

Sunday 31st August 2025 - Habits & Rituals

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Date: 31 August 2025

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] So, if you've clocked on the newsletter or you heard last week, next week there's no 10am Sunday service here as we're having some urgent work done on our roof which will hopefully fix the little leaks we've been having but instead it's going to be an evening service for change 6pm evening service here to which you're very much encouraged to come along to and be a part of so no morning service next week.

And do spread the word if any of your mates aren't here today do let them know instead we'll be meeting at 6 o'clock in the evening instead and then the following Sunday the 14th we're back to normal and we'll be starting this new Sunday series that we're going to be looking at called how to read the Bible.

So, all that's to come but I thought today it'd be good to start really by addressing the elephant in the room which is that summer is nearly over isn't it? I know, yes.

It's the 31st of August which means September looms large which for better or worse means that the schools are going back this week. Summer holidays might have become a fading memory. Maybe our shorts go back in the drawer for another year. I'm going to keep mine on for a little bit longer yet I'm sure. And although we've had what has been they reckon what the hottest summer ever there's there's maybe sadness that the longer nights and the colder days will now slowly be drawing in.

[1 : 30] And I know for many of us though at the same time there's also perhaps a bit of relief and a bit of keenness that we can get back into some kind of routine shall we say with a new term ahead.

So for our two kids Hardy and Bobby Bobby was saying actually although they've enjoyed being off school they're kind of ready to go back really. Bobby was saying he likes a bit more routine he's looking forward to a normal week seeing his friends and so on.

And I guess that return to routine might be something that some parents might agree with after a long summer as well. Equally though work life it can feel pretty disjointed over summer with many folks taking annual leave and so on.

So productivity and momentum take a bit of a hit during the summer sometimes. But then also in our social lives you know the groups or activities that we belong to can be nice to get back into the regularity of what we enjoy as September kicks in.

And I guess the same kind of applies for church life perhaps as well. Yes summer offers us a chance for a different pace. But I don't know about you I imagine I'm not the only one who's looking forward to things getting a bit more regular and getting going again wholesale.

[2 : 48] All of which I think reveals that on the whole most of us are probably creatures of habit. Where routines give shape and a healthy rhythm to our lives.

And in many ways I don't think that's surprising since routine is hardwired into nature. Whether that's night following day the lunar cycle the seasons of the year and so on.

You know there are daily monthly annual routines to the world God has given us. I don't know what your preferred daily or weekly routines look like.

Whether you start the day with an early gym visit or workout or whether you need a triple espresso to even open your eyes in the morning. Whether you have certain days of the week that you think that's my day for cleaning the home or doing the food shop.

Whether your prayer life has a daily or a weekly kind of pattern or whether it simply fits in around everything else. Maybe your Sunday routine feels different because you come here and that gives a unique shape or rhythm to your day.

[4 : 00] As I say habits, customs, routines. They're a pretty natural even important part of life. Something which I think interestingly we see being played out in the life of Jesus.

So for example if we turn to Luke's gospel chapter 14 verse 6. We read this about Jesus that he, Jesus, went to Nazareth where he'd been brought up. And on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue as was his custom. So each Sabbath, each Saturday for us. Jesus was in the routine of going to the synagogue, you know, the local community center where people would gather to meet with friends, to read and discuss the scriptures, find support, pray and so on. Very similar to attending or belonging to a church. And Jesus in particular, we know having grown up in Nazareth, he'd probably been going to that same synagogue there for the best part each week for maybe 25, 30 years. And I think that's quite an interesting thing to think about. Jesus growing up from boy to man in the same synagogue. I mean imagine the continuity of friendships, the commitment he'd have had to community, the sharing and the knowing of all the ups and downs of the people who he was meeting with in that small town. [5 : 27] You know, that shared life wouldn't always have been easy or perhaps not always comfortable. But if Jesus knew the value of prioritizing that kind of weekly gathering, then I suspect we'd do well to follow his lead as best we can.

And then how about this one from Mark's gospel where we read this on another occasion? Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again, crowds of people came to him and as was his custom, he taught them. So Jesus, he's in this habit, not only of attending a synagogue each week, he's in the habit of teaching people as was his custom. Which again, I think is interesting. As evidently, it was something that Jesus prioritized. You know, the importance of learning, of reflecting and studying, of thinking, praying things through with God and with other people. You know, it was important enough for Jesus to make teaching his routine. And again, it seems if we want to grow in our faith, then accessing teaching, keeping up perhaps with Sunday and Monday talks here on YouTube or online, listening to other podcasts, reading books, discussing matters of faith together.

[6 : 49] But again, I think as was his custom. We do well to follow Jesus lead in that. Well, then again, if we flip back to Luke's gospel, we read this.

