

BEFORE AND AFTER

Week Three - Choosing the ONE Narrowing Focus to Widen Results

A Lifelong Learning Bible Study
with Dr. Allen Hilton

Open

Part One - Aspirations

What makes us aspire to be better? St. Augustine famously prayed, "Our hearts are restless, Lord, until they rest in Thee." In moments of clarity, he recognized his own longing for something more, for flourish, for full engagement with God. And he saw this yearning, not as something only he felt, but as a human longing.

Is a desire to have better and be better standard equipment in the human being? Or is it an option only available in some models? What makes us desire more out of life, more out of ourselves? We could ask these questions in a vacuum, as if all human cultures process it in the same way; or we could ask it in light of cultural developments in our own culture that impact the way we look at ourselves.

As we ask these questions as Christian disciples, we notice how often scripture, from Genesis through Revelation presumes or instills a faithful desire to "get better". Within this series, just after our invitation to "be transformed by the renewing of our minds" (Romans 12.2), the Apostle Paul launches into an impressive growth plan (12.9-12). His nineteen different commands in those four verses threaten to overwhelm us. In this session, we will ask what scripture and brain science can tell us about how to decide where to start in this transformation project.

The Self-Improvement Industry and Our Motives for Change

In the early days of the industrial revolution, as the production rate for consumer products sped up exponentially, companies faced a challenge. In a sense, they were all dressed up with nowhere to go with their multitudes of newly-produced goods. In cultures that had always preferred "tried and true", familiar slippers or clothes or tools, they had to create a market for new ones. They had to help people prefer

“brand new” over “trusty”, so, presto, the modern marketing industry was born. Suddenly, a carriage or car that had worked for years became suspect because it wasn’t the latest model. (Fess up: Who’s already got the i-Phone XII? Who wants it...just because it’s next?) When Steve Jobs convinced us that the amazing computer and cellular connector already in our hands was “so 37 seconds ago,” he was playing the anthem of industry: build dissatisfaction or envy, and you’ll build markets.

Now let’s not tar and feather the innovators and marketers. In thousands of ways, life is better now than it was when the industrial revolution began. Although the Amish life occasionally appeals to me, I’d rather drive my Nissan Altima than a horse or carriage, because it is both safer and more comfortable. But there is a Christian question here. Faithful consumers ought to evaluate our motives, because the reason that I want a new thing matters. Why do I want the i-Phone XII or the chic German dishwasher or the Tesla or the latest big-buck Nike shoe or the second home or...? Intention is where ethics kick in, and keeping up with the Jones’ or seeming up-to-date or just updating because I can – all these sound a bit hollow, and they violate stewardship in a world full of people without enough. What would be good reasons to buy?

A similar dynamic has formed around personal aspirations for change. Our feeling of not being complete or good enough as persons has produced a burgeoning self-help industry that sometimes cultivates a dissatisfaction with the self. Just as marketing tells us our lives will be even better with the next product, so the prevalence of “new ways to...” tells us our lives are incomplete without the latest self-improvement fix. This industry can multiply our self-judgments and put us on a hamster wheel of endless self-improvement projects. Given truth serum, with how many habits in your life would you confess to being dissatisfied? How many parts of you would be on your change list?

The self-help movement’s myriad offers of products and methods for self-improvement have also produced a sense in some (especially Type A) people that they/we ought always to feel a step away from the contentment in God’s presence that the Hebrew poet experienced and sings in Psalm 131:

*Lord, my heart is not proud;
Nor are my eyes fixed on things beyond me.
In the quiet, I have stilled my soul.
Like a child at rest on his mama’s knees,
I have stilled my soul completely.*

As we frantically resolve to be better next time or next week, or to be better at this or that, or otherwise to improve ourselves, a dose of grace can be an antidote to obsession. "God loves you just the way we are!" always precedes "and too much to leave you just the way you are."

