

“THE POWER OF HABIT IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE”

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Romans 8:6—“*For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.*” What a wonderful contrast the Apostle makes in this text between the flesh and the spirit! Those whose minds are dominated by the motions of the flesh are in death; those whose minds are ruled and controlled by the spirit of the Lord are already counted as alive, though still imperfect and still unable to attain unto that which they would. We could not wholly agree with those who interpret this passage to mean that they who live a grossly immoral life are destined for eternal torment, while those who merely live a reasonably decent life and who train their minds to dwell on more scientific and artistic subjects and who, perhaps, attend Sunday School or church service on Sunday are bound straight for the Pearly Gates and that this passage is proof positive that a good life is owed to them now, and eternal bliss and happiness in the ages to come. While we aver that it is decidedly preferable for one of the world to live on as high a plane as possible, the contrast here is not merely between low worldly morality and high worldly morality, but it is between fleshly mindedness, of whatever grade, and spiritual mindedness, of whatever grade. The present native condition of the flesh is death.

Those who fall under the class mentioned in the first verse of this chapter as being freed from condemnation, because of their relationship to Christ Jesus, have passed from death in which they were born, unto *life*—from a legal condemnation to a legal liberty, because Jesus has applied the merit of His ransom sacrifice on their behalf; He has purchased them with His own precious blood.

The Apostle says, “To be carnally *minded* is death.” What is it to be minded? What is it to have a mind? What is the mind? Someone says, “it is the will;” but this seems hardly satisfactory. Rather would we say that the will is that factor which dominates and controls the mind. Another would say, “The mind is the brain.” But no; we must say that the brain is the tablet, so to speak, on which impressions are made. It is that portion of the human organism which is directly employed by the mind. The *mind*, then shall we say, is the sum of those impressions which have been made *on the brain, under the direction of the will, by the influences with which we have come in contract, before and since our birth.* All this, to be sure, taken in connection with the innate *faculties* which determine the penchant or drift of our thoughts or conduct under given circumstances.

But what is the mind of the New Creature? We answer, it falls under the same description as that just given. The brain might be illustrated by a canvas and the will by the artist. No painting of worth is done by accident but the artist directs the application of the pigments onto the canvas in an intelligent and scientific manner and the result is a harmonious and pleasing arrangement of colors which we call a picture. So we say:

“That man (or woman) has an admirable mind.” And we do not mean thereby merely that he has an admirable will or that the cells of his brain structure are special or peculiar, but we mean that the sum total of the impressions which are on his brain manifests itself in one way or another which is pleasing and admirable to us.

What, then, is the difference between the mind of the New Creature and that of a worldling? The answer is that the difference consists not in the method of formation but rather in the *class* of impressions made on the brain by holier and higher influences, under the direction of the *New Will*.

But what is *Habit* and what is its relationship to the mind? We might describe habit as being that custom of the mind to think or to direct action along certain previously employed lines. We all recognize that habit has a great deal to do with human experience. It may be that we have not rightly estimated its value and its power for good or for evil.

If we take a piece of flat paper and fold it we find it takes some little effort in the folding. But if we attempt to fold the same piece of paper later on, we find that it is very easy. In fact, it is hard to get it to fold in some other place. Paper is what we call plastic; that is, it offers some resistance to an initiative change in its form, but when it is once changed it has a tendency to *stay* in that changed condition. The human brain is also plastic. It is not easy to make it receive some entirely new impression because the brain cells resist the rearrangement necessary to receive the new item. All of us know how hard it is to think along the line of some new truth. It is like plowing among stumps. Now and then we strike a snag which offers great resistance. Some claim that every time we think an actual, though small, physical change takes place in the brain; and I would not wonder if it were so when I remember how hard it is to think sometimes.

The disinclination to examine a new thing or to think upon it we call prejudice or prejudgment. Prejudice, then, is but another name for mental indolence. You remember Nathaniel’s prejudice against Nazareth and how Phillip said: “Come and see.” And when he *did* come he *did* see. While he had prejudice, it was not so strong as to entirely govern his mind and he came and was honest enough to accept the testimony of his senses and receive the greatest blessing possible to him or any other creature.

But someone may interpose: “Can, then, the New Creature get bad habits?” Ah, the Bible corroborates our own experience that we are as prone to sin “as the sparks to fly upward.” In fact, we may set it down as a self-evident fact that if we are not busy developing new and beneficial habits we *will automatically take* on bad ones. We ought to reduce the majority of our daily duties to habit so the reserve force of the mind could be engaged in attacking *new contingencies* which do arise day by day.

