

If you practise doing something for long enough, it becomes part of you. You come to the point where you can do it quite comfortably without having to give it very much thought. You may even find yourself doing it automatically in certain situations. When that happens you have established a habit.

## Habits

If it were not for the ability to form habits life would be very difficult. It is a God given ability that enables us to perform many complex procedures with minimal effort. A good example of this at work in every day life is seen when you drive your car. Remember the first time you sat at the wheel? You had to think very hard about everything you were doing, and even then you managed to get most of it wrong, but now, because you have practised, you can drive very skilfully even when much of your attention is given to other things. Try to think of the individual actions you perform each time you start up the engine and you will probably find that you have to think hard to be able to recall them. That is because you do it automatically. It has become “second nature” to you.



*Can you think of some examples of good habits that make life easier?*

We also form mental habits. If we train our minds to follow certain sequences of thought, those ways of thinking become “second nature”: our minds slip into them without any effort at all. This too is a good thing, for if it did not happen concentration would be impossible and we would be continually plagued by wandering, unruly thoughts.



*Can you think of some other habits of thought that can be helpful?*

It is not just isolated skills or thought sequences which become habits. Whole lifestyles can become habitual too. One of the difficulties of coming through those times of grief, which we considered in the last chapter, is that many well-established habits become inappropriate after a bereavement and have to be replaced, and that is not easy — remember the effort it took to learn to drive!

Times of grief, however, are not the only times when habits cause problems. Being sinful as we are, we have an immense capacity to use the abilities God has given for our good in ways that are not

good: we form sinful habits, and if you want to help others within the body of Christ to grow in holiness you must take this into account.

Here are some problems in which sinful habit can play a major part. The list is deliberately incomplete to encourage you to give the matter some thought and produce your own, longer list. Remember, as you think about these problems, that I have said that **habit can play a major part** in them, not that habit is always the whole problem. In each case there may be other elements to take into account: things which we have considered already, or will look at in the chapters still to come.

- Irritability.
- Bad temper.
- Poor time keeping.
- Laziness.
- Alcohol abuse.
- Homosexuality.
- Obsessional thinking.
- Anorexia.
- Depression.



*In what ways can an understanding of habit be relevant to the way we bring up our children?*

### Its Hard To Break A Habit

To break a habit is not easy. It took practice, time and perseverance to establish it, and it will not go without effort. Here are some principles which will help.

- Identify the habit.
- Pray for help.
- Maintain spiritual strength.
- Do not grieve the Spirit.
- Replace bad habits with good habits.
- Give that habit no opportunity.
- Avoid even the temptation.
- Remember that God is gracious.

Let me explain these further.

- 1. Identify the habit.** Because habits are performed unconsciously and automatically, we are often blissfully unaware of their existence. To clearly identify a sinful habit is to go a long way toward overcoming it, and this is the first point at which you can help your brothers and sisters in the Lord. Graciously point out those sinful habits which are a hindrance to their witness or spiritual growth (Colossians 3:16, Galatians 6:1). Be careful as you do so to show clearly from God's Word that this habit *must* be broken because it is contrary to His command, and encourage confession to the Lord.



*What does the Bible teach about your responsibility to point out the sins of others?  
You may find the following passages particularly helpful:*

- Proverbs 24:24–25
- Matthew 18:15–17
- Galatians 6:1
- Colossians 3:16



Why do you think God attaches such importance to this duty?

- 2. Pray for help.** The breaking of old sinful habits and the formation of new ones which are pleasing to God is a spiritual work: it is the work of sanctification. Its success or failure depends upon the work of the Holy Spirit, so, at the very least dependence upon Him must be acknowledged in fervent prayer.
- 3. Maintain spiritual strength.** If the battle against sinful habits is a spiritual battle it must be fought from a position of spiritual strength. To help others to be successful in it, encourage and help them to feed regularly upon the Word of God, both in private reading and through its public ministry. You must also help them to see the importance of fellowship with other believers who will encourage and strengthen them, and require them to be accountable for their walk with the Lord. Do not allow them to fall into the danger of withdrawing from fellowship when they are struggling with sin: that is when they need it most.



