



# WHAT IF...

## *Imagining Possibilities*

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### How Shall We Live Now? – Part Five *Forming Habits of Christian Practice*

*(This is the fifth and final article in the series on formation for Christian living post-pandemic.)*

John Roberto

*Habits are not born but created.*  
Charles Duhigg (*The Power of Habits*)

When you woke up this morning, what did you do first? Did you hop in the shower, check your email or text messages, get the children ready for school, eat breakfast, or....? Did you choose a salad, a sandwich, or hamburger for lunch? When you got home, did you put on your sneakers and go for a run, prepare dinner, help with your child's homework, or....? Most of the choices we make each day may feel like the products of well-considered decision making, but they're not. They're habits.

It wasn't too long ago that children were socialized into the habits of faith by parents, grandparents, and extended family. The daily, weekly, and annual patterns (routines) of families nurtured habits of prayer, Bible reading, celebration, rituals, participation in community life, and much more. Small habits of prayer upon rising, before meals, and closing the day were built into the fabric of daily life. Living in a society that makes our lives much more complex has made sustaining the habits of faith much more difficult. The pandemic has disrupted every aspect of life and disconnected people from the benefit of the habits of faith which give their lives meaning and purpose. If "habits are not born but created," then how do we form people of all ages in Christian practices that become habits of daily Christian living, drawing them more deeply into a life with God in whom we "live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

A **habit** is a routine of behavior that is repeated regularly and tends to occur subconsciously. A habit is a choice that we deliberately make at some point, and then stop thinking about, but continue doing every day. In his University of Texas 2014 Commencement Address, Admiral William H. McRaven shared a story from his Navy Seal training about the power of one simple habit.

*If you make your bed every morning you will have accomplished the first task of the day. It will give you a small sense of pride, and it will encourage you to do another task and another and another. By the end of the day, that one task completed will have turned into many tasks completed. Making your bed will also reinforce the fact that little things in life matter. If you can't do the little things right, you will never do the big things right.*

*And, if by chance you have a miserable day, you will come home to a bed that is made—that you made—and a made bed gives you encouragement that tomorrow will be better.*

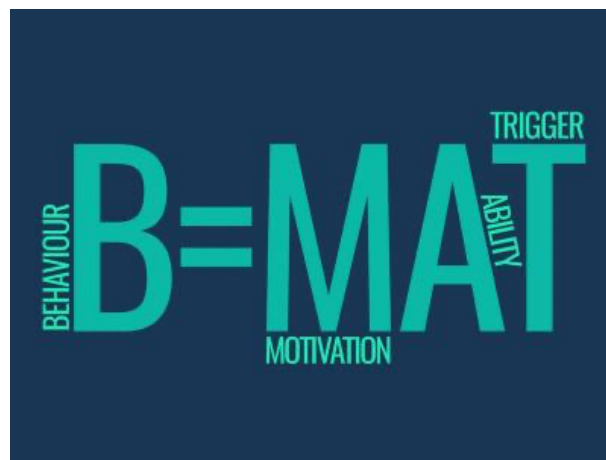
*If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed.*

(Watch the video of the commencement address at: <https://youtu.be/pxBQLFLei70>).

## The Fogg Behavior Model

In his book, *Tiny Habits: Small Changes that Change Everything*, BJ Fogg proposes a model of behavior change that directly applies to forming habits. According to Dr. Fogg, we can change our lives by changing our behaviors. We all know that. But what we may not know is that only three variables drive those behaviors. For behavior to occur, three elements must converge at the same time: **Motivation**, **Ability**, and a **Trigger** or **Prompt**.

Here's the simplest way to explain it: *Behavior (B) happens when Motivation (M), Ability (A), and a Trigger (T) or Prompt come together at the same moment.*



Motivation is a desire to do a specific behavior (eating a healthy vegetable tonight) or a general class of behaviors (eat healthy foods each night). There are three sources of motivation: *yourself* (what you already want), a *benefit* (or punishment) you would receive by doing the action, and your *context* (e.g., all your friends are doing it).