On another occasion, Jesus went out, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives and his disciples followed him. This, as was his custom, tells us that the Mount of Olives was a favorite place of Jesus to visit.

You know, the hillside overlooking the city of Jerusalem. Place, as we're told elsewhere, for him to pray, to meditate, to rest and to recharge.

Gave him a kind of panoramic view over Jerusalem. And you can imagine how that would have informed his prayers for the people of that city. Yes, he regularly went to a building, a synagogue. But his routine also involved intentionally being out in nature. And I guess in many ways, that seems to be Jesus' preferred place to be and to meet with God.

[7 : 54] And so again, if we were to take our lead from Jesus, I wonder what routine outside places have we got? Or might we find that can be our place with God?

It could be a hillside like Jesus. Gentle shore common, perhaps. That's our Mount of Olives locally, maybe. Equally, Jesus, like the shores of the Sea of Galilee, his chase water, perhaps.

If we're less mobile, perhaps ours could just as easily be a park bench. Or even looking out a window and watching the birds or whatever it is in nature from our seat.

You know, regardless of where we choose, the practice, it seems, of finding a routine place where we intentionally come aside with God.

If Jesus is anything to go by, which he is, then that could be a pretty transformational habit for our faith, I'd suggest.

[8 : 58] Indeed, what's interesting is we look at these three passages, Luke 4, Mark 10, Luke 22. There's a particular word in the original language, the Greek that it was written in, that gets translated into English with this phrase, as was his custom.

And the Greek word that's translated as this is this word, *ethos*, *ethos*. Now, *ethos* in Greek means custom, habit, routine, and so on.

But the, hmm, would tell us. It's interesting that the way we use the word ethos in English, I think it suggests that it's deeper than that.

As our ethos in our language means things like our character, our approach, our principles, maybe even the beliefs that guide us, our ethos for living.

Why is this interesting? Well, I think I'd suggest that it's through our ability and our appetite to embrace routine and custom and habit and so on, that actually we're able to tap into and draw from the ethos of God.

[10:11] The principles, the priorities, the practices of faith that will give shape and meaning to our lives and our connection with God. So through creation, through nature, through seasons, through the idea perhaps of a weekly Sabbath day of rest, and ultimately through the lived example of Jesus, I think we see the importance that God places on routines, you know, on good habits, customary rhythms, if you like, that really are God's gift to us.

A way of helping us, in old language, to abide with God through all the ups and downs of life. That abiding keeps us going.

Now, that's not to say being spontaneous and breaking from routines can't be a good thing. Of course it can. But I guess something can only be defined as spontaneous by virtue of the fact that there's a routine to break from.

Without some kind of routine, there'd simply be chaos. And God, as we know, from Genesis 1 onwards, is in the business of bringing order out of chaos.

So habits, routines, customs, I think they've got a lot to commend them to us for community, for learning, for prayer, and so on. But if we go a little bit deeper still, I think I want to suggest that habits and routines and customs, when they become truly meaningful, when we learn to embrace them as this, as rituals.

[11:50] So what makes something a ritual rather than a habit? We could define it like this, that a ritual is a habit infused with meaning.

You see, we'll all have habits, things we do out of routine, and sometimes without even really thinking anything from cleaning our teeth, to flicking on our phone, to picking our nose in the car. Whatever we do out of habit, without really clocking that we're doing it. Other habits could be, you know, putting the bins out each week, we don't even realise we've done it, we wake up in the morning and realise that we did. You know, maybe the habit of sitting in a similar seat when we come to church each week.

I don't know how regular you are where you are, but I bet it's quite a habit that's been formed. Ordinary habits would do ordinary things of life. But a ritual, well, a ritual infuses, I might say imbues or deepens those everyday habits with meaning.

What kind of meaning? Well, for example, when I go to the pub, which I do occasionally, and I meet friends, I'm in the habit of always chinking our glasses when we get a new pint or a new round in.

[13:09] Always think, chink before you drink. That's my motto. It's a habit for me. But for me, actually, it's more than a habit because that chinking is a way of expressing friendship and solidarity and gratitude and togetherness, all usually encompassed and summed up with the word cheers.

A cheers and a chink, they go together pretty well in my mind. And so the habit of chinking becomes a ritual, an ordinary practice that takes on a deeper meaning.

And if you're not a chinker in a pub, it's a similar practice, I guess, to saying grace at a meal. Yes, it can easily simply be a habit, maybe set words to get through before we tuck in.

But the act of saying grace, you know, of expressing thanks to God for what we're about to eat adds meaning to the habit of eating because we're intentionally acknowledging God's generous presence with us.

