
Well, I don't know about you, but I was really, really blessed by that time of worship. Was that amazing? I needed that after this last week and the week ahead. I trust that at whatever campus you are joining us from the worship was just as powerful. Hopefully you felt that right into your living room, if you're joining us online.

We are glad to have you. If this is your first time to be with us or to be tuning in, we have been in a series of messages since the beginning of the year. This is week number three. We are calling the series *Atomic Habits*, and it's inspired by a book with the same title that I read about a year and a half ago by a guy named James Clear.

What we are doing is we're just taking some stock, taking an inventory of our personal and spiritual lives at the beginning of the year. Most of the time, that's when we are the most open to experiencing change.

I think if all of us stop, take a time out, and do some evaluation of our lives, there would be some areas where we would say, "I know that needs to change. I've been excusing that for far too long. I've been ignoring that for far too long. I need to do something to experience this change I'm looking for."

Oftentimes, we're not exactly sure where to start, or maybe we feel like we're digging our way out a pit because, if you're anything like me, my life is kind of filled with lots of stops and starts. And so, it's kind of like, "How can I experience this change that I'm looking for?"

So, on week number one we said that all of us are hoping this year will be better than last year, and we are hoping to experience change. Hope is a great place to start, but it isn't a very effective strategy.

What I mean by that is if we're upside down financially and we wonder at the end of this year, "Are we going to save more than we're saving now? Are we going to be out of debt more than what we are now?" We can't just say, "I hope so." We need to develop some sort of strategy to begin moving in that direction.

If our relationships aren't where we want them to be, maybe our marriage is not where we want it to be, we can't just say, "Well, you know, hopefully by the end of the year it will be better. Maybe we'll have that one conversation, go on that one date, go on that great vacation, and it will be better by then." We've actually got to begin to do something on a regular basis.

If we look at our spiritual lives and say, "I'm not really where I want to be in my relationship with God, the growth of my character, and what we might call the Fruit of the Spirit found in a book in the New Testament call Galatians." We can't just say, "I hope I grow. I hope I attend or tune in a couple of times a month. I'll read my Bible and try to do a few new things. Hopefully at the end of the year I'll be spiritually further along than I am now." Hope is a good place to start, not an effective strategy.

But we're not talking about some huge jump. We're not talking about some huge, astronomical change, we're just simply talking about an atomic one. And in every week of this series, we've given this definition of atomic:

incremental, extremely minute, tiny

This should make it more manageable. This is good news in all of our lives. All of us can manage to say, "What small, tiny adjustment do I need to make?"

Simply by way of review, two weeks ago when we started this we talked about the cumulative power of atomic habits, these small incremental changes, and how it's such a biblical concept. We just see it all throughout God's Word.

Jesus, himself, implemented daily atomic habits into his routine that kept anchoring him back to his identity. Like Jesus knew who he was. He knew why he had come.

He said, "I've come from the Father, and I've come not just to teach some moral lessons. I've come not just to do some tricks on the side. I've come to reconcile men and women back to God." He knew who his identity was. So, his daily habits reinforced that identity.

And we see this in the Apostle Paul. Last week we saw it in Daniel. You can just go through every major character that God used in a significant way throughout his word—Ruth, Esther, and others. They all had these habits.

In fact, we may go as far as to say this. People of character foster healthy habits. If you look at somebody who has a really strong character, you can't just go, "Wow, they were just born that way," or "they just have the genetics of a good character." No, likely if you look under the hood, they have some daily disciplines, some daily habits, that they continue to foster in their lives that reinforce their character.

So, last week we talked about, "What are just one or two atomic habits, not 25, not 10, but one or two atomic habits we can develop into our lives?" We said we need to make them clear, simple, and known.

We ended last week talking about a keystone habit. And we gave this definition of a Keystone habit:

a small habit that you introduce into your routine that ends up improving many other areas of your life.

It really doesn't have to do with that specific area. I gave the example of eating dinner together as a family, and all the other side benefits that brings. And exercise, and all the other side benefits. And I said, "The keystone habit that will impact every other area of your life is daily engaging in God's word."

And, we drew a difference between reading and engaging. They are not the same thing. I don't know about any of you, but I have this ability to read like a whole page and then not retain anything I just read. Anybody with me?

My mind starts wandering. I'm over here, and I read it, but it didn't sink in. There is a difference between reading the Bible and engaging in God's word. We want to engage in it.