Motivation and ability have a compensatory relationship.

1. The *more motivated* you are to do a behavior, the *more likely* you are to do the behavior.
2. The *harder* the behavior is to do, the *less likely* you are to do it.
3. Motivation and ability work together like teammates.
4. No behavior happens without a *prompt*.

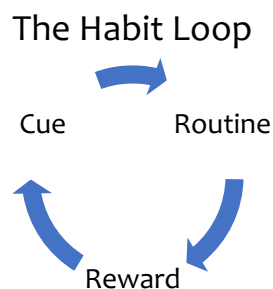
This solution is deceptively simple. On one hand, you can learn to think about behavior in this way in two minutes. On the other hand, you'll find this model applies to all types of behavior, in all cultures, for people at any age. It's universal.

Through his research and coaching with people, Fogg discovered two important principles when designing for behavior change for products, services, and how we design change in our own lives. *We all need to do two things: (1) Help ourselves do what we already want to do, and (2) Help ourselves feel successful.*

The approach resonates with the work of James Clear in *Atomic Habits*: “*The Four Laws of Behavior Change are a simple set of rules we can use to build better habits. They are (1) make it obvious, (2) make it attractive, (3) make it easy, and (4) make it satisfying.*” (Clear, 55)

## Forming Habits

A habit is a formula our brain automatically follows: When you see a **Cue** (getting up in the morning), you will do a **Routine** (making the bed) in order to get a **Benefit** or reward (feeling a sense of pride and encouragement). The process within our brains is a three-step loop. First there is a **cue**, a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode and which habit to use. Then there is the **routine**, which can be physical or mental or emotional. Finally there is a **benefit** or reward, which helps your brain figure out if this particular loop is worth remembering for the future:



Over time, this loop—cue, routine, benefit; cue, routine, benefit—becomes more and more automatic. The cue and benefit become intertwined until a powerful sense of anticipating and craving emerges. Eventually, a habit is born. (See Duhigg, 19)

Researchers have learned that *cues* can be almost anything: a visual trigger, a certain place, a time of day, an emotion, a sequence of thoughts, or the company of particular people. *Routines* can be incredibly complex or fantastically simple. *Benefits* can range from things that cause physical sensations (food) to emotional payoffs.

If you want to start reading the Bible each morning, it's essential that you choose a simple cue (like making a cup of coffee, listening to instrumental music) and clear benefit (quiet, reflection, inspiration or encouragement for the day). But countless studies have shown that a cue and a benefit or reward, on their own, aren't enough for a new habit to last. Only when your brain starts *expecting* the benefit—craving the endorphins or sense of accomplishment—will it become automatic to make a cup of coffee and then read the Bible. The cue, in addition to triggering a routine, must also trigger a craving for the benefit to come. (See Duhigg, 51)

## How to Create a Habit

### 1. The Cue

Experiments have shown that almost all habitual cues fit into one of five categories: location, time, emotional state, other people, and immediately preceding action. Each habit has a trigger:

- ◆ What time will this habit occur?
- ◆ Where will you be?
- ◆ Who else will be around?
- ◆ What will you have just finished?
- ◆ What emotion do you think you will be feeling?

We don't need all of these to create a habit. One of them is needed to become a cue. But the more we test it out, the faster the habit takes hold.

BJ Fogg suggests that we can design a new habit by starting with a routine we already do each day. With this routine in mind, we then look for a new habit that would naturally follow the existing routine. He calls an existing routine an "Anchor" because it's stable and solid.

Think about the common routines in daily life. Any one of these could become the anchor for a new habit.

- ◆ After waking up in the morning
- ◆ Before going to sleep at night
- ◆ Before or after breakfast
- ◆ Before or after lunch
- ◆ Before or after dinner
- ◆ Getting in the car to drive to work
- ◆ Sitting on the bus or train
- ◆ Putting the children to bed at night
- ◆ Turning off the TV or phone or computer at night
- ◆ Starting work each day
- ◆ Finishing work each day

## 2. The Benefit or Reward

Benefits or rewards can range from things that cause physical sensations to emotional payoffs. Here are questions to guide the identification of the benefit or reward.

