

22 June 2014

7 Habits for Christians - 2

“Habit #1 - Be Proactive”

Number 2 in the sermon series “7 Habits for Christians.” Super quick re-cap. I’m using Stephen Covey’s book *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. It’s not new, but it’s good. And it’s not about learning techniques to get ahead or to get what we want. It’s about character and principle. It’s about working at being the best people we can possibly be. And I’m trying to apply that to Living Water so that we work at being the best possible congregation we can be.

The heavy theology from last week came in two parts: 1. You are not God. This is actually kind of hard for us to get. 2. You are a created co-creator with God. You were made in God’s image, made to have a relationship with God, put in charge of God’s creation, and given self-awareness.

With that in mind, we took a peek at habit #1: Be Proactive. That’s proactive as opposed to reactive. Chemicals are reactive. They have no mind, no will. They just react to what happens to them. Properly strike a properly made match, it burns every time. I’m no expert, but it seems to me that animals are mostly reactive, mostly responding to instinct. Some animals can learn things, can be trained. Some, like whales and dolphins may have language capabilities. Some, like elephants mourn their dead and may have some self-awareness. Human beings have those things in spades.

We are self-aware. We are aware of our thoughts and moods and feelings. Therefore, we need not let them control us; we need not automatically react to them. Instead, we can be proactive, we can chose how to respond to what we think, how we feel, what happens to us.

There are limits. But our limits are less than what we might think. Do you know the name Victor Frankl? Do you know his story? I didn’t. Frankl was a prisoner in a Nazi death camp. He watched his parents, his brother, and his wife all die or be sent to the gas chambers. One day, naked and alone in a small room, he began to become aware of the one freedom his Nazi captors couldn’t take from him--namely that he could decide for himself how all of this was going to affect him. No matter what they did to him, Frankl was not going to let his captors control how he responded.

Through a series of mental, emotional, and moral disciplines Frankl exercised his small, embryonic freedom until it grew larger and larger, until he had more freedom than his Nazi captors. *They* had more liberty, but *he* had more freedom. He became an inspiration to those around him, including some of the guards, helping others find meaning in their suffering and dignity in their imprisonment.

That’s just amazing, isn’t it? That anyone could have the inner strength and discipline to respond that way to being in a Nazi death camp? In extreme circumstances Frankl shows how powerful and how much more healthy proactivity is over reactivity. We may have been programed by parents or bosses or television shows or talk radio or life circumstances to react differently.

Could you blame *anybody* for reacting with despair or anger or hatred or even self-loathing to what Frankl experienced? No, that's kind of what we would expect. But between the stimulus we are given and the response we make is our choice. Which choice, do you think, leaves us better off?

Being proactive is about having the ability to abandon an impulse to a value. Being proactive is admitting to ourselves that no one can make us angry, that we can choose how to respond, that we have self-control. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, "No one can hurt you without your consent."

If being proactive is about having the ability to abandon an impulse to a value, then we as a congregation would do well to be clear about what are our Christian values. One of our illustrious former church councils looked at exactly that. Among the things they said were Kingdom of God values are: being repentant and bearing fruit, choosing Kingdom of God values over other, competing values, not worrying because we trust that God will take care of us, avoiding self-deception and self-righteousness, and living with wonder and innocence; so that mercy begets mercy; mercy trumps justice; and forgiveness is required.

We can be proactive about all of those things no matter what is going on around us.

As a simple exercise for working on this I have a sermon challenge for you this week. It's for each of us to watch our language. Not in the way we usually mean when we say, "Watch your language," though that might be a good thing, too. No, I mean watch our reactive language. Like, "He makes me so mad!" No, we have control over that. Getting angry at what someone does might be reasonable, and it might be good--but it might not. We have a choice of how to respond. Or, "I can't come; I have to do such and such." No, we choose to do such and such. And that might be the right choice. But it's our choice. Number one, watch your language.

And number two, select a problem from your work or personal life that is frustrating to you. Identify what you have control over and what you don't. And then start working on the things over which you have control. Identify the first step you can take, and take that step.

And lastly, check out how you're doing with those Kingdom of God values. It may not be easy, but you have a choice there, too, a healthy choice, a Godly choice, a faithful choice, just as God has chosen you.