

The Habits *of a* Steward



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 5:15–17, Col. 3:23, Luke 12:35–48, James 4:14, Acts 3:21, 1 Cor. 9:24–27.*

Memory Text: “How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word. With my whole heart I have sought You; oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You” (*Psalms 119:9–11, NKJV*).

Your habits reveal purpose and direction in your life. Stewards who develop good habits are the most faithful stewards. Daniel had a habit of daily prayer (*Dan. 6:10*). Paul's custom was to be in the synagogue (*Acts 17:1, 2*). He also writes: “Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits’” (*1 Cor. 15:33, NKJV*). We are to cultivate good habits in order to replace bad ones.

“We shall be individually, for time and eternity, what our habits make us. The lives of those who form right habits, and are faithful in the performance of every duty, will be as shining lights, shedding bright beams upon the pathway of others.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 452.

The pathway that a habit creates is the fastest way that you can take to get the reward you seek. A habit is an ingrained decision. In other words, you don't even have to think about it; you just do it. That habit can be very good or very bad, depending upon what it is you do. This week we look at powerful habits that will help a steward conduct God's business.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 24.

Habit: Seek God First

We all have habits. The question is: What kind are they? Good or bad? Of all the good habits a Christian could have, seeking God first thing every day would have to be the most important one of all.

“Every morning dedicate yourself, soul, body, and spirit, to God. Establish habits of devotion and trust more and more in your Saviour.” —Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, vol. 1, p. 15. With a habit such as that, we surely would enter through the “ ‘narrow . . . gate’ ” that leads to life (*Matt. 7:14, NKJV*).

God said, “ ‘You shall have no other gods before Me’ ” (*Exod. 20:3, NKJV*). Jesus said, in the context of our basic needs, to “ ‘seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness’ ” (*Matt. 6:33, NKJV*), and we also have been told: “ ‘You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart’ ” (*Jer. 29:13, NKJV*).

Read Matthew 22:37, 38; Acts 17:28; Ephesians 5:15–17; and Colossians 3:23. What is said here that can help us understand how to put God first in our lives?

Of all our examples in seeking the Lord first, none is of course a better one than the example of Jesus. Jesus put His Father first in everything. We begin to see this priority during His Passover visit to Jerusalem as a child. When confronted by His mother, who had found Him “in the temple,” He said to her, “ ‘I must be about My Father’s business’ ” (*Luke 2:46, 49, NKJV*).

Throughout His life, Jesus craved communion with His Father, as evidenced by His habitual prayer life. This habit was something that the disciples did not understand fully. All the powers of darkness could not separate Jesus from the Father, because Jesus made it a habit to keep totally connected with Him.

We can follow Jesus’ example by making the decision to love God with all our hearts, minds, and souls (*Matt. 22:37*). By praying, studying God’s Word, and seeking to emulate the character of Jesus in all that we do, we will form the habit of making God first in our life. And for a Christian, what better habit could there be?

Ask yourself: Have I really made God first in my life? How do you know?

Habit: Look for the Return of Jesus

Read Luke 12:35–48. What does this parable teach us about how we are to relate to the second coming of Jesus? Why must all that we do always be in the context of the reality of the Second Coming?

Stewardship should be practiced habitually in light of Jesus' return. The character of unfaithful stewards who act like faithful ones eventually will be known by their actions; for true, faithful stewards carry out their responsibilities by watching and working just as if their masters were present. They live for the future and faithfully work day by day. "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ" (*Phil. 3:20, NIV*).

Abraham looked for an eternal city (*Heb. 11:10*), and Paul looked for Christ's return (*Heb. 10:25*). They were forward thinkers, anticipating, planning, and ready to meet Jesus at a moment's notice. We also must develop this habit of looking into the distance with a steady gaze for the climax of the gospel (*Titus 2:13*). Instead of peering now and then or casually glancing at prophecy, we need to be continuously looking, watching, and doing, always aware of the eternity that awaits us when Christ returns. At the same time, we must avoid wild and fanciful speculations about end-time events. The promise of the Second Coming gives us direction in our lives, provides a proper perspective to the present, and helps us remember what is important in life. The habit of looking for the return of Jesus gives a steward definition and purpose.

The Cross has paved the way for us to have a rendezvous with the Redeemer. We look for waymarks revealed in Scripture that point us to the coming of Christ in the glory of the Father and angels (*Mark 8:38*). "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (*2 Cor. 4:18, NIV*).

