

Small Disciple-Making Habits Make a Huge Difference

By **C. ANDERSON**

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Goals excite type A personalities. The setting, achieving and working toward them can be very motivating. After reaching an important goal, however, many feel a sense of emptiness and loss.

Long-distance runners often experience this after completing a marathon. They've trained for months to compete in a race. Driving toward that goal gave training a clear purpose. When the race is over, there is an emotional downswing. The big challenging goal is completed. So, why am I going to the gym today? Those who train runners warn against low-level depression in the days following a big race.

In a reverse scenario, we can experience intense disillusionment when an important goal seems elusive. Perhaps the goal of catalyzing a rapidly multiplying Disciple Making Movement feels that way. We may need a change in our focus.

Goals vs. Systems

New York Times bestselling author, James Clear, writes about this in his popular book *Atomic Habits*. On page 23, Clear writes, "Forget about goals, focus on systems instead." He describes the difference in this way. "Goals are about the results you want to achieve. Systems are about the processes that lead to those results."

While this book has a humanistic, self-help slant, as I listened to the Audible version on a long car

ride, a series of lightbulbs exploded in my head. "There is so much in this book to apply to disciple-making and the pursuit of movements!" I mused, taking copious notes.

If you haven't had the chance to read Clear's book, I recommend it. There are many takeaways for life in general as well as disciple-making. After listening to it, I decided to buy the actual book and re-read it in light of disciple-making habits. This article shares some of the insights gained and what I am experimenting with.

While I'm not ready to let go of the God-sized goal of a DMM, I see the book's point about systems. It's not having a DMM goal that will get us to movement. If that were the case, we would have many thousands more movements than we do already.

What will catalyze and sustain a DMM are disciple-making habits we put in place in our lives, in the lives of those we train and in those our disciples train. Normalizing a few key habits and simple systems in our movement efforts sets the trajectory for multiplication. This leads to something far beyond the superficial goal of reaching 4th generation growth and a certain number of groups or streams. If you are not familiar with the definition of a DMM, please see <https://www.dmmsfrontiermissions.com/disciple-making-movement-what-defined/>. While this definition has merit and is helpful, it is not the

end goal. Nor does it come directly from Scripture. The real aim is to see disciples that multiply rapidly and continue to do so as we see in the New Testament. So again, just aiming for 4G and multiplication isn't enough. We need habits, systems and practices that get us there.

With that established, let me first illustrate some of the *Atomic Habits* concepts in a personal and practical way. From there, we'll then turn attention to the applications for disciple-making.

Habit Stacking vs. Despairing Over a Challenging Goal

My husband and I currently live in Thailand. We have been here for about six years. Before this, we lived for many years in Nepal and India. When in those nations, I learned to speak Nepalese and Bengali. It is a personal value to understand the culture and worldview of those around me. I want to find bridges and ways to share the good news of Jesus with my neighbors. This is true even though I now travel a great deal and my ministry is more global than local.

Learning Thai has been hard. Perhaps it's the fact that I'm now over 50, or maybe because it's a tonal language, or it could be because I travel in and out and have a full ministry schedule. I'm not exactly sure why, but I've found it exceedingly difficult to gain even market fluency in Thai.

At times I feel determined to learn. At other times, I'm deeply frustrated and want to give up. In all honesty, I'm ashamed to have lived here so long and to speak so poorly. My heart aches to be at a place of fluency where I can share the message of my wonderful Savior freely. Many, many Thais around me don't speak English and have never heard the gospel in a way they could understand.

As I read *Atomic Habits*, I realized I should change my focus. Instead of the goal of being fluent in Thai, it may be more helpful to concentrate on developing a consistent daily study habit. Now, each day after my quiet time and writing hour, I study Thai for 30 minutes. That consistent habit is already making a difference! It has set me on a trajectory where I definitely will reach my goal of speaking Thai one day. I'm no longer feeling discouraged but can trust the system to get me there. I've habit stacked Thai study (a concept he talks about in the book) on top of two other habits I already have in place in my life and enjoy.

Another helpful concept from this book is what James Clear calls the Law of Least Effort. It's followed by the

Two-Minute rule (Chapters 12 and 13). They come under the habit law he describes as, "Make it easy." The basic premise is that a new habit should be so simple you can't talk yourself out of doing it. If you can do it in two minutes, you don't need much willpower to put that habit into place. Thus, it is far more likely to become a sustained practice. After a simple habit is established, it is far easier to increase it.

Again, allow me to demonstrate how I'm applying this personally. I find motivation for strength-building difficult, though I know it's important at my age. I've recently started doing just five pushups and five sit-ups every day. This takes two minutes and is so easy that I can't talk myself out of it. From there, I can increase to seven, then 10, and in six months I'll be doing 50 a day.