Someone may say that the man who does things by habit is the man who can do nothing original, but this is merely an assertion for we can see on closer examination that advance in efficiency in any line depends on the presence of well-established habits. Why? Because the task which is done largely or wholly by habit is done to that extent automatically and leaves the will free for employment elsewhere. The first time an engineer goes over a new road he is on a tremendous strain. He must watch with unremitting effort for each sign, each paddle, each light and at the end of his run he is exhausted. But when he “learns the road,” when he knows where every signal must be given and where every danger point lies, though yet his work is weighty, it becomes more and more of a habit to him, he increases in efficiency and his mind is left more free to cope with unexpected exigencies which may arise

Take the “raw recruit” in the army as an example. When he first enters the army he is the embodiment of awkwardness in the drill. So awkward is he that he cannot be allowed with the larger company. He, with a handful of comrades, is detailed to a special officer who gives painstaking care to inculcate the various commands and movements. When at first he hears the word it is meaningless to his ears. He must take the time and trouble to analyze what he hears before he can respond, even imperfectly. It taxes every power he has so that at the end of two or three hours’ drill he is exhausted. It is also hard for the officer, who must watch with precision the every effort and false move of his protege. He could maneuver a thousand well-trained men all day easier than he can drill those few a few hours. But when those same men by inexorable application acquaint themselves to the extent of extreme familiarity with every command they can respond not only more accurately but instantly to what is heard, because they need not longer to analyze the whole matter but the habit is established and a certain sound sets in motion a certain set of sympathetic and automatic responses so that the deed is done without specially drawing on the will or the attention—hence the nerve energy is spared.

The extent to which habit may become automatism is shown by the story of the young lady who was playing the accompaniment and singing the score to a very difficult musical selection. She was observed by members of her family to go through the selection faultlessly and yet all the while to be in a state of intense excitement. When the piece was finished she burst into tears and then it was noted that she had been watching the dying throes of her pet canary bird. She had been entirely oblivious to either the science or art of playing and singing. Habit had done its work; the attention was elsewhere.

We are living in a nervous age. The disposition is to strain and over-taxation. The easy methods of intercourse between place and place bring new ideas to both employer and employed and more is expected for a given time. If the employee finds no easier methods of doing his work than he did know he is obliged to draw upon his reserve nervous energy in an effort to accomplish what he is not properly drilled to do. As time passes,

this strain becomes a habit until it seems as though he is not working if he is not on a strain. At the same time, if he be conscientious, he will realize that he is not accomplishing what he ought. This double draw on his reserve nervous energy, if not interfered with, will bring nervous prostration and collapse.

The trouble often is, in part, that instead of having so mastered the minute details of his oft-repeated tasks, he is forced to give them much the same amount of attention as he must at first. Not only the old details of a thing may be habitualized but also one's method of approach or attack upon a new duty.

Speed is always a desirable thing but *hurry*, never. Speed is acquired in proportion as we master the details of a thing in hand—otherwise not. Take piano playing or typewriting. One might memorize selections or write letters until he were gray-headed and never have a thorough intimacy with the keyboard. The only way to master either is to spend time and attention upon drills which have no other sense or object than to familiarize one with the keyboard. The keyboard must become a habit; it must become an extension, so to speak, to one's brain. Then and then only can the instrument be used to real advantage.

When the child first learns to walk, it is a very conscious procedure with him. It is far from a habit. He must direct his whole attention to the accomplishment of that single feat. But as years pass by, walking becomes such a habit that it is almost entirely subconscious with those in good health. And that this automatic walking requires less energy than if every step were felt is shown by the fact that if we walk several blocks, or half a mile, definitely willing each step, we are wearied.

Custom becomes particularly manifest in *personal* habits—manner of dress, tone and accent of voice, etc. As the poet says, "Habit oft betrays the man." The manipulation of the perambulating machinery is graceful with one and awkward with another largely because of his habits developed in early life. The true accent of a foreign tongue is seldom acquired after the age of twenty because the sounds of one's mother tongue have become habitualized and anything else sounds strange and hence measurably undesirable. Habits of dress are seldom changed after one is twenty for the mental indolence, termed prejudice, resists the suggestions made by the more careful attire of others. If one be slovenly in youth in respect to dress and manner he is almost sure to be slovenly in age because *habit begets a fondness for the deed performed*.