Yes, death, and the ever-present reality of death, always should help us realize just how limited and transient our time here is. But the promise of the Second Coming also shows us that death itself is temporary and transient. No wonder, then, that we should live in light of the promise of Christ's return, a promise that should impact how every Christian steward lives. Let's make it a habit now to live always in the expectation of Christ's return. Our very name reveals the reality of that expectation.

Habit: Use Time Wisely

“For we were born yesterday, and know nothing, because our days on earth are a shadow” (*Job 8:9, NKJV*).

You can stop a clock, but not the movement of time. Time does not wait; it keeps moving forward even if we stand still and do nothing.

What do the following texts teach us about our time here on earth in this life? *James 4:14; Ps. 90:10, 12; Ps. 39:4, 5; Eccles. 3:6–8*. What is the basic message that we should take from these texts about the preciousness of our time here?

With something so limited and nonrenewable as time, it is important that Christians be good stewards of it.

Thus, we should develop the habit of using time wisely by focusing on what is important in this life and the next. We must manage time based on what the Word of God reveals to us as being important, because once time is up, it can't be renewed. If we lose money, we eventually may get it back, maybe even more than what we first lost. Not so with time. A moment lost is a moment lost forever. We can put a broken egg back in its shell more easily than we can recapture even a moment of the past. Thus, time is one of the most precious commodities given to us by God. How important, then, that we develop the habit of making the most of every moment we have been given.

“Our time belongs to God. Every moment is His, and we are under the most solemn obligation to improve it to His glory. Of no talent He has given will He require a more strict account than of our time.

“The value of time is beyond computation. Christ regarded every moment as precious, and it is thus that we should regard it. Life is too short to be trifled away. We have but a few days of probation in which to prepare for eternity. We have no time to waste, no time to devote to selfish pleasure, no time for the indulgence of sin.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 342.

“See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (*Eph. 5:15, 16, NKJV*). What is Paul saying here to us, and how can we apply these words to our present situation?

Habit: Keep a Healthy Mind, Body, and Soul

We originally were created perfect—mentally, physically, and spiritually. Of course, sin has ruined it all. The good news of the gospel, among other things, is that God is in the process of restoring us to what we were meant to be originally.

Read Acts 3:21 and Revelation 21:1–5. What hope is found in these texts for us? How are we to live as we await this final restoration?

Christ worked tirelessly when here for the uplifting of humanity spiritually, mentally, and physically, all as a precursor to the final restoration at the end of time. Jesus' ministry of healing proves that God wants us to be as healthy as we possibly can—now until the end comes. Thus, stewards develop habits for their minds, bodies, and souls that promote a healthy lifestyle.

First, the mind will grow stronger the more it is used. Habitually fill your mind with “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable” (*Phil. 4:8, NIV*). Such thoughts bring peace (*Isa. 26:3*), and a “heart at peace gives life to the body” (*Prov. 14:30, NIV*). Healthy habits of the mind allow the citadel of power to operate in the best condition possible.

Second, good health habits, such as exercise and proper diet, indicate that we care about ourselves. Exercise, for example, lowers stress and blood pressure, improves our moods, and is an elixir that is probably more anti-aging than anything available on the shelves.

Third, a steward will develop good habits to invigorate the soul. Lift up your soul to God (*Ps. 86:4, 5*) and wait (*Ps. 62:5*). Your soul will prosper “as you walk in the truth” (*3 John 3, NKJV*) and will be “preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*1 Thess. 5:23, NKJV*).

Think about the kinds of habits you have and how they impact your spiritual, physical, and mental health. Are there some changes that you need to make that could help you improve in any or all of these areas? What choices can you make, and what Bible promises can you claim that will help you improve the quality of your life now as you await your final restoration?

Habit: Self-Discipline

Self-discipline is one of the most important character traits a steward can have. “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline” (2 Tim. 1:7, NIV). The Greek word for discipline, *sophronismos*, appears only here in this verse in the New Testament and involves the ability to do what must be done with a balanced, sound mind that will not deviate from God’s principles. Self-discipline can help us “to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:14, NIV), understand situations at hand, and yet calmly and meekly withstand pressures and distractions regardless of outcome. Daniel pursued what was right despite the lions, as opposed to Samson, who lived a self-indulgent life and showed little restraint or sound judgment. Joseph pursued what was right in Potiphar’s house, in contrast with Solomon, who worshiped other gods (1 Kings 11:4, 5).

Read 1 Corinthians 9:24–27. What does Paul say here about self-discipline? What does he say is ultimately at stake in the whole question of self-discipline?