All of this is to say that, as with consumer decisions, so with self-improvement, God would have us examine our motives. Why do I want to get better – at healthy living or productive working or time or money management? What drives my thirst to improve? In Matthew 6, Jesus features people who, through disciplined practice, have gotten very good at pious acts like alms-giving, prayer, and fasting. Surprisingly, though, Jesus isn't pleased with these spiritual over-achievers. He calls them hypocrites, because they improve "in order to be recognized by people." They show off at religion to enhance their own reputations, and Jesus sees through it. For him, a quiet sort of advance is better, the kind only God sees. Give, pray, and fast quietly, says Jesus, "so your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you." (6.1-18)

What would it feel like for you to seek the transformational habit change for God's sake only?

Have you ever experienced that sort of alignment with the divine?

How might this impact the way you decide what's next on your change list?

Spend some time in prayer, examining your motivations in God's presence. Then you'll be ready to choose a next frontier of growth.

Choosing Well

Now that you've begun to discern with God what habit you need to lay on the altar next, you're ready to ask what will be your next change. But how to choose? In the verses after Romans 12.1-2, Paul names a passel of personal projects.

1. Don't "think of yourself more highly than you ought to think" (12.3)
2. Use your spiritual gifts well. (12.4-8)
3. Love genuinely (12.9)
4. Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good (12.9)
5. Love one another. (12.10)
6. Outdo one another in showing honor. (12.10)
7. Serve the Lord with zeal. (12.11)
8. Rejoice in hope (12.12)
9. Be patient in suffering (12.12)
10. Persevere in Prayer (12.12)
11. Contribute to the needs of the saints (12.13)
12. Extend hospitality to strangers. (12.13)
13. Bless and do not curse your persecutors (12.14)
14. Rejoice with those who rejoice. (12.15)
15. Weep with those who weep. (12.15)
16. Live in harmony with one another (12.16)
17. Don't be haughty but associate with the lowly. (12.16)
18. Think of what is noble. (12.17)
19. Live peaceably. (12.18)
20. Never avenge yourselves. (12.19)
21. Feed and give drink to hungry and thirsty enemies. (12.20)

Even if we compress by grouping like habits, this is a tall order! We know that God likes each of these habits, but there are so many of them. It's rather intimidating.

In his book, *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg highlights two important recent scientific insights about habit change:

One Habit at a Time. Our brains have a finite amount of energy and attention units, making it almost impossible to change even two, much less many habits at once. Successful transformation requires choosing.

Choose Habits Well. If we choose that one habit well, we can multiply its impact. As prominent senators carry with them a block of votes, or chiefs bring along their tribes, certain habits (he calls them "Keystone Habits") pull others along with them.

In an article you received earlier, DuHigg features a woman who was obese, in deep financial debt, listless, and a smoker. If she had decided to run the table - diet, go into

draconian financial austerity, begin an exercise program, and take on nicotine all at once – she would have failed and remained abject. But she chose to focus on one habit – smoking cigarettes – and something remarkable happened. She successfully stopped smoking. But as she kicked that habit, without even putting her mind directly to food and finances, she began to eat better and take better care of her money. She had struck the mother lode of transformation: the keystone habit.

Given these two insights, look at the list of habits Paul shares in Romans 12, and compare the list to your own change list. Is there overlap?

Which change on your list seems most urgent to you?

Which seems like it might bring others along with it?

Keystone Habits and Self Mastery

How do the multiple improvements that come with focusing on a keystone habit happen? Ancient philosophers would say it starts when we take control of ourselves. They used the Greek word “*ENRATEIA*” to describe the sort of discipline that helps a person change a habit. It gets translated in our Bibles as “self-control” or “self-mastery.”

One of Socrates’ ancient students, Xenophon, quotes the great philosopher saying, “Should not everyone hold *enkrateia* to be the foundation, and first lay this foundation firmly in the soul?” As ancient moral philosophers learned from and expanded on Socrates, they focused directly on this fundamental change. Two generations down, Aristotle wrote, “I count the person braver who overcomes (her or) his desires than the one who conquers (her or) his enemies, for the hardest victory is over self.” (*Nichomachean Ethics*) And 400 years after this, the philosophers of Jesus’ and Paul’s time continued this tradition. The first-century Stoic, Seneca, wrote, “We should every night call ourselves to an account: What infirmity have I mastered today? What passions opposed? What temptation resisted? What virtue acquired?”

