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Title: Habit Forming: Study

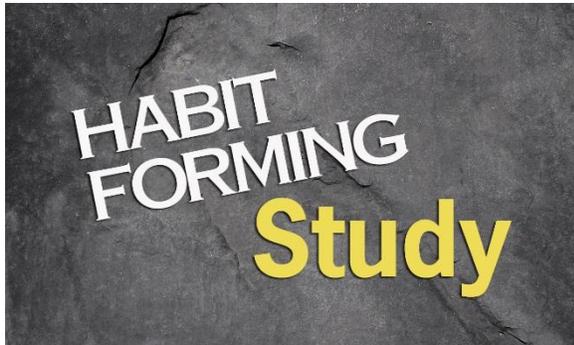
Date: October 7 & 8 1, 2017

Preaching: Senior Minister Randy Spleth

Scripture: [Psalm 1](#)

Text: [Colossians 3:12-16](#)

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Let's start with a little bit of science and an off the wall question. First, the question. Turn to the person next to you and answer this question. Just say the first thing that comes to mind. What does the Grand Canyon and a spiritual life have in common?

When I asked the question this week, I got some of the answers you probably shared-- deep, vast, and beautiful. All are pretty good answers but not what I was looking for. My answer is neuroplasticity. When I shared that at men's prayer breakfast, one of the members said, "Didn't we just pray for someone who has that?" Actually, every one of us has this and long before brain science had a name for it, faithful men and women were using it to develop a deeper, more beautiful spiritual life

Neuroplasticity is the science of the way the brain works. It's based on something called Hebb's Axiom. It describes the brain's capacity to rewire itself, strengthen pathways between neurons that are exercised. It is the way we form habits and shape behaviors. Brain science says neurons that are repeatedly activated in a pattern are statistically more likely to fire in that same pattern. It's a Grand Canyon description of what happens in our brains. Visitors to the Grand Canyon as well as eighth grade earth science students will tell you that over millions of years, the Colorado River carved out an immense gorge. Now the Colorado must follow that path because it is so deep that there isn't any other way to flow. The path is clearly defined.

This is the way brain scientists understand your habits and behavior, what you feel and do. Do something once and it is like the first water that flows down a flat piece of land. Do it again, and it is like a second time down that ground. There isn't much of a groove but it is beginning to form. A third, fourth, and fifth time, the pattern begins to emerge, the habit formed and eventually, this pathway in the brain becomes a deeply ingrained habit, something that we can do automatically, without thinking.

“The more frequently those patterns have been fired, the more easily they will fire in the same pattern in the future. That’s why you may immediately recall the ingredients and steps to preparing spaghetti, which you make every week, but need to consult the cookbook when preparing a holiday dish, you haven’t made in years. This is the way the brain works together to create memory and form habit. In a sense, life becomes a living memory, because so much of what we do is the repetition of what we have done in the past. ¹ We are hardwired to form habits and the habits we form will end up forming us.

It may have the fancy scientific name of neuroplasticity, but this type of behavior modification and habit formation is as old as the Bible. It’s called the spiritual disciplines or spiritual practices or in the case of our new sermon series, habits. Over the next seven weeks we are going to look at seven spiritual habits that shape and form us as followers of Jesus.

This series found its genesis in last month’s series about discipleship. We looked at the path to following Jesus and if you were here, we talked about three steps. Be with Jesus. Become like Jesus. Do the work of Jesus. If you are going to become like Jesus, you have to practice his ways, develop his habits because the Bible knows what science tells us. The habits you form will end up forming you. “Spiritual formation in the Christian tradition is a process of increasingly being possessed by the character traits of Jesus...”²

Paul describes it as a transformation, a renewing of the mind, getting into the habit of wearing the clothes and attitude of Jesus. He says, “...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.”

And just how does that happen? Paul tells us. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly....” (Colossians 3:12-16a) You have to take in God’s word. Nothing is more important to personal spiritual growth than a deep, sustained connection with the Bible. The study of God’s Word is our first spiritual habit.

I think every one of us wants what Paul is describing. “Imagine having a mind cleansed of all the debris that blocks our best intentions. Imagine if each time you saw another person your first thought was to pray for him or bless her. Imagine what it would be like if, any time you were challenged or

anxious, your reflexive response would be to turn to God for strength. Imagine genuinely wishing your “enemies” well.³

This is what it means to “...let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” This is how we are to be transformed by Scripture.” It teaches us how to change, to form new habits and behaviors, to create new cellular pathways in our brains, to rewire our brains to become like Jesus. Scripture is indispensable for this task. Paul says to be transformed into the type of people from whom goodness flows unceasingly like the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, we must let Christ word dwell in us.⁴

When it comes to studying the Bible, the key question isn’t how much, but how? There are lots of different ways to study the Bible and all are important. You need to hear the word of God read aloud. Scripture came to us as an oral tradition and it needs to be heard and read out loud. You need to study the Bible in community. The Bible wasn’t given to you, it was given to God’s people, to the church and you need the dialog of fellow believers in a Bible study or small group or Sunday school class. You need to study and hear what others have said about the Bible, both ancient and contemporaries, which may mean reading books, some old, some new. It may be finding a mentor to guide you in your study.

All of that is knowledge based and is important. But the process of spiritual formation isn’t knowledge based because you can’t think your way into Christlikeness. You have to reshape your mind and imagination through a personal study habit. Dallas Willard described this habit or behavior as this. “The process of spiritual formation in Christ is one of progressively replacing...destructive images and ideas with the images and ideas that filled the mind of Jesus himself.” That’s rewiring the circuits, the pathway of habits in your brain.