You're like, "What's the difference?" Well, Psalm 119:105 says, "Your Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path."

We said the Bible is not a history book, it's not just a bunch of knowledge, it's not just the answer book. God never promised to illuminate the whole path, he promised to illuminate the step in your path.

So, how you engage in it is, every day you sit down and you take just a few moments, 10-15 verses, maybe a chapter, tops. And you just pray and say, "God, I need some guidance for the day. I need some clarity for the step of faith I'm getting ready to take. Would you give it to me from your word?"

What I want to talk about today in this third installment. We talked about fostering good atomic habits to reinforce our identity, who we want to be. Now I want to talk about breaking up with bad habits. Because, the reality is that we could spend a whole bunch of time fostering and developing good habits in our lives, only to have all of that sabotaged by just one or two bad habits that we allow or make excuses for.

It's kind of like, have any of you ever gotten like a really, really good workout in? You broke some sweat and burned like 600 calories? And then you go home and you take your family out to the brand-new Japanese steakhouse that just opened up?

I'm talking hypothetically here. Just use your imagination with me. You sit down and eat all the fried rice, the shrimp, the chicken, and the steak. Then you go home and realize, "I just undid the hard work I did in the gym." Hypothetically. I felt like I was sweating butter.

This is kind of like if you do all this hard work to say, "Here are one or two atomic habits I want to implement into 2021," but then you don't pay attention to some habits that are actually working against those good habits, it will sabotage everything.

I talked a couple weeks ago about how, unfortunately, bad habits are so easy to fall into in our lives. We don't have to give great intentionality to them, they just happen. You don't have to intentionally set out to binge watch Netflix, it just happens. And they make it easy for you. As soon as you get done with one episode, it goes right into the next one.

It doesn't take a whole lot of intentional effort to overeat. That's easy to do, because it's enjoyable. Or to oversleep. These bad habits that we foster, it is so easy to let them into our lives and then we get stuck.

I shared with you on week one some of my bad habits I had when I was growing up, one of which was biting my fingernails. But I've had others. When I was in high school, I worked at a grocery store bagging groceries. I got into a bad habit one summer.

At closing time, I would run back to the freezer section and grab a thing of Ben and Jerry's ice cream, one of my favorite flavors Chunky Monkey. Anybody with me? We have one fan. Me and you, after, we're going to go get it, right?

So, I would run back to the freezer section, get it, and run home. I wouldn't just make myself a little bowl or whatever. I would go back to my bedroom with it, and turn on Nintendo and play RBI Baseball late into the night. I would eat the whole thing.

I would finish up around midnight, and then go to bed. I got into the habit of doing that for several weeks during the summer. And then I began to wonder why my stomach hurt all the time. And I began to wonder why I wasn't sleeping very well. I'd slipped into this bad habit I knew I needed to break free from.

There have been other bad habits that have been right on the verge of my doorstep. Like many of you. Maybe you can relate to this. I remember when I was in high school and one of my friends came over. He had a backpack. He came into my room, shut the door, and unzipped the backpack. He pulled out some explicit magazines he'd snuck out of his dad's closet.

I didn't really say anything, but then he brought them over again and again. I remember thinking to myself, "I need to break up with this habit. This can turn into an addiction that can get a hold on me."

And I would imagine that if that's not one of the particular things you've wrestled with, maybe there is something that is. It could be some sort of a substance. Maybe it's an addiction to social media of some kind. What is it in your life right now? Can I just ask this question?

What are the 1-2 bad habits you need to break up with in 2021?

You need to put some distance between you and these behaviors that are holding you back and they are working against your identity, who Jesus died for you to be. What are some of the things you need to do?

Here is the thing. When it comes to some bad habits that are in our lives, I would imagine that every single one of us can identify at least one or two, "At the very least, I know this isn't helping me."

It's not that we don't know that. We've probably tried in the past to put some distance there, to break up with some of these addictions, and maybe it didn't work. Maybe we just empowered it all the more. Maybe we have been stuck in that pit for so long we are like, "I don't know that I'll ever be able to break free from this."

In fact, maybe you've even begun to buy the lie, "This is who I am," so you just continue to harbor that bad habit in your life and to foster these secrets. Maybe you can relate to something Paul said in Romans 7.

"I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate."

And then he says this.

"I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway."

Can anybody relate to that? He sounds so human. Like, this is the struggle we have. There is good I want to do, and I don't do it. There are unhealthy things, bad things, destructive things I don't want to do. But this I continue to do.

