



"Thoughts lead on to purposes; purposes go forth in action; actions form habits; habits decide character; and character fixes our destiny."

—Tryon Edwards

**06-Sep-24**

## **Good Habits**

Have you ever tried to jump across the Mississippi River?

I have done this several times. Of course, at Saint Louis or New Orleans, we might find that task somewhat impossible—even for a stuntman like Evel Knievel—but at the headwaters at Lake Itasca, where the great river is only a few feet wide, the task proves rather undemanding and unremarkable.

Similarly, near a river's source, it is fairly easy to build a dam and divert the waters elsewhere, but as the stream widens, it becomes more difficult to harness the current.

Many young people may feel that character development is "uncool." But what is uncool about success? There is a key to character development, which, if acquired, will lead a person to success in a career, a marriage, a hobby, or whatever else one plans to do. This key amounts to "little" more than learning and implementing a cluster of good habits.

Character—those success or failure habits—begins incredibly small, not unlike the tiny, clear, unpolluted stream at a river's source. Flowing toward

the ocean, picking up tributaries of experience, it becomes increasingly defined, set in its course, and often polluted. The mouth of a large river often becomes as wide and deep as a large lake, churning with dangerous, irreversible currents capable of carrying massive objects into the ocean. The habit clusters that lead to success—or failure—parallel the growth of a large river, beginning small and controllable but ending large and uncontrollable.

The key to success in adult life stems from habitually choosing lawful and productive behavior over unlawful and unproductive behavior *now*. We make a series of daily choices, some leading to character development and success and some to character destruction and failure.

To have the ability to make the wrong decision but willingly making the right one develops the habit cluster we call "character." The Creator does not want a bunch of automatons saying, "Yes, Lord" or "No, Lord." To obey God's laws—or man's laws—for any other reason than choosing or wanting to from inner volition shows no inner strength. A motorist who obeys the speed limit merely because he spies a cop in his rearview mirror exhibits no good character.

The English poet William Wordsworth once wrote, "The child is the father of the man." The habits that we form as teenagers determine success or failure in adulthood. We can directly connect weaknesses in adult character to habits formed in teen or pre-teen years. When we see an adult who lives like a slob, who continually arrives late, who habitually fails to keep his word, we know these horrible habits stem from childhood behavior patterns. Most adults have stories about scars and mental turmoil resulting from poor habits they formed in their early years. Young people can profit from avoiding the mistakes of their parents and other adults.

Habit formation is just another synonym for character development. Motivational expert Millard Bennett teaches, "Habit is like a cable, and you weave a strand a day until it becomes unbreakable. Good habits carry you to success, and bad habits ruin you. It's as simple as that." Good and bad habits are formed the same way, little bit by little bit, except that instead of building up, as good habits do, bad habits tear down.

The time to control our future—by forming good habits—is now, while our "lifestream" consists of a small trickle or a gentle brook. [Proverbs 17:14](#) suggests this principle: A major problem or strife begins as a tiny, controllable trickle. Left unchecked, the little trickle will erode a gorge, as geologists believe the Grand Canyon was formed. Similarly, from a tiny seedling no larger than a fingernail, the Sequoia emerges as one of the earth's most massive specimens of vegetation.

We cannot develop the habit clusters that can carry us to success on a crash program. The best time to develop them is during youth, at the headwaters of a person's development, when a person easily forms or destroys habits. In the teenage years, we have the priceless opportunity to develop success habits such as dependability, reliability, and consistency. Teens can use the chores and responsibilities given to them to prepare them for adult responsibilities. The time to develop a reputation for these traits is now.

"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" ([Proverbs 22:6](#)) is mainly aimed at parents, but teenagers or young adults should also internalize this principle as parental influence decreases. Teens are obliged to take over some of the responsibilities of parenting themselves. Parenting must increasingly come from within as the young person gradually takes on more accountability for his own behavior.

Good habits could be considered the building blocks for success and righteous character, while bad habits are Satan's wrecking ball. Society's losers, both behind bars or on skid row, did not get that way overnight. Growth and decay do not occur overnight but over a long period.

How would we like to clean up the squalor and filth of the inner cities? Tackled in its entirety, it would be a massive project. But, by changing attitudes and habits in young people over time, it would resolve more easily. So, the time to start is now to develop cleanliness and order individually in our own living quarters. Clutter, chaos, or squalor begins as an inner state of mind. Slum and ghetto conditions are learned, and they are cumulative. Notice [Proverbs 24:30-34](#):

I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding; and there it was, all overgrown with thorns; its surface was covered with nettles; its stone wall was broken down. When I saw it, I considered it well; I looked on it and received instruction: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest; so your poverty will come like a prowler, and your want like an armed man.

This state of cumulative neglect did not arrive overnight. It takes time to make a slob or a derelict, but reform is next to impossible once the pattern becomes set.

Success goals, better known as character development, cannot develop from crash programs. For instance, a crash diet does not form the habits that keep off excess weight. Our long-term, positive habits make up the mainstream of our good character. The place to begin developing habits that will lead to success lies near the headwaters, during youth, rather than midstream or downstream, when we are older and more set in our ways. Do not delay—start building character-forming, life-enhancing habits now!

- David F. Maas

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## **From the Archives: Featured Sermon**

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[Character and Reputation](#)**

by James Beaubelle

Obedience to God's instructions in Scripture brings a Christian excellent benefits, and one of the greatest of these is working with God to grow in

holy and righteous character. James Beaubelle explains the relationship between character and reputation, showing that our goal is to become transformed into the very image of Jesus Christ.

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