There is an ancient way of doing this rewiring. It is the habit of study known as *Lectio Divina*. Some of you know it; a few of you might remember me teaching it to you years ago. But whether you know it or not, it is a powerful way to slowly and surely “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” Over the next few minutes, let’s walk through this way of approaching scripture. You can use it to look at large passages of scripture or simply a verse. You could use it with our texts today, Colossians 3 or Psalm 1. Or you might start with something familiar, like Psalm 23.

Don’t be intimidated by the Latin. *Lectio Divina* dates to the 3rd century and it literally means “divine reading” or “sacred reading.” There are four steps. *Lectio, meditation, oratio, contemplatio*.

Lectio is read. This is where we read the Word of God slowly and reflectively so it sinks in. For lots of you, this will be a major step in forming a new habit. Most of you don't read your Bible. The average American household has 4.4 Bibles but only 35% of Americans open their Bible weekly. ⁵It is impossible to let the word of Christ well in you if you don't open the Bible.

We need to form a habit of reading, reading slowly. This is another problem. We live in the digital world that has fast, fast, fast short messages, 140 characters or less. Speed is everything. US internet users spend an average of 13 hours online each week, browsing 99 domains and 3,123 pages. But listen to this: time spent on each website is just 56 seconds. We are wired to have short attention spans.

Read slowly. Read it the way you'd read a love letter at the height of romance. Certain words may stand out to you; allow them to sink into your heart. Look for something that catches your eye, what shimmers. Read it out loud. "The Lord is my shepherd." Whisper it. "The Lord is my shepherd." Read it again and again until you know it backwards and forward, until that path of the words has been repeated enough to create a pathway in your brain.

Then comes ***meditatio***, meditation. You meditate on it or you think deeply about it. You think about, what does this mean? Again, meditation is a slow process and something that was considered so important in the Old Testament that is mentioned over fifty times. The Psalmist says that someone who is blessed meditates on the law, day and night. "Blessed is the man... (whose) ...delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night." (Psalm 1:1a-2)

The word "meditate" in Hebrew is "hagah." It's an interesting word. It can be translated to meditate or to think deeply. It could also be translated to growl over. That's how the prophet Isaiah uses. It's the exact same word in Hebrew, "hagah" a great lion over a prey. There is a word picture. Think of a lion with his prey, growling over it, like you might see if you are on a safari. Haven't been on a safari? Then think of a dog and its bone. He takes hours with it, playing with it in his mouth, chewing on it and ingesting it. This is the idea of mediation. We are to chew on the Bible over and over, to get it inside our system, to draw life and nourishment and strength from it. We are, for lack of a better word, to eat it.

Eugene Peterson has this great little book on the Bible called Eat this Book. He gets the title from Revelation 10 when an angel presents a scroll to John of Patmos and says, "Eat this." It tasted like honey on the mouth but was bitter when he swallowed it. Scripture can be sweet; it can also cause you

heartburn. Peterson says, "Christians feed on Scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures us as food nurtures the human body. Christians don't simply learn or study or use Scripture, we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into our system."⁶

Read, meditate, then *oratio*. *Oratio* is to pray, a prayer from the heart. As you become aware of what you sense God is saying to you, you talk to God about it. You pray it back to God. You engage with God. Maybe it is gratitude. "God thank you for this verse, this story, this passage." Or maybe your prayer of repentance and confession. "God, I'm sorry. I confess my sin." Maybe it's for guidance. "God, I need you to lead me. I need you to guide me. I need you to heal me." Can you see how those prayers might work with the 23rd Psalm? "God, thank you for being my shepherd." "God, I confess I won't allow you to be my shepherd." "God, I need you to be my shepherd."

And then, the final step is *contemplatio*--contemplation, it's where we get the word contemplation but that's not exactly right in English. The idea here is that you sit in it.

As you read the Bible, you let it read you. It's a great time for listening prayer. Ask if perhaps God wants to speak to you through these words. The question that always lies behind such reading is, "God, what do you want to say to me in this moment?" What new attitude do I need, what decision should I make, what should I do for the sake of Christ, or others, or myself, what should I believe, what should I praise, thank, trust?

Remember, the goal of this type of Bible study is for spiritual transformation, to rewire your thinking, to create new pathways that become a deep and life-giving force. In contemplation we come to an understanding of the parts of our lives that need to be transformed by God's grace.

That's *Lectio Divina*, a way of study for spiritual transformation. But this is important. The goal of the study of scripture is not to get through it. It is to get it through us, to get it into us, so Christ can dwell richly in us.

You can call it spiritual formation. You can call it neuroplasticity. Any way you label it is the way to have a Grand Canyon spiritual life, one that is deep, vast and beautiful. I challenge you to try this way to study. This week, find ten to fifteen minutes a day. Start perhaps with the 23rd Psalm, maybe a verse a day. Read, meditate, pray and then contemplate. Try it. I promise at the end of the week, you'll discover it's habit forming.

¹ Thompson, Kurt. Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships Kindle Edition, page 65

² Why Bother With Discipleship?, Dallas Willard, <https://renovare.org/articles/why-bother-with-discipleship-1>

³ Ortberg, John. The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People (Kindle Locations 2697-2706). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Ortberg, John, 2711.

⁵ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/14/5-facts-on-how-americans-view-the-bible-and-other-religious-texts/>

⁶ Eat this Book, Eugene Peterson, http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/446.