Our vices will abort of themselves if they be brought every day to the shrift." (*Moral Epistles*)

Two things about these old and dusty words from ancient philosophers that make them worth our while for you and me right now:

1. Overlap with Science. What Duhigg and brain scientists call a "keystone habit" seems to fit the way these ancient philosophers describe self-mastery.
2. Overlap with Early Christianity. Paul and Luke and other New Testament authors demonstrate an extensive acquaintance with these authors and their ideas. That means they impacted the way Christianity was transmitted to us.

Ultimately, it may not matter so much which of the habits you choose to change, as long as you move at it with passion and intention and it is significant enough to be weighty for you as a disciple of Jesus. If it is an important one, it could start a chain reaction in you. When we train ourselves to conquer one element of our lives, that one instance of self-mastery becomes the foundation for hope that others will follow; then, other changes become easier. Research shows, for instance, that people who take on the habit of exercise generally eat better, keep their books better, etc. Self-Mastery is contagious!

Do you recall a time in your life when you felt most in charge of yourself?

What helped that happen?

Our Part and God's Part

It's no accident that the Apostle Paul, a citizen of Seneca's world, knows and celebrates *enkrateia*. He sees this sort of self-control or self-mastery as central to the project of faith. In fact, it makes it into the Apostle's moral Hall of Fame: his Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. There he writes, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (*enkrateia*). (verses 22-23) Clearly, Paul saw self-mastery as a crucial part of Christian life. Paul and the philosophers agree thus far.

There's a really significant difference, though. Notice that for Paul this kind of self-mastery comes, not from us, but from God. It is a "fruit" that God's Spirit produces in us. And that fact reminds us that when Paul commanded us to change, he did not say "transform yourselves" but rather "be transformed." (Romans 12.2) There too, he leaves space for the doing to be God's.

Are you as confused as I am? We've been reading ancient philosophers and modern brain scientists, who all seem to put the ball in our court. "Choose a good habit, change the routine you attach to life's triggers or cues, make sure the reward that follows is adequate to sustain the new practice, etc.." These feel like a very human to-do list. So why does Paul put it in the column "stuff God does"?

When Jesus pictures himself as the vine and his disciples (us) as branches, he emphasizes our participation in God. He says, "abide in me and you will bear much fruit." In Galatians 5, Paul makes the same point, but tracks our participation through the Spirit. In either case, the first task of Christians is to connect ourselves with Jesus/God. This participation in the divine becomes the conduit for our transformation. It sounds a bit like our charter verse, doesn't it? In Romans 12, Paul told us to "present our bodies" to God, to hand ourselves over to God's process of transformation. All roads lead to connection with God.

As you choose your first holy habit, consider this: if "self-mastery" is the philosopher's foundational move, Jesus and Paul say it's secondary to participating in God through Christ and the Spirit.

For the Philosophers...

Self-Mastery (*enkrateia*) →
Specific Habit Change →
More Virtues

For Jesus-Paul...

Life In Christ/Spirit →
Self-Mastery (*enkrateia*) →
Specific Habit Change →
More Virtues

Both for Jesus and for Paul, the first task of faith is to connect with God first. The Christian philosopher Austin Farrer, who saturated himself in their writings and the best thought of his mid-twentieth-century day, called this dynamic “dual agency” or “double agency.” As he pictures it, God is always, every moment, appealing to our will, inviting us to join the divine way, and when we consent, the action becomes a joint divine-human effort.

This is heady stuff and a lot to take in! But in its simplest form, here’s the point: If you want to change a habit, you may want to begin by connecting with God.

Back to That Choice

How shall we choose our next habit? The good news is that scripture knows our problem, and God helps us focus our attention on what’s important. Did you know that there are 613 different commands (Hebrew: mitzvot) scattered through the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament)? But if you were asked, “Which of those 613 do you know?” you would probably start naming “Thou shalt not kill” and “Thou shalt not commit adultery” because they’re from a prioritized list we call “The Ten Commandments.” That list starts with a God-centered command: “You shall have no other gods before me!”