The Scriptures tell us: "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart therefrom." He will not wish to depart therefrom, because that way has become his preference. In this connection let me read an extract from a secular magazine just on this point. The late Professor William James said: "The great thing, then, in all education, is to make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy. It is to fund and capitalize our acquisitions, and live at ease upon the interest of the fund. For this we

must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can, and guard against the growing into ways that are likely to be disadvantageous to us as we should guard against the plague. The more of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their own proper work. There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work, are subjects of express volitional deliberation. Full half the time of such a man goes to the deciding, or regretting, of matters which ought to be so ingrained in him as practically not to exist for his consciousness at all.”

The Scriptures place the query: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, which are *accustomed* to do evil.” The Ethiopian’s skin and the leopard’s spots can both be changed by the use of powerful chemicals. So also in His own due time will Jehovah God wash away the vilest stains of even habitual sin if the individual turn therefrom and seek the cleansing fount.

I quote from one of the *Watch Towers*: “My readers, beware of habit! Habit is the most significant word to be found in the English vocabulary. Get an artist to paint it in letters of fire and hang it on the walls of your chamber, where your eyes shall catch its message when you retire and where it may greet you again with the rising sun. Gaze upon it until it is deeply cut into the sanctuary of your inner being, just where the lamp of life may cast its ruddy light over it. Habit is to be your curse or benediction; it is either to conquer you or enable you to conquer. Today it is transforming you into a sycophant or a prince of freedom. Today you are either girding your soul with fetters of sorrow or building a chariot that will conduct you to paradise. Good habits are as potent for emancipation as vile ones are for slavery and anguish. One may resolutely form habits of purity, honesty, fidelity, till he breathes the air of divinity as his native air—as he eventually becomes expert and master of melody, by years of inexorable drill.” [From a “noted writer” quoted on Reprint page 3270, last paragraph. The following paragraph was from the Pastor’s pen. First paragraph on page 3271.]

“The power of habit is unquestionably a great one, either for good or evil, but let us not forget that the human will, however strong or persistently exercised, can only reach its highest attainment and most favorable results when placed under discipleship to Christ—to be taught of God.”

But one may say: “What has all this to do with us as New Creatures?” The answer is that it is of vital importance to the new man. *First*, in that it can be applied to the performance of our daily duties, which are to be done *as unto the Lord*. And *second*, we can apply them to our habits of thought, which are of prime importance in our preparation or lack of preparation for our heavenly home.

At the beginning of our Christian course we find ourselves in possession of a certain stock of habits, the majority of which are probably bad or partly so. Some of them may appear well before the world but make a very poor showing in the light of the glorious goodness of God as it shines in the face of Jesus Christ. It is our duty as stewards of our influence and general powers to see to it that the Lord's grace is sought to help us see our objectionable customs of mind and body and overcome that evil with good.

Our usefulness, our influence, our talents in general may thus be improved and enlarged. If we find ourselves in possession of a natural tendency to *doubt*, we can and must develop faith. And not only such faith as is *forced* upon the presentation of the last bit of evidence, but faith which triumphs over despair and which "can firmly trust Him, come what may." Do we suppose that the perfect beings of Heaven have habits of doubt; must they sit and wonder every day whether God is as good as His Word? The faith which gains the victory is such as can ask the Father to give us more of His holy Spirit and more of His heavenly wisdom and to prepare us for that place which He sees to be best and which can *rest* in the confidence that He will "complete the good work which He has begun in us." The poet has depicted a triumph faith in the following words:

"Unanswered yet? Faith *cannot* be unanswered!
Her feet are firmly planted on the rock.
Amid the wildest storms she stands undaunted;
Nor quails before the loudest thunder shock.
She knows Omnipotence hath heard her prayer,
And cries, 'It shall be done, some time, somewhere.'"

If we have a natural habit of *disobedience*, we need to develop *obedience*. If we find that we have a disposition to continuously rebel at things previously proven to be of Divine Providence, or beneficial to us, we must force ourselves into obedience until it becomes easier and easier for us, not on that one point alone but also in a general way. Even if we should perchance allow some of our proper rights to be tampered with or to be taken from us in our practice on obedience, the practice thus gained will be of far more value to us than any little thing which might be lost.

If we have *Discouragement* by habit we need to develop *Perseverance*. Discouragement is one of the most potent weapons of the great Adversary. If the Lord's people can be kept habitually discouraged they can be kept from the goal.

If we find *coldness* or *hate* in ourselves, we must develop *warmth*, *love*. It will seem awkward to us at first, just as it was awkward to the Raw Recruit, but if we are persistent in seeking to acquire the Christ-mind on this subject we will soon become more expert, until, instead of having to warm up by special effort on stated occasions, it will be our

habitual cast of mind. Our love will not be constrained or exclusive but genial and inclusive, of all.