And you could probably fill in the blanks there with some more specific struggles. I really, really want to eat healthy, but I ate the chicken chimichanga anyway. I really want to get up early and exercise, start my day off right. But when it's dark and cold outside, it's so easy to roll over and go back to sleep.

I really do want to live on a budget, but Amazon makes it so easy with the one-click purchasing button. The thing I didn't know existed five minutes ago, but now I have to have it. And I could probably have it within the next hour.

I really want to engage in God's word, but I binge watch Netflix instead. I really want to be kind and encouraging, but I got on Facebook anyway. I'm hitting a little too close to home, I know.

Why? Why is it so hard to break up with bad habits?

We've looked at this graph every week of this series. By way of review, this is a result-time graph. If you're just now joining us, we've been saying that one of the reason change is so hard is that when we make a decision, whatever it is—New Year's resolution, I want to eat healthier, live on a budget, work on my relationships, grow spiritually, whatever. We want to experience immediate, tangible results up and to the right.

But most often that's not how change works. With change, usually there is a dip. So, if you take exercise as an example. You say, "I'm going to exercise and eat right," you're probably not going to notice after one day of it.

Maybe even like a week of it. Maybe at the end of the week you're really sore, and maybe have even gained a couple of pounds. You don't feel any stronger and you're like, "I don't even know if this is working."

And there's like this dip. But if you stay with it and continue to follow the pattern of this, over the course of several months, it begins to pick up momentum and something begins to happen.

Compound interest begins to work for you. All of a sudden, you turn a corner and you begin to experience exponential results. Where we oftentimes lose the battle is in the valley of despair.

I want to say it's just the opposite in trying to break a bad habit. With a bad habit, we make maybe a decision or a poor choice and we experience immediate results. That's the unfair thing about it. You get a hit of dopamine. You get an adrenaline rush. You get this itch scratched right away.

So, you make the purchase, the \$500 purchase on a credit card, and you get the shiny thing right there. You don't even get a bill for a month. You get the immediate results. You go to the Japanese steakhouse, hypothetically, and you eat the meal. It tastes so good. And you're like, "That tastes so good," but an hour later you begin to experience some of the negative results.

You have the innocent flirtation. You have the blow up of anger. It feels good in the moment, but then it begins to erode your marriage or your relationships.

Here is the thing about a bad habit. It starts off and you get immediate results. But you stay with it? Eventually it will crater your life, because compound interest then begins to work against you.

We can say it this way:

With a good habit, it's difficult to start, but easy to live with.

With a bad habit, it's easy to start, but difficult to live with.

And some of you know this to be true. We've got to address some of the bad habits in our lives rather than ignoring them or excusing them. Because a few bad habits can lead you and me to a place that we never, ever wanted to go. And it can sabotage the work God desires to do in our lives.

So, last week I said in order to foster a good, healthy, atomic habit, I showed you a graph. Here's last week's outline here. Start a good habit. Make it:

Clear, Simple, Known

I would say in order to break up with a bad habit, it just mirrors this. Stop a bad habit. Make it:

Invisible, Difficult, Known

So, that way we stay accountable and encouraged to continue to put distance between us and the bad habit.

Let me unpack this. First of all, to distance ourselves from a bad habit, we need to make it invisible. It's all in what we see.

How many times have you resolved to never engage in a bad habit, but you fell into it anyway? And you told yourself over and over again, "Don't do it. Don't do it. Don't do it. Don't do it." And just like Paul in Romans 7, you end up doing the very thing you didn't want to.

I think the reason why is, so much of the time when we're trying to break up with a bad habit we're doing so in the power of our own strength. It's called willpower. The unfortunate and ironic thing about relying upon willpower is that when you try to resist temptation with your own willpower, you end up just making the temptation stronger.

Jesus, himself, when he resisted temptation in the desert, when Satan came to tempt him, he didn't rely upon willpower. If there was anybody who probably had the willpower to resist it was him. But he didn't. Instead, he relied upon the power of God's word.

Paul is talking about willpower in Romans 7, and he says it will only take you so far before you eventually lose your grip.

When I was in college I worked at a furniture company. We delivered furniture. We delivered couches, lazy boy chairs, mattresses, and tables. So, I would go, right after lunch when my classes were finished, and we'd show up, get the order, load the truck up with furniture, and run our deliveries.