- ◆ What benefit (reward) will you give yourself at the end of the behavior?
- ◆ Do you actually enjoy this reward? (If no choose a new reward.)
  - After a few days, ask: Do you crave this reward when you are exposed to the cue?
  - After two weeks ask: Do you crave the intrinsic reward of the habit (how it makes you feel) more than the extrinsic reward (what you give yourself as a treat)?
- ◆ If you answer yes to these questions, you have a powerful habit!

## 3. The Routine

Now we can put it all together by creating a plan for ourselves.

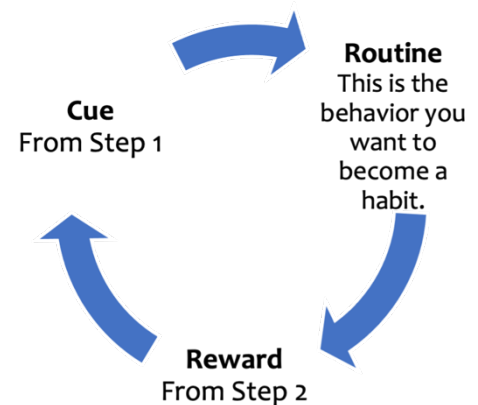
Studies show that the easiest way to implement a new habit is to write a plan:

When \_\_\_\_\_ (Cue),

I will \_\_\_\_\_ (Routine)

because it provides me with \_\_\_\_\_ (Benefit/Reward)

Post this plan where you will see it. Try it for a week. Eventually, studies say, the new behavior will become automatic.



## Habits Form Identity

In his book, *Atomic Habits*, James Clear describes how habit formation can change a person's identity.

**The first layer is changing your outcomes.** The level is concerned with changing your results: Losing weight, publishing a book, winning a championship. Most of the goals you set are associated with this level of change.

**The second layer is changing your process.** This level is concerned with changing your habits and systems: implementing a new routine at the gym, decluttering your desk for better workflow, developing a meditation practice. Most of the habits you build are associated with this level.

**The third and deepest layer is changing your identity.** This level is concerned with changing your beliefs: your worldview, your self-image, your judgments about yourself and others. Most of the beliefs, assumptions, and biases you hold are associated with this level.

Outcomes are about what you get. Processes are about what you do. Identity is about what you believe. What it comes to building habits that last—when it comes to building a system of one percent improvements—the problem is not that one level is “better” or “worse” than another. All levels of change are useful in their own ways. The problem is the *direction* of change.

Many people begin the process of changing habits by focusing on what they *want* to achieve. This leads us to outcome-based habits. The alternative is to build identity-based habits. With this approach we start by focusing on *who* we wish to become.

The ultimate form of intrinsic motivation is when a habit becomes part of your identity. It’s one thing to say I’m the type of person who *wants* this. It’s something very different to say I’m the type of person who *is* this. (Clear, 30-31)

True behavior change is identity change. For example,

- ◆ The goal is not to read a book, the goal is to become a reader.
- ◆ The goal is not to run a marathon, the goal is become a runner.
- ◆ The goal is not to learn an instrument, the goal is to become a musician.

Behaviors are usually a reflection of our identity. What we do is an indication of the type of person we believe that we are—either consciously or non-consciously. Our identity emerges out of our habits. We are not born with preset beliefs. Every belief, including those about ourselves, is learned and conditioned through experience.

Our habits are how we *embody* our identity. When we make our bed each day, we embody the identity of an organized person. When we write each day, we embody the identity of a creative person. When we train each day, we embody the identity of an athletic person. The more we repeat a behavior, the more we reinforce the *identity* associated with that behavior

Habits are the path to changing our identity. The most practical way to change *who* we are is change *what* we do.