I don't know if you can remember what you had for lunch yesterday. I suspect if we said grace a bit more, we might remember and be a bit more grateful for the food we eat. Jesus said grace and gave thanks for food all the time.

[14:23] Surely a good thing for us to follow. So ritual is infusing ordinary habits and everyday things with meaning.

Why might this matter in particular? Well, I think I'd suggest that if we can begin to think of our everyday customs not as habits but as potential rituals, then it opens up all sorts of ways in which we might be able to relate to and encounter God in the ordinary everyday stuff of life.

As I mentioned earlier, the habit of automatically putting the bins out and yes, it can simply be a habit but if we were to think, well, how can I make that habit a ritual?

How about the next time we put the black bin out, how about we use that habit as a prompt to quietly thank God for the way we can leave all our rubbish with him at the cross and trust Jesus to carry and take away all of our burdens, use the putting out of a bin, the habit in a deeper way by immersing it in prayer.

Or when we put the blue bin out, do our recycling. How might we use that habit as a prompt to be grateful for the way God is working all things for good, you know, where no experience is wasted but can be renewed and recycled and restored into something useful or beneficial.

[15:56] You can say, okay, God, the recycling's going out, what can you recycle and renew from my life this week? And so a customary, ordinary, everyday or fortnightly habit of putting the bins out can easily become a little ritual, habit with infused meaning.

And it seems to me once you begin to go down that route, your imagination with God can go to town so that your morning shower can be a moment to start the day with God.

A little mini baptism if you like, you know, prayers of preparation for the day ahead for those we'll meet and so on. I don't know, I like feeding the birds in our God and feeding the birds can become a chance to consciously partner with God in creation.

If we do the school run or a work commute on the car or the bus or whatever, that can become an opportunity not just a habit that we get through but a ritual for intentional conversation perhaps with those we're travelling with for listening to their stories perhaps even just staring out the window but noticing things to find joy in or to consciously pray for the teachers our kids will be having that day or for the work colleagues we're going to be alongside and so on and so on you know all ways in which the habitual can become a ritual a custom infused with deeper meaning but then how about the way we do church we do church so that the journey here perhaps on a Sunday or a Monday becomes a ritual of preparation and expectation or where before we perhaps take our usual seat we might look around to see who we could welcome who we could greet or if that's a bit much and we're a bit shy if we just sit who can we look around and quietly pray for from afar without them even knowing that they might encounter God in a special way in the service and so on you know and so on infusing ordinary habits with deeper meaning and then again for today with communion we'll be asking

God to help infuse the ordinary everyday act of eating and drinking with deeper meaning so if anything like me you're probably in the habit of eating bread most if not every day but in communion that everyday habit becomes a unique ritual an everyday practice that becomes infused with deeper meaning and yet I wonder if the ordinary everyday habit of eating bread can become in church a kind of timeless ritual of communion with God and with one another why not find ways to make every meal at home a ritual for communion if you like as well a way of intentionally deepening our awareness and gratitude and connection with God and maybe with others you can break bread on your own in your own home every single meal time you know I wonder for you whether in this service in the day ahead in the new season as September and so on unfolds

[19:13] I wonder for you as you think about the habits the customs the routines you have I wonder how we might embrace and elevate the idea of ritual in our lives so that our everyday habits become an opportunity to deepen our faith and our encounter of God in the ordinary stuff of life but also we've said a prayer of confession today there's a chance to come and kneel or receive from God in a kind of open way today with communion I wonder if there are practices that we used to treat perhaps as rituals but which over time have lost a bit of their meaning and now feel like a habit and maybe attending church can easily become just that so how might we at this new term how might we intentionally re-infuse that habit of coming to church with meaning so that it once again becomes a ritual of encounter and connection in many ways if we can learn to see our customs not simply as habits but as opportunities for ritual then I suspect

God can use that mindset that ethos to turn out everyday ordinary black and white moments into extraordinary moments of colour and I suspect a rediscovery of ritual might be one way to push against the tendency in our society to fall for black and white thinking and maybe shallow interaction because instead ritual is a way of discovering depth meaning and connection or as the writer Priya Parker says she puts it like this she says ritual is a way of being thickly in one place and not thinly everywhere I like that I like that a little bit of depth of substance in life of experiences thick with meaning where roots can grow and faith can be formed that's the kind of life that's the kind of faith

the kind of community I believe God is calling us into for this new season ahead and that's going to be a theme that we'll pick up next
Sunday evening as well at six o'clock but take this away until then I think my prayer is that you and I as this new season unfolds would be that we would discover the joy and the meaning that comes from asking God to transform the everyday habits the ordinary customs of our lives transform them into rituals experiences through which we can connect more deeply with God and with one another
Amen Amen