By what standard should a person make an assessment of his or her spiritual condition?

- 4. Do not grieve the Spirit.** Many fail in their attempts to break stubborn habits because they focus all their attention on one area of behaviour, whilst they continue to sin in many other ways without concern. Remember again that this is a spiritual battle. It cannot be fought alone, and we cannot expect the Holy Spirit to give victory in one aspect of life when we wilfully exclude Him from others.
- 5. Replace bad habits with good habits.** It is a clear principle of Scripture that right behaviour must replace wrong behaviour. Look, for example, at Ephesians 4:22–32. It is not enough for a liar to stop telling lies; he must learn to speak the truth (v 25). The habitual thief must labour and

work with his hands to give to those who are in need (v 28). Those who use corrupt language must learn to speak only words which build others up (v 29). Those who are bitter must be kind (vs. 31–32).

What is the righteous alternative to the habit which has to be broken? In putting off our old ways we must always ask this question, and then practise those new, righteous behaviours until they become as automatic as the old ways once were. It is only when that has been achieved that the sinful habit is fully overcome. If you do not help people to come to that point, they are sure to slip back. In practice this means that you may have to sit down with someone and search the Scriptures to find out how God wants us to act, or think, in specific situations.

- 6. Give that habit no opportunity.** Every time a habit is practised it becomes stronger. If it is to be overcome it must be cut out altogether. To try to merely cut down on the practice of it will only prolong the fight.
- 7. Avoid even the temptation.** It is the nature of a habit that it becomes linked in our thoughts with the situations in which we have practised it, so that whenever we come into those situations again the habit is triggered automatically. It can be very hard to resist once that has happened. That is why, for example, an alcoholic must not go into places where alcohol is served. Once he enters the atmosphere of the place or smells the alcohol he will begin to feel a pull toward his old behaviour. If you are helping others to overcome stubborn habits you must help them not only to avoid the particular thought or behaviour to be changed but also, as far as possible, to avoid everything that is linked with it. Breaking habits can be a costly activity (Matthew 5:29–30).

Spend some time trying to identify the thoughts and circumstances associated with the particular habit you are dealing with. Often you will find that there is a chain of thoughts or events coming before the action which causes concern and you will find that the earlier this chain can be broken, the easier it will be to resist temptation.

- 8. Remember that God is gracious.** With even our best efforts there are times when we fail in our attempts to overcome sin, but if we persevere, faithfully applying the principles of God's Word, we will be successful. There is no sin that cannot be overcome. Although God tells us that we will not be perfectly free from sin until we reach Heaven, with regard to the overcoming of individual sins we are given grounds for great optimism (Romans 6:6, 14 & 16, 1 Peter 4:1–2).

Nevertheless there are times, perhaps many times, when we fail. Those are the times when we need to be reminded that our God is gracious. Often in our failure guilt prompts us to turn away from the Lord. Although we say that we believe salvation is by grace alone, our actions betray the thought that somehow we have to earn our way back to Him. It seems too easy to turn to the Lord in repentance and ask His forgiveness if we have not suffered a little first, or proven our sincerity by trying again. That is wrong thinking!

The time when we sin is the time when we are most vulnerable to further temptation and we must quickly return to the God of grace, who is seated upon a throne of grace, to find grace and mercy to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:15–16).

### Restore The Offender

I hope, as you have thought about these things, that you have come to see something of the extent of God's command to you to restore the offender (Galatians 6:1). It involves much more than just pointing out offences. It involves coming alongside another and patiently and gently working with him until new, righteous, responses become second nature. May God grant us to have the mind of the Apostle Paul who spoke of the brethren in the churches of Galatia in such devoted terms.

“My little children, for whom I labour in birth again until Christ is formed in you...”

Galatians 4:19



Do you know someone who struggles with a particular sin? If you do, what could you do to demonstrate your love, or to be of practical help to that person in his battle?