## Application

I believe the research into creating habits (and changing existing habits) can have a direct application in the way we form people in Christian practices. We are seeking to guide the development of a Christian way of life. We want people to experience Christian practices, to be changed by the experience, and to integrate the practices it into their lives. We can summarize the approach in this way:

*We form people in the practices of the Christian way of life by drawing upon the wisdom of the Bible and Christian tradition and connecting the practices to the “signs of the times” – the struggles, joys, needs, and hungers of people and communities today – and equipping people with the skills and ways to live the practice in their daily lives.*

How do we design formation programs and activities so they nurture habits of faith practice? James Clear’s “The Four Laws of Behavior Change” provides a guide for designing learning experiences and activities that people can use to form habits of Christian practice in their lives. What if we followed these simple guidelines?

- ◆ Have can we make it obvious?
- ◆ How can we make it attractive?
- ◆ How can we make it easy?
- ◆ How can we make it satisfying?

The Christian Practices learning programs and reproducible activities on the Lifelong Faith website provide a starting point for designing learning programs and experiences. Each practice has a teaching guide and reproducible activities that you can use with age groups, families, and intergenerational groups. (Go to <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/practices.html>)

Using the insights of creating habits, here are a few things to consider in designing programs and experiences and in providing Christian practice activities:

1. Suggest times (day, week, month) for forming the habit using the Christian practice activities. For example:
  - *Through the day:* Mealtimes, car times, morning and bedtime, exits and entries, family sharing times, waiting for... times
  - *Through key moments:* Good times and hard times, times of joy and sorrow, highs and lows of the day
  - *Through the year:* Church year seasons, holidays, rituals and celebrations—birthdays, anniversaries, etc.
2. Script the moves by providing “how to live” guidance using examples, videos, and stories that demonstrate the practice in the real lives of individuals of all ages and families.
3. Describe the positive benefits of living the practice—for individuals, the family, the community and world.
4. Make the activities easy to do and easy to understand.
5. Make the activities short: 5 minutes or 10 minutes (15 minutes max). Tell people how long something will take to do.
6. Provide differing levels of depth – Beginning, Growing, Advanced – with a menu of activities from which people can select the one most appropriate for their faith life.

7. Consider developing 30-day or 7-day intensives where an age group or the whole church community can focus on one practice. For example, a 40-day Lent intensive or a monthly plan for “30 Days of Practice” throughout the year.

◆ September	Hospitality (welcoming back)
◆ October	Stewardship (Stewardship Sunday)
◆ November	Reading the Bible (prepare for new Cycle)
◆ December (Advent)	Finding God in Everyday Life (incarnation)
◆ January (ML King)	Doing Justice
◆ February (Lent)	Praying, Fasting, Serving, or Forgiveness
◆ March (Holy Week)	Dying Well
◆ April (Earth Day)	Caring for Creation
◆ May	Peace and Reconciliation
◆ June (Pentecost)	Embracing Diversity

## A Last Word

Thinking from the perspective of forming habits of Christian practice in people of all ages and in families/households changes the way we design faith formation. We begin thinking about people’s daily lives and how we can nurture habits of faith in the midst of those lives. This person- and context-centered approach can change everything we do in faith formation, and equip people to live the habits of daily Christian living that draw them more deeply into a life with God in whom we “live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

## Three Essential Books on Habits

Clear, James. *Atomic Habits: Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results*. Avery/Penguin Random House, 2018.  
Duhigg, Charles. *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. Random House, 2014  
Fogg, BJ. *Tiny Habits: The Small Changes that Change Everything*. Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2020.

## Websites

### James Clear

- Website: <https://jamesclear.com>

### Charles Duhigg

- Website: <https://charlesduhigg.com>

### BJ Fogg:

- Website: <https://www.bjfogg.com>
- Website: <https://behaviormodel.org>
- Video: <https://youtu.be/AdKUJxjn-R8>
- Website: <https://tinyhabitsacademy.com>