If we are unfeeling, *sympathy* must be *forced* to flow in our veins. It will seem awkward and foolish at first if we have been accustomed to looking at everything from the stoical and cynical side. A pen used in black ink and transferred to red will show decided traces of the black at first, but finally it will write a clean, bright red. Though our minds have at one time been shadowed by feelinglessness, they may become warm and vibrant with tenderest sympathy.

Ingratitude?—Gratefulness. The whole world, due largely to ignorance, is ungrateful. The German proverb says: “Undank ist der Welt Lohn.” The anointing of our eyes with the eye-salve of Truth reveals to us our true condition and we become verily “lost in wonder, love and praise,” exclaiming: “I’m a miracle of grace.” Ingratitude chills the very marrow of the bones. Gratefulness adds warmth and pleasure to life on any plane. Do the angels sulk and pout? Do they whine because they are not archangels? So “be ye thankful.”

Are we *stiff* and *repulsive*? We need *cheerfulness* of face, of tone and accent of voice. Some are outwardly pleasant and affable who have merely learned the outward form. On the other hand some have a real grace of heart but whose outward bearing belies the real sentiment. Some have developed a gruff or harsh voice before their contact with the Lord and do not realize how that employment of the same voice now robs them of part of their most valuable talent—their personal influence.

If we are *selfish* or niggardly we must force ourselves to be *generous* until it has become a habit. We should be generous not only with such means as are at our disposal but also with our time and powers; with a word in season. Generosity will perhaps cut to the quick at first but when we remember our Heavenly Father’s great love wherewith He loved us and in the fathomless billows of which we have been submerged, when we did not deserve a drop of it, we cannot afford to be stingy. Solomon tells us: “There is that which scattereth and yet increaseth and there is that which withholdeth more than is meet, and tendeth to poverty.” Epicticus says: “Only those things which thou shalt have given away will abide with thee.”

Are we by nature dis- or mal-content? We must “learn in whatsoever state we be, therewith to be content.”

If we are *cruel* by unduly using our superior knowledge or experience or position to the pain and embarrassment of others, we need the tender balm of *mercy*. Mercy forced seems out of place but when it becomes a habit, “the quality of mercy is not strained; it droppeth as the gentle dew from Heaven.”

If *Dilatoriness* besets our pathway we need *promptness*. “Do with thy might what thy hand findeth to do.” Habitually putting known duties off not only loses to us many opportunities of service, but sears the conscience also.

We need *Frankness, genuineness*, if we find our actions are sometimes hypocritical. We may have to first convince ourselves that our conduct is real and true.

Wastefulness on the one hand must be displaced by *frugality* on the other, especially in regard to personal matters.

However *giddy* we may be by nature, the rich indwelling of the Holy Spirit will surely give us a proper *sobriety*. 1 Tim. 2:9; Eph. 5:4.

If we are a slave to *Carelessness*, we need to develop *Caution*. The hit-or-miss method of doing things may appeal to us most strongly after the flesh, but if it is employed in the Christian way it will mean invariably to miss the position to which we have been called. With our best judgments and efforts our works are still slight, hence the need for as great caution as possible in our intentions. Caution may be foreign to us at first, in respect to our responsibilities and personal influence, but it can be developed more and more.

If we are *impudent*, from lack of training or wrong training or the subsequent influences of our day, we need more of the “unction from the Holy One” with its consequent *suavity* and *unobtrusiveness*. Impudence is a mark of the time. Everything is hooted, caricatured and cartooned. Nothing is respected—not even one’s self. To “speak evil of dignities” is the order of the day. Because of this outside influence, the Lord’s people should be all the more careful and unobtrusive.

Impatient? We need *Patience*. It will come very consciously at first but under the lash of unremitting effort it will become the habit that it must. For do the angels of Heaven exercise a conscious patience as the centuries sweep by?

If we are naturally *Inaccurate*, *Precision* should have its due season of drill and rehearsal, until our very method starting a new duty will be colored by that poise of mind. Inaccuracy lies at the root of much of the industrial difficulty now nascent. It makes inferior work and cuts down the average of production along all lines.

If we are habitually *slow*, we need more *speed*. But as we have observed, speed is only attainable through the mastery of proper habits. It was Hartmann who said that no action can be done well, which is not done unconsciously.

If we are habitually in a *nervous hurry* and observe ourselves getting into a nervous fret

soon after starting to work, *Deliberation* is the thing to be cultivated. We can remember how that God is not in a hurry but has taken centuries for matters which we might have assigned to days.