It was a fun job. I enjoyed it. But the thing I didn't like was delivering sleeper couches. Do you know what I'm talking about? Whoever invented the sleeper couch should be excommunicated. They're not even very comfortable anyway. But they look like regular couch, until you pick it up and it weighs 3 times the amount because of the bed frame and the mattress inside.

We had an order one afternoon of a lot of sleeper couches. At the end of the afternoon, we are about done. We had one more stop to make. The only thing left on the truck was two sleeper couches.

We pull up to this house, and somebody had ordered two of them. We walked in and the guy said, "Let me show you where they go." It was a three-story house. Neither one of them went

on the main floor. One of them went upstairs, and one of them went downstairs. Than you very much.

And then, to top it all off, he said, “I’ve got two existing sleeper sofas I’d like for you guys to take out of here and haul away.” So, four sleeper couches at the end of the afternoon. Me and my friend, we are dying. We manage to get the two out, we got one in and we have one more to deliver downstairs.

Have you ever gotten to this place where your grip is so tired you can hardly feel your hands anymore? That was me. I’m holding this thing and we’re going down the stairs. I’m doing everything I can to hold onto it. I’m telling myself, “Hold on. Hold on. Hold on.” I couldn’t. Involuntarily I lost my grip. It just slipped out of my hands. And it dropped on the stairs.

I would say, for so many of us, that’s what happens when we’re relying on willpower. We’re trying to resist, we’re trying to refrain from—you fill in the blank. We are trying to refrain, “Just hold on, hold on,” and our grip will only take us so far. We’ve got to rely on something that is much, much stronger than willpower.

Charles Duhigg in his well know book *The Power of Habits*, gives us a little equation. He says when it comes to both good and bad habits, here is how they stick.

There is a cue, a trigger of some kind, oftentimes in what we see. Then there is a response, what we do. And there is a reward. If you do this enough times you’ll develop a habit.

Cue—Response—Reward

So, he says that when breaking up with bad habits, we’ve really got to attack the cue.

Make it invisible

And it’s really this question of where is my focus, where is my attention? It’s all these sensory receptors we talked about last week. This is just reinforced by Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:

“Your eye is like a lamp that provides light for your body.” I can’t help but notice the parallels to Psalm 119:105. “When your eye is healthy, your whole body is filled with light. But when your eye is unhealthy, your whole body is filled with darkness.”

In other words, what you look at, what you are focused on, is where the rest of your life will go. And then he uses really, really strong language in chapter 5 verse 29. He says this.

“So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away.”

And this is such dramatic language! You’re like, “Wow, does Jesus mean that literally?” Thankfully, he doesn’t mean it literally, because if he meant it literally there wouldn’t be any eyeballs left. All of us would have all our eyes gouged out multiple times over.

No, he is using hyperbolic language, which he often did, in order to make a dramatic point. You see, Jesus is basically saying this. He is saying, “Instead of trying to resist, remove.” Don’t just resist the temptation, remove yourself from the temptation, because you might be able to hold on for a while, but eventually you’ll lose your grip. So, don’t put yourself in that position.

What is your struggle? What is the thing you need to distance yourself from? And maybe it’s a substance of some kind. So, don’t have it in the house. Maybe it’s a flirtation of some kind. So,

make sure you're not alone. Maybe it's your self-esteem. Watch what it is you are watching and looking at. Don't just resist, remove.

The second step just overlaps that. It's simply this.

Make it Difficult

Sometimes success is less about making a good habit easy and more about making a bad habit difficult. And one of the best ways to break up with a bad habit is to make it incredibly difficult to fall into.

So, if you go back to Charles Duhigg's equation of:

Cue—Response—Reward,

we've basically got to say, "I need to remove the cue, and then I need to pay attention to the actions associated with it. I need to make it really, really difficult for me to continue to harbor this bad habit."

So, if we could just use some illustrations once again, if the bad habit you need to break up from is over-spending and you need to get out of debt, then maybe you need do something about the placement of your credit cards. And you might do the Dave Ramsey thing and cut them all up.

Maybe some of you are like, "We can't cut them all up. We need at least one for emergency purposes or whatever." Okay, just don't put it in your wallet or your purse. Lock it up in a safe somewhere.

Maybe, and I know this is going to be crazy and so many of you are going to go, "Whoa, whoa, whoa hold up. Are you using hyperbolic language too?" No, I'm not. Maybe we need to remove Apple Pay. I know that's crazy, that's crazy. I don't know. Maybe it's something about purchasing something with your face. It just seems a little too easy. And maybe we just need to make it a little harder.