Don't Despise Small Beginnings

How does this apply to disciple-makers? Is this humanistic thinking? Or has James Clear actually observed something about human behavior that God designed?

Zechariah 4:10 comes to mind. "Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin, to see the plumb line in Zerubbabel's hand." God rejoices in small beginnings and tells us we too should celebrate them! Psalm 139:14 says that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made." Created in God's image, to display His glory, if humans make progress through regular habits, it's because God created us to do so.

An overlapping concept is the idea of spiritual disciplines, also called spiritual practices. Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Ruth Hailey-Barton, and others have helped us see their vital importance in spiritual transformation. Prayer, Bible reading, gratefulness, silence, solitude and others are transformative in our lives. Why not add to these key disciple-making habits as well?

Experimenting with Disciple-Making Habits

Each reader should prayerfully consider what habits they could begin. Think of what would set you (and those you train) on a consistent trajectory toward the rapid multiplication of groups of disciples. Here are a few new habits I am experimenting with. Perhaps they will spark ideas to consider.

1. *Always asking the server how I can pray for them when they bring my food.*

Initiating spiritual conversations can be difficult, especially for introverts. I needed to create a habit

where I don't have to think about what to say, or how to transition into talking about Jesus. In the last few weeks, I've started a new practice. Every time we eat out, after the server brings the food I say, "We are followers of Jesus and like to thank Him for our food. We appreciate your serving us today. Is there anything you'd like God to do for you? We'd love to include that in our prayer." As a result, I'm having new spiritual conversations every time I eat out.

2. *Praying every day at 5:50 AM for five people I am coaching as well as for 50 new movements.*

Last week we met as a Disciple Makers Increase (disciplemakersincrease.org) leadership team. We talked about *Atomic Habits* and decided together that each day at 5:50 am our team would set an alarm and pause to pray. Each of us is choosing five people we are coaching life-on-life. At that time, we will pray for them, then pray for our big corporate goal of releasing 50 new movements.

Prayer is such a key to seeing greater fruit! Developing a simple prayer habit that you and those you train can follow could have a massive cumulative impact. Especially if it is one that is related to praying for the lost and for those you are training as disciple-makers.

3. *Stopping to chat a few minutes with any neighbor.*

In many cultures, this is already normative. If you see someone, you stop to greet them. In other places, particularly in the West, we barely notice the people around us. We don't engage with lost people, nor do we know their names or pray for them, even if they live next door!

It may feel overwhelming for those you train to think of skillfully giving a clear 10-minute Creation to Christ presentation to their neighbor. Make it easy! Something that takes only two minutes. The first habit can be to regularly stop and say hello and ask someone how they are doing. Do this whenever you see a neighbor outside. It may mean you stop your car and roll down your window to greet them. You won't be late, it only takes two minutes. Practice friendliness.

Then, after that simple exchange, pause to offer a breath prayer for God to bless them.

Once this habit is established, add other habits to it. You might add other open-ended questions like "What's been good about your day today?" Follow that by sharing something from yours. Or add sharing a three-minute testimony or Bible story. First, though, we have to become comfortable engaging in conversation with lost people.

At recent meetings, one of my Indian friends decided to learn how to swim. The hotel where we stayed had a swimming pool, and each day she and her husband practiced simple steps. The first step was to become comfortable in the water. She needed to learn to relax there and simply enjoy being in the water.

Many Christians used to staying in their church-friend bubble have forgotten how to be comfortable in the water that lost people swim in. Train yourself and others to take one small step. Apply a super easy habit, engaging intentionally with the lost around you.

4. *After sharing a testimony or having a spiritual conversation, always ask "Would you like to hear more about this? Or read the Bible together sometime?" then follow that up with "Is there anyone you know who might also like to join us?"*

This is a simple habit for those who regularly share the gospel. It can lead to the formation of groups of disciples.

What Disciple-Making Habits Could You Begin?

Time and space don't allow me to unpack all the applications to disciple-making that my learning from *Atomic Habits* holds. If this article has sparked interest in you, get the book and prayerfully think it through. Feel free to write to me with your applications and we can think and grow together in this.

I've given enough though, for you to think of one disciple-making habit you could put in place this week. One that would set you on a trajectory toward greater fruit. You may want to discuss this article with your team and come up with a few corporate habits that you do together.

A characteristic of Disciple Making Movements is that every believer functions as a disciple-maker. It is not only the professional clergy making disciples and sharing their faith.

Motivating church members to make disciples can be too big a leap. Make it easy. Start small. Do it together. Habit stack. Don't concentrate only on the goal of leading people to Christ, starting groups, or a movement. Focus on the systems and habits that set disciples on a path that leads to multiplication.

What new disciple-making habit will you start this week?  