Famously, Jesus was once asked to prioritize that list. Rabbis of his era often debated the question, “Which command is most important?” and one of those rabbis turned the question on Jesus as he taught outside the Jerusalem temple one day. “Teacher, which commandment is greatest of them all. Jesus cheated and named two – one from Deuteronomy 6 and the other from the Book of Leviticus, of all places: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. This is the greatest and first commandment,” he replied. “And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” From 613 to two. That’s helpful! Jesus continued: “On these two hang all the Law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22.34-40)

Both the Ten Commandments and Jesus’ First and Second Commandments begin with connection to God. If we want a keystone habit, then, we might want to choose one that directly connects us to God. We at least should consider that our success will hinge on that connectedness.

The Experience (or Not) of Divine Help

Which of the following best portrays the level and quality of your connection to God?

1. Great! I can't get enough of God's presence, and I experience life as a joint enterprise with the divine.
2. Good. I pray every day and sometimes I experience God's presence in my life. I try to make decisions in light of God's will.
3. OK. I experience God occasionally in worship or when nature comes alive, but I wouldn't say that I'm particularly connected to God.
4. Non-existent. I think what other people call "relationship with God" is really just trying to live well in light of the Bible's commands.

This question is not designed to rank Christians. It is designed to point out the wide range of Christian experience, and personalities, from mystical connection to rational obedience without much felt connection at all. When you find yourself in this picture, ask how you imagine God might join your effort at habit change.

Do you think your personality lends itself to seeing God at work helping you choose and then enact a focused habit change that we call transformation?

If so, how will you increase the chance of God's transformative work?

If not, do you experience that fact as a hindrance to your growth? Or do you simply understand the process of growth differently? And what would help you enter that process more fully?

Close

How Self-Help Prevents You Finding True Happiness [& What to do About It]

By Alfred James

<https://www.pocketmindfulness.com/how-self-help-can-prevent-true-happiness/>

The self-help world can be a deceptive and contradictory landscape, one that purposely pulls your mind from pillar to post, promising that the next method will be better than the last, and deceiving you into believing that your lack of progress is due to not “manifesting” or “visualising” enough.

The rinse and repeat approach to keeping people from finding sustainable contentment in life is a multi-billion dollar industry that uses a simple, cyclical formula:

Set goals.

Visualise success.

Take action.

Attract abundance.

Repeat.

Not working for you? Still feel like something is missing in your life? Still unhappy? Still stressed, anxious, sleepless?

The self-help industry offers up a plethora of systems, programs and entrepreneurial gurus to follow, and while all are accompanied by varying positive marketing messages, a large number of these products are deceptive.

And here's why.

A large percentage of self-help brands package “spirituality” as a vehicle to amassing material wealth. Success is equated by your ability to continually achieve bigger and better things; the majority linked to financial gain. Rather than liberating your mind, the goal is to imprison it further by feeding the ego, until you are drowning in a cycle of desire that is in absolute contradiction to elevating your consciousness to a better understanding of self.

Contentment in life transpires when we let go of the grasping, when we stop chasing the next best thing and conditionally attaching our happiness to the acquisition of material goods and superficial goals, when we seek love and selflessness, cultivate internal and external compassion and let go of the vacuous rampancy of the untamed ego.

To discover contentment, we must turn the search inwards. We must learn to be unconditionally present to see the true nature of what is. Only then do we cultivate the mental clarity required to achieve a neutral understand of our purpose and place in the world.

Only when we begin to feed on the nectar of inner contentment does life begin to effortlessly fall into place. Only once we have set foot upon the pathway to self-acceptance do we discover that there is no magic system for unlocking “success” and “happiness”. We begin to naturally grow into ourselves and become everything we need to be, or should I say already are, albeit unrealised.

As a result, the opportunity, prosperity and mental contentment we seek independently transpire and manifest in our consciousness.

But instead we have a tendency to chase the delusion. We are fooled by the constant evaluations and judgements of the mind. The self-help industry preys upon this delusion, convincing us that our dreams and soul-fulfilling happiness is just out of reach, but with this new system; this new, proven step-by-step method, you can have all that your heart desires.

The paradox of “self-help” is that it keeps us rooted in the same cycle of mental suffering we are seeking to escape. The same desire we seek to satisfy is used to keep us investing our time and money, with the promise of fulfilment always so close but just out of reach.