Maybe you want to get up, but it's so easy to hit the snooze button. And so maybe you need to take the alarm and remove it from the nightstand. You may need to put it in the bathroom somewhere so you actually have to get out of bed to turn the snooze button on. I know some of you are going, "I ain't doing that."

Maybe you keep falling into the trap of social media. I'm not against social media, but for some of us it's bringing out the worst in us. It's stirring up some angst and anxiety. You say to yourself when you get off of it, "I need to spend less time on it," but maybe you need to delete the app off your phone so you don't even see it. So, it's not the first thing you open up to.

Listen to the wisdom of Jesus again in Matthew 7:

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it."

One of the take-a-ways from what Jesus is saying is that in order to break free from something that is destroying the work of God's Spirit in your life, you've got to be willing to do the hard thing.

In other words, to experience a breakthrough, you're going to have to break free from some of the things many other people are doing. To foster the character that we need to stand up under crisis, maybe we need to swim upstream. Maybe we need to go against the grain.

There's always this point in my message prep where I sit down and spend hours engaging in God's Word. I'm saying to God, "What are you saying? What are you saying? How do I take what you're saying and teach it clearly to remain faithful to your word? And then, what's the application for us today?"

As one preacher said a long, long time ago, "To deliver God's word effectively you've got to have the Bible in one hand and newspaper in the other." So, I'm thinking about our current situation and life. Where is the application for so many of us today?

I feel like, for many of us, the thing we need to do is we need to get a proper perspective around technology and social media because I think, I'm afraid, that for many of us it's being formed into a bad habit that is not fostering the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

And I'm not against social media. I think it provides some great things for us to stay in communication with family and friends and share pictures and thoughts, and even get the gospel message out. That's why our church uses it.

Like any tool, I think we've got to be disciplined enough to use it properly. Many of you around here remember that a year ago during this time we ran a series called, ironically, *Screen Time*, and we talked about our usage of cell phones and technology, and limiting our screen time.

Little did we know that within two months we'd be in a pandemic and our screen time would shoot up 1,000 percent. Yet, I think we need to be reminded of some of the truths we covered a year ago because they are still applicable today, maybe even more applicable.

During a pandemic, during crisis, everything accelerates—both good and bad. And I think all of us need to stop. I've done this, and I'm not saying I'm achieving victory over this yet, but I'm thinking about it. Right now, in the midst of an abnormal season we call a pandemic, we are fostering habits.

Part of what's made this season so uncomfortable is because it's turned life upside down for so many of us. Eventually, when the pandemic lifts, we'll be left with the habits we fostered during this time.

The question is, "Do I want the habits I'm fostering to stick around once the pandemic is over?" And we've got to make a decision today. I think for so many of us, this centers around our usage of social media and technology.

Did you know the average person receives 45 notifications on their smartphone every day? Not counting text messages, direct messages, and news alerts. Our phones and devices are constantly crying out to us, "Look at this. Check this out. Scroll over here." And it's leaving us feeling more overwhelmed, disconnected, and emptier than ever.

I don't know how many of you noticed. It was in the 11:00 hour last week, and always before I get up to preach on my watch and on my phone, I hit do not disturb. For whatever reason, Siri decided to ignore it. Right in the middle of my sermon, she started talking to me.

I don't know if any of you caught that. The sound guys noticed it. And she just starts chirping away at me. It was so annoying. I was like, "Siri, be quiet." It's like she doesn't even respect the middle of the sermon. And that's just the thing. It just causes all these interruptions for our day.

There are massive corporations behind the social media apps and their job is to distract us, to pull us away from the things we need to focus upon.

The average person touches their phone 2,617 times a day and spends over two hours on social media a day—91% of smartphone users have their phones within arm's reach all the time—68% won't go anywhere without their smartphone.

Henry Blackaby gave what I think is one of the best definitions of idolatry. An idol is this, "Anything you turn to for help, when God invited you to turn to Him for help."

And it's just a question that I can't answer for you, you can't answer for anyone else. It's self-reflection. You've got to ask yourself, "When I'm looking for some comfort, do I scroll or do I engage? When I'm looking for some answers, do I open up an app, or go to my knees?"

"When I spend time on social media and then walk away, am I more anxious or less anxious, angrier or less angry?" Just the answers to those questions should inform some of those decisions that we make around this tool. I really think it's primarily this question. Am I using social media, or is social media using me?