“The world is given to self-indulgence. Errors and fables abound. Satan’s snares for destroying souls are multiplied. All who would perfect holiness in the fear of God must learn the lessons of temperance and self-control. The appetites and passions must be held in subjection to the higher powers of the mind. This self-discipline is essential to that mental strength and spiritual insight which will enable us to understand and to practice the sacred truths of God’s word.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 101.

Self-discipline improves through habitual practice. God has called you to “be holy in all you do” (1 Pet. 1:15, NIV) and to “train yourself to be godly” (1 Tim. 4:7, NIV). Stewards must practice and train to be self-disciplined just as much as the most talented and hardworking athletes or musicians do. We must, through God’s power and our own diligent efforts, discipline ourselves in the things that really matter.

How can we learn to surrender to the power of God, who alone can give us the self-discipline we need to live as faithful and godly stewards in a fallen and corrupt world?

Further Thought: Enoch and Noah made it a habit to walk with God in an age when few remained faithful amid excess, materialism, and violence (*Gen. 5:24, 6:9*). They understood and accepted God's grace, and were thus good stewards of the possessions and tasks entrusted to them.

Down through the ages, people have walked with God just as Enoch and Noah did. For instance, Daniel and his friends "realized that in order to stand as representatives of true religion amid the false religions of heathenism they must have clearness of intellect and must perfect a Christian character. And God Himself was their teacher. Constantly praying, conscientiously studying, keeping in touch with the Unseen, they walked with God as did Enoch."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 486.

"Walking with God" defines what a steward does, that is, living with God day by day on earth. A wise steward will make it a habit to walk with God amid a world of corruption, for only by this connection with God can we be protected from falling into the prevailing evils.

Being a faithful steward entails an all-encompassing life that begins with being in agreement with God (*Amos 3:3*). We must walk in Christ (*Col. 2:6*), walk in newness of life (*Rom. 6:4*), walk in love (*Eph. 5:2*), walk in wisdom (*Col. 4:5*), walk in truth (*Ps. 86:11*), walk in the light (*1 John 1:7*), walk in integrity (*Prov. 19:1*), walk in His law (*Exod. 16:4*), walk in good works (*Eph. 2:10*), and walk the straight path (*Prov. 4:26*).

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Define humility and explain its role in the life of a steward (*Matt. 11:29, Eph. 4:2, Phil. 2:3, James 4:10*). Why is humility important in our walk with God? (*Mic. 6:8*).
- 2 In class, talk about the ways in which we can help those among us who are trapped in bad, even self-destructive, habits. What can we do as a local church to help these people?
- 3 What are some other good habits that Christian stewards should have? See, for instance, *Titus 2:7, Ps. 119:172, Matt. 5:8*.
- 4 In class, talk about time and the mysteries of time. Why does it seem to go so fast? How do we even understand what time is? And, most important, why is it necessary that we be good stewards of the relatively short amount of it we have while here on earth?

Prodigal Daughter

by ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Starlene Peters, bruised and wearing crumpled clothes after a night of partying followed by a drunken car crash, walked into the Seventh-day Adventist church on Sabbath morning.

A former Adventist, she wasn't sure how church members, long ignored, would respond to her presence. But a friend had died in the car accident hours earlier, and she needed to find God.

"I saw that accident as a wake-up call," said Peters, 32, now a full-time missionary. "I realized how fragile life was."

Peters was raised by an Adventist grandmother in Port of Spain, capital of the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago. From a young age, she was required to attend church every Sabbath. She held various church positions after her baptism, but she said her service was not genuine. "For most of my childhood, I didn't feel any connection with God," Peters said.

At 18, she left home and the church to embark on a life of partying.

Then, the car accident occurred. Peters and two friends were driving home after a Friday night of partying, and the driver, who was intoxicated, wrecked the vehicle. Peters and the driver escaped with scratches, but their friend, a 26-year-old woman, was killed.

Peters was whisked away from the accident scene to the hospital for a checkup. Then police questioned her at the police station. After that, Peters headed straight for church.

Peters had nothing to wear but her partying attire: a short dress, earrings, and makeup. She didn't know what to expect. She hadn't worshipped at the church in seven years.

The pastor was preparing to start the sermon when Peters walked in the door. All eyes turned on her. Then the church members abruptly broke into song.

"They stopped the service and started a sing-a-thon because they were so happy that I was in church after so many years," Peters said.

It was a welcome worthy of the prodigal son in Jesus' parable from Luke 15:11-32.

At that moment, Peters decided to give her life to Jesus and start over.