Excess?—Temperance. If we are beset by *sensuality* in its coarser or finer forms, the Apostle's admonition is to "set our affections on things above." They will not go there like a balloon. They must be hoisted with the most painstaking care and by force of the will, with much prayer. They will come down again and must be forced again to heavenly things, until finally we become by *habit* spiritually *minded* and are "meet for the inheritance of the saints in light." In closing, allow me to quote the poem "Heroism."

"It takes great strength to train
To modern service your ancestral brain;
To lift the weight of the unnumbered years
Of dead men's habits, methods and ideas;
To hold that back with one hand, and support
With the other the weak steps of new resolve!
It takes great strength to bring your life up square
With your accepted thought, and hold it there,
Resisting the inertia that drags back
From new attempts to the old habits' track.
It is so easy to drift back—to sink—
So hard to live abreast of what you think!

"It takes great strength to live where you belong,
When other people think that you are wrong;
People you love, and who love you, and whose
Approval is a pleasure you would choose.
To bear this pressure and succeed at length
In living your belief—well, it takes strength—
Courage, too. But what does courage mean
Save strength to help you face a pain foreseen;
Courage to undertake this life-long strain.
Of setting yourself against your grandsire's brain;
Dangerous risk of walking alone and free,
Out of the easy paths that used to be:
And the fierce pain of hurting those we love
When love meets truth, and truth must ride above!

"But the best courage man has ever shown
Is daring to cut loose, and think alone.
Dark are the unlit chambers of clear space,

Where light shines back from no reflecting face.
Our sun's wide glare, our Heaven's shining blue,
We owe to fog and dust they fumble through;
And our rich wisdom that we treasure so,
Shines from a thousand things that we don't know.
But *to think new*—it takes courage grim
As led Columbus o'er the world's rim.
To think—it costs some courage—and to go—
Try it—it taxes every power you know.

“It takes great love to stir a human heart
To live beyond the others, and apart;
A love that is not shallow, is not small;
Is not for one or two, but for them all.
Love that can wound love for its higher need;
Love that can leave love, though the heart may bleed;
Love that can lose love, family and friend,
Yet steadfastly live, loving to the end.
A love that asks no answer, that can live,
Moved by one burning, deathless force—to *give!*
Love, strength and courage; courage, strength and love—
The heroes of all time are built thereof.”

“TURN CHILD INTO CROOK? IT'S EASY!”

Chesterfield, England (A.P.)—The Archdeacon of Chesterfield has given his Church of England parishioners a handy guide on “How to Turn Your Child Into a Crook!” Drawing a bead on indulgent parents, the Venerable Talbot Dilworth-Harrison listed these 12 rules in his parish magazine.

1. Begin in infancy to give the child everything he wants. In this way he will grow up to believe that the world owes him a living.
2. When he picks up bad words, laugh at him. It will encourage him to pick up ones that will blow the top of your head off.
3. Never give him any spiritual training. Wait until he is 21, and then let him decide for himself.
4. Avoid the use of the word “wrong”. It may develop a guilt complex. This will condition him to believe later when he is arrested for stealing a car that society is against him and he is being persecuted.

5. Pick up everything he leaves lying around—books, shoes and clothes. Do everything for him so he will be experienced in throwing the responsibility onto others.
 6. Let him read any printed matter he can get his hands on. Be careful the silverware and drinking glasses are sterilized, but let his mind feed on garbage.
 7. Quarrel frequently in the presence of the children. Then they won't be shocked when the home is broken up.
 8. Give the child all the spending money he wants. Never let him earn his own. Why should he have things as tough as you had them?
 9. Satisfy his every craving for food, drink and comfort. See that every desire is gratified. Denial may lead to harmful frustration.
 10. Take his part against the neighbors, teachers and policemen—they are all prejudiced against your child.
 11. When he gets into real trouble, apologize for yourself by saying, "I never could do anything with him."
 12. Prepare for a life of grief—you will have it!
- (Sent to us by Brother August Swanson years ago.)

Give a child the habit of sacredly regarding the truth—of carefully respecting the property of others—of scrupulously abstaining from all acts of improvidence which can involve him in distress, and he will just as likely think of rushing into the element in which he cannot breathe, as of lying or cheating or stealing.—*Lord Brougham*.

A large part of Christian virtue consists in right habits.—*Paley*

Acts of virtue ripen into habits; and the goodly and permanent result is the formation or establishment of a virtuous character.—*Chalmers*.

The law of the harvest is to reap more than you sow. Sow an act, and you reap a habit; sow a habit, and you reap a character; sow a character, and you reap a destiny.—*G. D. Boardman*.