What has become the greatest source angst, anxiety, and anger in your life over the past 60 days? And whatever it is, that might need to be the bad habit you put some distance in between you and the thing.

Hebrews 12:1-2 gives us a roadmap for how to do this:

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."

Don't give up. You notice what the author of Hebrews is saying, "Where you look makes all the difference. What you are taking into your head and heart makes all the difference."

I heard from a number of you this last week where you said, "You know what? I'm getting off social media for a while. It's not doing my heart any good. It will be there when I'm ready to come back. I'm going to redeem the time. I'm going to redeem the screen."

Many of you have decided to put up some boundaries and parameters. I want you to know I'm right there with you. I'm feeling this thing where I need to dictate what I'm going to do with my phone, devices, and technology rather than let them dictate my day.

Listen, God's calling upon your life is far too big and far too important for you to scroll it away, for you to be looking at pictures of other peoples' lives rather than living the life God has called you to live, and getting spun out on anxiety rather than experiencing the peace of God.

Can I just ask you, "What boundaries do you need to put in place?" And there are going to be people who won't like it, won't understand it, accuse you of false motives.

I've come to this realization recently. I'm on social media, but so much of it is because I do want to impact and pastor people. It is a way to do that. But, it can get out of hand in a hurry because I'm always accessible so that makes it difficult to maneuver and manage my day.

I realize I've got Messenger on Facebook, I've got direct messages on Instagram, I've got direct lines from twitter, a church email, a personal email, and text messaging on my number. I was getting to this place where my phone was pinging all the time.

And so, I decided I had to draw some boundaries. One of the first ones to go was Facebook Messenger. I can't devote any more energy to that. I've had a couple of people, here recently, really angry with me. They sent me a message. They had a need. They really needed prayer, they needed a pastor in their life.

I didn't respond because I didn't see it. Because I said, "I can't constantly be responding to DM's and text messages all the time." I just want you to know that it's this conviction that if I make myself available to everyone, I won't be good for anyone, specifically my family.

I have three teenagers at home, and I'm realizing they will be out of the house before I know it. I want to give them the best of my energy and the best of my effort. I don't want to be looking at a phone all the time.

Can I just tell you that all ministry doesn't have to go through me? And it's not just through the pastoral staff. It's all of us as a church body. That's why we continue to encourage you to get into groups. It's the priesthood of all believers. That way we can encourage and pastor each other.

And, there are channels through which you can get to me and I will respond pastorally to things. Yes, I have an assistant who receives all my emails first, not because she is trying to protect me, but because she is trying to help me give an answer to everybody. So, stop giving her a hard time.

She is a servant. And she does it with a Christ-like attitude. Here is the thing. I'd encourage you to do the same. What areas of your life have just gotten a little bit out of control? And you're like, "I need to put some boundaries in play so it doesn't dictate my day."

Here is the last step:

Make it Known (by the right people)

And last week we said if you want to start a good habit and stick with it, then you've got to have the right people around you encouraging you and holding you accountable in the best way. 1 Corinthians 15:33 it says this:

"Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'"

You've heard it said before. Show me your friends, and I'll show you your future.

And you have the power to withstand some of these temptations and bad habits more so that you're probably giving yourself credit for.

You know, social scientists have studied people who have self-control and those who struggle with it. They've said, "We've studied both groups." Do you know what they found the differences are between the two groups, both physically and psychologically? Not much.

You see, the difference between the two is people who have self-control simply limit the tempting situations they put themselves in, and they surround themselves with the right people.

Yet, at the end of the day, when it comes to fostering good habits and distancing ourselves from bad habits, the most important thing you and I can do to change our lives actually has nothing to do with our habits. It has everything to do with our identity.

Listen one more time to Paul's description in Romans 7:19:

"For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing."

And then he goes on to say.

"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?"

What we see here is Paul is kind of going at his identity. He is basically saying that, "My identity is my struggle." It's like saying, "What a wretched man I am. I failed over and over again. This is who I am, and maybe I'll never get out of it," which is why the conclusion he comes to in verse 25 is so, so powerful.

"Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

He delivers me. I put myself in this position, and it's not about willpower. It's not about the things I bring to the table. It's about putting myself in a position where he and he alone can change me.

So, if you want to break up with bad habits that are cratering your life, don't fall into the same pattern of starts and stops. Don't try to hold onto willpower. Don't just try to hang on. Let go. And you die to yourself, and you surrender it to the one who gave it all to change your identity.