"I made a deal with God: all or nothing," she said. "I got rebaptized, and that is where my life began."



Read more about STARLENE PETERS (left) next week.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Texts:** *Psalm 119:9–11*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand the characteristics of habits adopted by trustworthy stewards.

Feel: Appreciate the value of cultivating those habits that draw him or her closer to God.

Do: Take practical steps toward incorporating spiritual habits into daily practice.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Habits That Make a Difference

- Ⓐ What does “seeking God first” mean in practical terms?
- Ⓑ How does a forward outlook help the Christian steward to use time effectively?
- Ⓒ Why are physical, mental, and emotional health important components of spiritual stewardship?
- Ⓓ How does self-discipline support our other stewardship endeavors?

II. Feel: Nourishing the Spiritual Life

- Ⓐ What personal attitudes or opinions might need adjustment should we desire a deepening sense of God’s presence?
- Ⓑ How can believers experience the transforming power of God’s Spirit for the development of positive habits?

III. Do: Making Lasting Changes

- Ⓐ How can believers cultivate lasting changes as opposed to temporary ones?
- Ⓑ How can Christians develop habits that will have significant impacts upon their communities?
- Ⓒ How is humility important to the cultivation of any positive habit and a guardian against pharisaical attitudes?

► **Summary:** Negative or positive habits are formed through repetition. Athletes cultivate their skills by practicing certain patterns again and again. That is why nearly every sport calls the periods of preparation for the future contest *practice*. Many have heard the saying, “Practice what you preach.” It is time for believers to take that advice seriously.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Psalm 119:9–11*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Committed stewardship incorporates practices and habits that demonstrate a life dedicated to Christ.

Just for Teachers: A high school track-and-field coach once interviewed a prospective athlete who boasted that she could high-jump five feet six inches, which is quite impressive. Her performance, however, was quite different. After the first two track meets (competitions), she was ready to quit because she had not been able to jump the entering height, which was only *three* feet six inches—two feet lower than her boast of five feet six inches.

Nevertheless, she persisted, returning to jumping fundamentals. She practiced each component of jumping repeatedly. She mastered her approach steps, perfected her arc, and transformed the jumping functions into intuitive habits. She established the school high jump record that year and placed third at state championships. The following year she established the district championship meet record (five feet three inches) and was runner-up at state championships. Following graduation, she was recruited by top universities.

Practice converted a dreamer into a winner. Many dream of doing great things for God, but it is those who perfect spiritual habits through repetitive practice who actually succeed.

Opening Discussion: Ask if there are any athletes (current or former) in the class and ascertain the sports in which they excel or their fields of athletic prowess. Inquire of them as to what habits should be practiced in order to succeed in that athletic endeavor. Next, ask about the vocations and professions represented by class members. What habits do people practice in those fields in order to be successful? Discuss the specific spiritual goals of class members. What habits should believers practice in order to achieve those goals?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Most definitions of the word *habit* relate to *regularly repeated patterns of action and behavior*. Negatively framed, we sometimes call these actions *addictions* and oftentimes associate them with obsessions. Patterns, however, are not necessarily negative. Forming good habits, positive patterns, is *required* from those who

would progress in spiritual development.

Our study this week concentrates on several habits that are characteristic of devoted stewards.

Bible Commentary

I. God First (Review Exodus 20:3; Jeremiah 29:13; Matthew 6:33; 22:37, 38; Acts 17:28; Ephesians 5:15–17; Colossians 3:23; Luke 12:35–48; and Hebrews 10:25; 11:10 with the class.)

Seeking God first demonstrates *trust*. Such trust is demonstrated in a committed prayer life. Morning prayers and meditations have fueled the spiritual lives of numerous believers. These devout souls routinely schedule God first during the day. In this way, Christians make God their first priority. The Bible tells us that God precedes all other things in life (*Matt. 6:33*), supersedes governments (*Col. 1:16*), and must be preferred above family and even life itself (*Luke 14:26*).

In the same way, the tithing principle places God first above finances. Trusting God, therefore, forms the central characteristic of stewardship. In addition to trusting God, Christian stewards are also forward-looking. Put another way, Christianity is the world's most hopeful, forward-looking religion. By way of example, when we explore Scripture, we find that dreams, aspirations, promises, expectations, and possibilities abound. And throughout the inspired writings of the Bible, the promise of Christ's promised return outshines the rest. It surfaces repeatedly. This promise inspires believers with enthusiasm. As a result, we are infused with purpose, meaning, personal significance, and belonging. These benedictions extend to us from our divine family membership as a result of our trust in this promise. As part of the divine family, we await the Master's return, anticipating His coming through faithful obedience to His instructions. Considering God's wonderful promises, why would anyone think of putting Christ second?