Metaphorically speaking, no matter how expensive the metal bars, and how attractive the room’s décor, a caged bird never finds joy in its imprisonment. And if we are not careful, self-help can trap us in a mental cage, in the illusion that we’re “almost there”. Just one last step and you can set yourself up for one more disappointment, over and over again.

Don’t get me wrong here; I am not putting down those who spend their lives helping others. I am personally in touch with many wonderful people who use mindfulness, CBT and other holistic methods to help people overcome anxiety, depression, ADHD, anger problems and other behavioural and mental health issues. I have great admiration for these people.

Moreover, in this digital age, whatever the nature of our business, we all need to engage in some level of self-promotion to connect with those we wish to establish relationships with, and therefore none of us are immune from getting caught up in our own PR at times, including me. For example, to reach more readers, I ask people to subscribe to my newsletter. And my books, by nature of the beast, have to be promoted if they are to have any chance of finding an audience.

What I am referring to specifically are the self-help brands and shrewd entrepreneurs that have emerged through the web in the last 10 years; those who bombard people with emails containing the underlying message that they aren’t good enough, but could be if they do X, Y, and Z.

I am specifically talking about the marketers selling mindfulness, meditation and spirituality in general as a means to acquire financial wealth on a par with their own, as a means to become as “successful” as they have become.

The contradiction in this can be immediately identified by anyone who has experienced and understands the nature of these personal tools, which is, in short, a profound awareness of just how fruitless living a life in sole pursuit of material wealth and the admiration of others is.

In fact, the theme at the root of nearly every troubled person who asks for my advice is one of *not being good enough*. Their stress, anxiety, depression or simple discontentment in life is driven by a feeling of not having delivered to the expectations of others; be it family, friends or society as a whole. And in nearly every case, they are searching for an elusive, tangible something that can cure their perceived lack of success and personal fulfilment. A person in this mind-set is a self-help marketers dream subscriber.

Of course, the answer is not another system, but instead to turn the search inwards. Because taking an external lead from those who ultimately have a self-serving agenda – those teaching others to indulge in delusions of grandeur and artificial, fleeting happiness – will never provide any lasting contentment.

And this is where mindfulness practice thrives. It provides a spiritual compass that switches the mind’s emphasis from outwardly searching to inwardly seeking, from one of material, superficial gain to that of first learning to be kind and compassionate to oneself, and then to spreading loving-kindness to others.

So, if you find yourself caught in a cycle of self-help delusion, turning from one magic solution to the next, in the hope that you’ll one day achieve wealth and success beyond your wildest dreams and live happily ever after, stop a moment and consider this:

The self-actualisation you are seeking through superficial valleys won’t lead you to the top of the mountain. Like a carrot dangled in front of a donkey, the anxious journey will never end.

The self-wholeness you unconsciously want to feel will not be fulfilled through a constant desire for more money, or an increased ownership of material assets.

The panting will not stop at the next goal post because there is no finish line in this race. The constant desire to feel worthier, to feel ever more accomplished and accepted will lead you to disappointment and emptiness every time. You will end up right back where you started.

The truth is that you don’t need to do anything. No programs, no systems, no secret techniques.

So before you fall into the trap of believing the answers reside in changing yourself to align with the ideas and methods of others, start by turning the search inwards to begin understanding who you are; who this person with all these thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions really is.

We all want to prosper in life: We all want an enjoyable job, to have a loving family, to take lovely holidays, to save lots of money and enjoy our retirement. But life is not a template, and we are not clones of each other. What is good for the goose may not be good for the gander. We need to understand who we are, what it is we really want and what actions are capable of filling these insatiable cravings that never let the mind have a minute's peace.

What is the point in arriving at what was sold to us as the vital piece of the puzzle, the final link in the chain, only to ask, "Why am I here"? And, "Why do I still feel the same?"

The doorway to inner peace is always unlocked. But only you can open the door and walk through it.

Step away from the judging, the wanting and the anticipating for a moment. Let go of past grievances and future expectations and stand naked in purposeful awareness for a while.

Come home to yourself.

Everything you need is right here.