In Ezekiel 36:26, it says this:

"I will give you," you don't have to earn it, "a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

And we see in 2 Corinthians 5:

"Therefore, if anyone," and this is an open invitation to anyone and everyone, "is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"

I want you to know that this has not just been a series on self-help. That the Bible is simultaneously deep in its transformational power and it's equally practical to everyday living. And when we can take the deep, deep truths of God, there is a fancy word for that, it's called theology, and when we can wed it to practical application, there is real power in that.

And right now, today, I hope you get lots of applicable stuff from this. I hope you can implement some things into your life. But at the end of the day, all of it would be for nothing if I don't give you the opportunity to lay it down and to give your life to Jesus Christ, to die to

yourself and allow him to deliver you and give you a heart of flesh replacing the heart of stone. To make you a new creation, to give you a new hope.

It's not as difficult as we might make it out to be. You don't have to have all the answers, in fact, none of us do. You don't have to be perfect. That would defeat the whole point. You come to God, and this is the beauty of it, just as I am, bad habits and all, mess-ups and all.

Some of you are like, "You don't understand. I've got a really, really messy divorce in my past. If I'm being honest, Aaron, it was mostly my fault." Okay. But that's not you. You did some things, you made some mistakes, but that's not your identity.

"Aaron, you don't understand what I'm addicted to. You don't understand some of the stuff I've got going on over here in some of these dark corners of my life." Maybe I don't. But listen to me, that's not you.

Your struggle is not you. Jesus died so that would not be the thing that would keep you between him and God. You simply lay it down. You simply say, "I don't have the answers. I need you to deliver me."

And here is the promise. He will. He'll meet you right where you are and give you a new identity, a new name, and a new purpose for living. You've just simply got to lay it down.

You confess your sin. You don't harbor it any longer. You don't make excuses for it. You just come clean with it and say, "Forgive me. Now, Jesus, you take the throne of my heart, the rightful position that has always been yours but I've put other things there, you take that position and I'll follow you imperfectly for the rest of my days."

I just want you to simply invite Jesus into your life, or re-invite Jesus into your life. And here is the next step for many of us, whether you have never done this or you did it for the wrong reasons. I just want you invite you to be baptized.

Baptism is simply an outward expression of an internal decision, something tangible you do. There is something powerful about it. That when you are lowered under the water it's like a watery grave. You're being resurrected as a new creation in Christ.

We've done thousands and thousands of baptisms here. It never gets old, and the experience is always the same—grown men crying like a baby in the baptistry, women just trembling with emotion. There is something powerful about it.

Why did God invent baptism? I don't fully know all the answers to that. But I do know that every one of them I've been a part of has been super-powerful.

It's also one of the things we have a tendency to resist so much, for all kinds of reasons. I want to encourage you today at the beginning of this year to invite Jesus into your life, and to be baptized.

If you would like to do that, you can simply text JESUS to 87221 and our team will answer any questions you have, talk about your next steps, try to give you some direction for what that all looks like. We would love to have you as we step into our new identity in Christ, to live out the purposes he's called us to now more than ever.

Father, we come to you right now, so grateful that your word is deep in its truths about who you are, theology, and incredibly practical for our day-to-day living, application.

So, Father I pray that today you would give us the courage and the strength to foster some atomic habits that support the godly character you want to foster in us by the power your Spirit.

I pray that you would give us the courage to break up with some bad habits that have been sabotaging that work in our lives for far too long. God, I pray collectively, as people, that we would surrender our lives to you, many of us for the very first time, or re-surrender our life to you, because we've gotten distracted by all the things going on in the world.

God, we know it's another emotionally charged week with an inauguration ahead of us. God, I just pray that you would bring a sense of peace and calm and trust, knowing that this world is not our home.

So, in the words of Hebrews, "We fix our eyes on you, the author and perfecter of our faith." And you told us in 1 Peter that, "we are foreigners in this land," and we are here to represent you as you usher in your Kingdom come.

So, Father we put our trust in you. We desire to be the people who live out your purposes. That we would grow stronger during this time of crisis, and not weaker. That comes when we are intentional about the habits that we form and the destructive habits we need to put distance to, asking you to take the seat on the throne of our hearts that you rightfully deserve.

So, as we lift up our voices and as we sing back to you a response for what we just heard from your word, I pray that you would receive it and none of us would ever be the same. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.