in high school and after my freshman year of college, I worked in the car factory. And every other word I heard was a cuss word. I almost became immune to it.

I didn't even hear it anymore. It was just part of their vocabulary. And fortunately, God allowed that to never become part of my vocabulary. But then I remember going to a Christian university. I went to Bethel over in Mishawaka, and you know you're in Christian classrooms where they pray all the time and nobody cusses. And I have family that often swear. And so I remember being over the Christian university and not being just used to it anymore.

And when I would hear those cuss words, I would just kind of cringe because I was like, "Ooh, I'm not used to that anymore." And those people that use those words, I'm going to try to say this in a polite way because maybe some of you struggle with the words that come out of your mouth. I am always shocked at their limited vocabulary. They don't know any other adjectives. That's all they know. Their talk is so simple, as Solomon would say, as they struggle.

The other thing that we have to be cautious about that I did struggle with in my life, I'm certainly not standing up here telling you I'm perfect, but that we would be people of integrity and tell the truth. You know As a child, it was easy to get caught doing something, and your immediate response was, "Oh, no,

that wasn't me. I didn't do it." And having young children of my own now, like all young children, it is amazing what they'll lie about, isn't it? I mean, things that you don't even care about.

I tell my kids all the time, even as they're getting older, you know I am less concerned about what you're actually getting in trouble for, and I'm more concerned that you're lying about it. I'd rather just have you tell me the truth. You'll get in far less trouble if you just tell me the truth. And of course, children, and even as teenagers, they think to themselves, "It's not a big deal. It's just something small." But the problem is, it starts by telling those small lies and then it grows. And as adults, we know that. And so we are constantly teaching our children and grandchildren just tell the truth.

Be a person of integrity. Because if you will tell the truth in the small things, you'll tell the truth and the big things. Fill your mind with truth. Be a person of integrity before you talk. Make sure that it is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We also have to be careful about what we allow into our minds through our ears. And again, it's the small things. Things like what type of music are you listening to? Positive, encouraging music?

There is music that I would say is neutral. It's neither positive nor negative. It's just kind of there. It just talks about life. I've kind of moved away from the edge a little bit on this. I was super conservative. When I was a senior in high school, I had some CDs that you know people had given me that I began listening to that was not Christian music. And you know I would always just put my standard way off away from the edge. And I said, "You know what? I'm not going to listen to any unchristian music." So I broke all of my CDs and you know I could motivate other people for whatever reason as a high school student.

And so some of my other friends, I encourage them, they smashed all their CDs, and six months later, they were really mad at me that they did that. But there's neutral music, but then there is negative music. I can't tell you how many times I would talk to the teenagers when I was a youth pastor, and I would say, "Man, what you listen to affects you. It affects you how you think." And I can't tell you how many times their response would be, "Joel, I don't even know what they're saying. I don't even know the words. I just like the beat." That's the famous response, right? Some of you may have used that.

And I said, "That may be true, but I'm telling you, it still affects you. What we allow into our ears affects us." Again, you have movies. It's not just what you're watching, but what's coming into your ears. What about the people that you hang out with? How do they talk? Do you surround yourself with encouragers or complainers? Do your closest friends have an uplifting spirit or a critical spirit?

Do you listen to podcasts and news stations that are always complaining about all of the bad and the evil and what's going on in our world? Or do they actually suggest ways of making a positive difference? Because if you're constantly filling your mind with the complaining and all the things that are bad and not how we can make it better or what we can actually do, you will fall into the trap of just complaining. We have all used this. I'm really going to sound like a dad right now, okay?

We usually become the average of our five closest friends. We become the average of our five closest friends. And so I ask you the question, are you with people whom you want to emulate? Do you want to be like the people you hang out with? Now, I am not telling you that you can't have non-Christian friends. I encourage you to have non-Christian friends. But those that are closest to you, your inner circle, those should be people that you want to emulate, that are encouraging, uplifting.

Proverbs 13:20, Solomon says, "Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm." Isn't that true? We have all fallen into that. Guilty by association, right? This leads to our final category for today, where your feet are going to go. Where do you spend your time? This can play a crucial role in the type of person you become. It's another small thing, but it does shape us.

Scripture is very clear that you and I are to flee from temptation, to run away from it. The best analogy that I always come up with for this idea of running from temptation is that if you struggle with your weight and you want to be healthy, you shouldn't wander around the donut shop. I don't know what it is. I try to be healthy. But when I smell donuts, I just want them. It doesn't matter if I just ate a meal and you know the same is true of movie popcorn.

I can just eat a meal and be stuffed. And I walk in there and I smell the butter and the popcorn. It's like, "I've got to have some." If I want to be healthy, I can't walk around these places. I can't think to myself, "You know what? I can just smell it, and that'll be enough. I'll be okay." I used to watch that show, "The Biggest Loser" you know that was on NBC, and I loved that show. And I loved when they would I didn't love. I thought it was just wrong. They would tempt these people. You know They would send them into a room with all these suites, and they would just sniff them. And I'm like, "What are you doing, man? Run away.

Run away. Don't put yourself in situations where you're going to be tempted to sin." Paul, writing to the young man, Timothy, and to us, says, "Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Flee from evil. Run in the opposite direction." Sometimes these are simple decisions like maybe driving a different way to work because there's some temptation on your normal route.