Consider This: What things might we reasonably expect if we seek God first?

II. Time Management (Review Job 8:9; James 4:14; Psalms 39:4, 5; 90:10, 12; and Ephesians 5:15, 16 with the class.)

Humans can neither reverse time nor relive the past. Time wasted today cannot be recaptured. Obviously, time is our most valuable asset. How should time be utilized?

To answer this profound question, let us turn to God's law and the fourth commandment, which is the only commandment that deals with

time. The fourth commandment enjoins both work and rest. The command says work six days and rest one. Israel was different from other ancient societies in utilizing the seven-day week. Jesus' custom or habit was to worship on that rest day, called the Sabbath. Likewise, Paul habitually worshiped on Sabbath (*Acts 17:1, 2*). The annual Jewish calendar maintained this balance between work and spiritual/physical rest, enjoined in the fourth commandment, stipulating feasts and a fast, planting times and harvesting times. There were times for family celebrations, such as the wedding feast at Cana (*John 2*), an event that Jesus honored with His presence (time).

Work, family, rest, and worship seem to be the dominant themes of the fourth commandment. What seems missing—overtly, at least—is explicit instruction regarding leisure and entertainment. Contemporary culture, through technological advancements that have lessened our workload, has filled that emptiness with entertainment, much of which is pointless at best and destructive at worst. But it could be argued that the fourth commandment provides sacred principles that we can apply to our use of leisure time and that we can use to govern our recreational activities.

Consider This: What principles does the fourth commandment teach us about how we are to spend our week? How do the Scriptures show that entertainment must either serve and conform in spirit to the fundamental uses of time, outlined in Scripture, or be avoided?

III. Healthful Habits (*Review 3 John 1–3, Revelation 21:1–5, and 1 Corinthians 9:24–27 with the class.*)

Work (exercise) balanced by rest (Sabbath) was established during Creation before sin's entrance (*Gen. 2:3–15*). Counsel regarding beverage consumption (*Prov. 20:1, 23:29–35*), sexual morality (*Leviticus 18 and 1 Cor. 6:18–20*), various diseases (*for example, Leviticus 14*), plus additional counsel regarding other physical issues underscores the importance of establishing healthful habits. Christian stewardship demands it.

Paul admired athletic discipline and used running to illustrate spiritual principles related to self-control (*1 Cor. 9:24–27, 2 Tim. 4:7, Heb. 12:1–3*). God's promise to ancient Israel is equally meaningful for modern Israel: "If you diligently heed the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in His sight, give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought on the Egyptians. For I am the LORD who heals you" (*Exod. 15:26, NKJV*).

Consider This: How do the Scriptures for review and in this commentary section show the mind-body connection? How do the laws governing diet, sexual relations, and the Sabbath commandment serve as preventive measures

that guard against disease and promote health?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Should the linguistic linkage between the words *disciple* and *discipline* surprise us? How could Christ sanction *undisciplined disciples*? Could a greater oxymoron exist? Clearly, authentic Christians will experience discipline through every aspect of stewardship—spiritual, physical, mental, financial, emotional, and otherwise.

To these practical virtues others might be added. Lists of Christian habits and practices occur in Galatians 5, the first chapter of 2 Peter, and other places. While this week's study is obviously not exhaustive, it has supplied an opportunity to concentrate on some fundamental practices that should be present in the life of every believer.

Thought/Application Questions:

- ① How can believers cultivate those habits that are essential to stewards?
- ② How can physical discipline contribute toward spiritual attainment?
- ③ How can disciples improve their time use when so many live with hectic schedules?
- ④ How can maintaining balanced lifestyles help Christians become more effective stewards?
- ⑤ How might scriptural immersion and prayer help believers keep Christ and His coming uppermost in their thoughts?
- ⑥ Outside the Bible, what are some resources that the Christian can use to maintain focus on spiritual things?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: New positive habits are not easily formed. Unfortunately, negative habits develop all too easily. God's authority over everything, however, forms the believer's unbeatable safeguard. Paul writes, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (*Phil. 4:13, NKJV*).

Activity:

Conduct a self-inventory regarding the areas that were studied this week. Where are your strengths? Be honest about your weaknesses. In what actions might you choose to change course? What practices would help to maintain your strengths? Write down your thoughts so that you may reference them later.