Maybe it's not going to that restaurant or to that bar because when you go there, you just have urges to do things and to eat and drink things that you shouldn't that get you in trouble. Maybe it's not going to a certain person's house because when you go to that person's house, you just find yourself doing things that you wouldn't normally do. Run in the opposite direction, like your life depends on it because it might. Maybe it's as crazy as not having a cell phone because you can't control yourself.

Maybe it's as crazy as not having internet at home, or if you do because you have to because everybody tells me you have to have internet at home. And if you struggle with those things, you only have a computer in a public space, and you're only ever allowed to go on it when somebody else is around. These are small decisions that lead to big life consequences. Now, I know this can seem overwhelming. You say, "Pastor, I've got a lot of things in my life that I struggle with. I struggle with what my eyes see and my ears are hearing.

I have too much. I can't even begin to fix it." But it's one small decision at a time. Here is my suggestion to you. Choose just one step you'd like to take. Just one thing, one habit that you want to begin. Let me give you some options. And I know I hopefully don't get any emails, but I know some of these things are going to seem petty. They're going to seem small. I'm going to seem like a dad that's talking to a child. I understand that, but I am here to tell you that these small things add up over time.

Maybe you say, "You know what? As I try to control what I allow to come into my eyes and into my ears, I'm no longer going to watch R-rated movies. I'm just going to draw the line." And that really probably means there's some PG-13 I'm not going to watch because I know that's just man's rating scale, right? That's what people try to tell me, "Oh, that's just man that rated it R. Well, okay. If man thinks it's bad that doesn't know God, I'm probably not going to watch it." But maybe you say, "I'm just not going to do that anymore." Maybe you say, "I'm going to listen to more worship music." Not that you're going to cut out some of the fun stuff that you enjoy that's neutral, but I'm going to listen to more worship music that's going to uplift me.

It's going to be encouraging to me. Maybe you say, "I'm not going to give up my cell phone. I just can't do that, pastor, but I'm going to put an accountability app on my phone so that someone can hold me accountable. I'm going to give my phone to my spouse every night and have them go through everything." Maybe you say, "I want to encourage three people a day. I want to complain less. I want to read my Bible more." Those are all great things. But successful people have specific goals.

So I'm going to share with you how to increase the chances of having success because how many of us have made a New Year's resolution or said, "I'm going to do something. I'm going to change. I'm going to start my diet tomorrow." Right? And we mentally want to do it. It's not an issue of wanting to do it. I know you want to do it. But let me give you some advice on how to be more successful. The first thing you need to do is be specific. Don't just go out of here this morning saying, "You know what? I want to read my Bible more, Pastor. You've encouraged me. I think that's a good habit.

I'm going to do it." This is what I mean when I say specific. I will read my Bible in my room for 10 minutes every day right after I brush my teeth in the morning before I go to work or school. I will start in Matthew chapter one and I will work my way through the entire New Testament. Did you see all of the specifics there? Studies have shown over and over again that if you have a location and a time, you are much more likely to accomplish what it is you want to accomplish if you say, "I'm going to do it at this time and in this location." And studies have also shown that if you piggyback that new habit on an old habit, notice I said right after I brushed my teeth, I do that every day.

So that's just something I'm naturally going to do that if you piggyback that on top of that, it's just a reminder, "Oh, I'm going to do that now. Now's when I have to read my Bible." And all of a sudden, you're going to find every time you brush your teeth, you have this urge. I should read my Bible. That's the way that our minds work. Some more ideas to help you be successful. Put your Bible right next to the sink before you go to bed. So when you're brushing your teeth, you see it. Tell someone your goal and ask them to hold you accountable once a week, "Hey, how are you doing?" Whatever your goal is.

Let me give you another example, then I'll be done. A simple example would be, "I want to be more optimistic." That's great, but it's not specific enough. Instead, say something like, "Right after my alarm goes off in the morning and before I get out of bed, I am going to list five things that I'm grateful for." And so to help me with that, I'm going to have a journal next to my bed right by my alarm clock so that when I turn off my alarm, I grab that journal.

And before I even get up, I write down five things that I am grateful for. Maybe another specific would be, "I am going to write one encouraging note to a friend, a coworker, or a family member every Sunday after I get home from church and before I eat lunch." And so you put a journal right where you set your keys. So every time you go to church on Sunday, you go home and you have that card and you write a note before you do anything else. Now, that's only a good idea if you come to church every Sunday, right? If you only come every third Sunday, that's not going to be a good way to stack your habits.

Really, it boils down to these questions, and then it will be done. Who do you want to be? What do you want to be remembered for? As a pastor, I've had the opportunity, the privilege to perform a lot of celebration of life services, funeral services, over the last few months. And it's just caused me to think again about my own life. And what do I want people to remember about me at my funeral? What do I want them to say?

I want them to say that I was a man of God. I loved my family. I loved my kids. I don't really care if they remember what sports team I root for, though most people will know. But I want them to know me as a man of God. That's the goal. Now I've got to work backwards from there. So what does that mean? That means I got to be careful about what I put in my eyes. Got to be careful of what I allow to come into my ears, what comes out of my mouth, where I go, what I do.

Start with the answer to that question. What do you want to be remembered for? And then work back from there and see what it requires of you today and start by taking that one small step. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, help us to take that one small step.

It's probably different for every one of us, but may we be willing to just come before you and say, "God, what do you need to cut out of my life and what needs to be added? Give us the courage and the strength to step out on faith." We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.