

# Habits

Breaking Bad Habits and Building Godly Ones



by Pastor Marvin R. Knight

*"Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?  
Then you also can do good who are accustomed to doing evil."  
Jeremiah 13:23*

## Introduction

The people of Jerusalem were occasionally accustomed to seeing a dark-skinned Ethiopian who, perhaps, was a Negro from South Africa or a dark Arab from Southern Egypt. Every now and then leopards also came up from the thickets of the Jordan or from the hills of the southern wilderness near the Dead Sea. The dark hue of the Ethiopian and the black spots of the leopard became fitting emblems of what Jeremiah saw as the sinful condition and moral helplessness of the people.

This word came from Jeremiah as a last appeal to a people on the brink of judgment. Jeremiah's task was not an easy one because he had to hammer home the death nail for his nation. The name Jeremiah means, "whom Jehovah appoints," and apart from this appointment by God, certainly the prophet could not have ministered faithfully. The people had turned away from God for so long that the sin in which they lived appeared to be ingrained in them. One of the key words that appears repeatedly is the word backslide *2:19, 3:6, 8, 11-12, 14, 22, 49:4*). Eleven times the prophet uses the word "repent," but the nation did not repent. Thus, he is called the weeping prophet (*9:1, 13:17, 14:17, 15:17-18*). Jeremiah wrote Lamentations, actually, to commemorate the death of the Holy City. He knew that it was impossible for them to change their direction by their own effort. His aim was to point out their utter bankruptcy in order that they may cry out for God's mercy. Here is a text on the extent, the acquisition, the power, and the remedy of ingrained habits.

The metaphors employed by the prophet are intended to illustrate the difficulty of getting rid of that which has become a natural part of one's life. The doctrine is that underneath certain habits may fall into, which appear to be external, the origin and root are really in the depravity of the heart. Therefore, any external reform will fail to bring about permanent change. Whether it is like the skin that wraps itself around a man's entire body, or the freckled spots that appear here and there on the hide of a leopard, once habits are formed, they are unchangeable. A man can no more change his character once formed than a black man can change the color of his skin or a leopard his spots.

## The Extent of Habits

The black man's skin and the leopard's spots are natural. Although sin is originally unnatural to man's design, it is so engrafted into the very life of men that it has become a part of his nature. Sin is no mere defilement that we can wash off like a coffee stain. It is ingrained. It is in the blood, in the life, and in the nature (*Job 5:7; Rom.5:12*). The spots on the leopard are connected to the surroundings in which it operates. It acquired the spots from its parents, and cannot alter or remove them by

any effort. They are a part of its very nature, and the pattern of its skin lasts throughout the whole life of the animal. Such is true of sin and the formulation of habits. Every sinner knows how hard it is to change habits. When those habits are sinful, the stains of the sin seem to become dyed in the flesh so that it becomes a part of the very image of the person.

**Reflection and discussion:** *Think of someone whose sinful habits have become a part of his very persona.*

### **What did Jeremiah mean to convey with these images?**

These two images of the Negro with ebony skin and the leopard with satin spots convey the idea that we are coloring our very being by the tone of our thoughts and actions. What we do today, we will be tomorrow. We are often the product of our past deeds. As sinners, we sin because of what we are -- sinners. Instead of becoming wiser about sin, the mystery of sin causes us to become more blinded to it and hardened in it. Sinning more doesn't make you more of a sinner, it just further imprisons one's soul in the dictates of the flesh. In other words, if you follow selfish impulses, you will become a creature of selfishness. If you indulge in impurity, you will become an unclean person. Yet the opposite is true as well ( *Rev.22:11*). Every person, by his deeds, is building up a habitation or house where his own soul will dwell. We are constructing a life, if you will. The question is: when the building is finished, what kind of house will it be? A holy temple or a shrine of corruption? A prison of wickedness or a palace for the King?

The two chief lessons we can gain at the beginning of this study are:

1. *True self-reformation is impossible without divine aid.*
2. *We must seek real spiritual reformation from God Himself.*

### **Think about it:**

*\* Is there a habit that you have sought to break, but effort upon effort has failed?*

Habits are easy to acquire and hard to get rid of. We can get so used to our sin that we never feel how sinful it is. We are so much like our surroundings that we have no sense of contrast or shame. We can become so content with ourselves that we make no effort to become better. Even when our conscience is slapped to open its eyes to its sad condition, the effort to deal with it is so painful that often we simply choose to remain as we are. From this text on habits, let us consider three points:

1. **The Acquisition of Habits:** how are they acquired?
2. **The Power of Habits:** what strength do they contain?
3. **The Change of Habits:** is there any hope for change? What is the remedy?

### **The Acquisition of Habits**

#### **A. We conceive habits in the mind, but form them by repetition.**

The word "habit" is defined as an involuntary pattern of behavior acquired by frequent repetition.<sup>1</sup> It also is connected to the world of costumes. Its Latin root conveys the idea of a garment that you can throw off when you please, but it also is a way of living that you may be so bound up in that you cannot change it. This two-fold idea seems to convey the truth that the sin which you could at first easily throw off like a dirty shirt may, by frequent indulgence, take such a firm hold of you that it becomes a very part of your life -- much like skin on a black man or the spots on a leopard. By nature, we have a tendency to repeat what we see and what we do. Like the wheel that turns or the clock that ticks, we as humans possess a tendency to act with repetition. It is natural and easy to us. This is how we form habits. They become "second nature." Habits affect everything we do. They are not compartmental in nature; rather, they are all-encompassing. We conceive habits in the mind, but form them by repetition.

#### **B. Habits are the elements of character.**

A single act does not make character. However, deeds, which we do over and over again, ripen into character and comprise the raw materials of one's integrity. The first puff on a cigarette will cause a young boy to choke and become a little dizzy, but if he continues, the lungs adapt and an addict is created. The same is true with deeds that become habits. The repetition of acts forms habits and the habits of a man become the scaffolding of his character.

**Reflection:** *What habits have you acquired? What do you do daily by nature? Are these habits furthering the gospel? Are they honoring to God? Do they make you more useful for the kingdom, or less?*

## **The Power of Habits**

When someone repeated to Wellington the maxim that "Habit is second nature," his reply was, "Second nature! It is ten times nature." <sup>2</sup>

In other words, the power of habit is ten times stronger than normal. However, let us keep in mind the balance. When people speak of habits, they are usually referring to bad habits like smoking habits, cursing habits, and drinking habits. However, just as bad habits make the raw materials of one's character, good habits -- godly habits -- can become the virtues of one's practical holiness. We can describe sanctification as holy habits in operation. J.I. Packer put it this way, "Holiness by habit forming is not self-sanctification by self effort, but is simply a matter of understanding the Spirit's method and then keeping in step with Him." <sup>3</sup>

We can develop gospel instincts for self-denial, prayer habits, Bible reading habits, purity habits, truth habits, and habits of faith and love.

### **Now just how strong are habits?**

**1. Habits gain power by every repetition of an act.** Just as grace is strengthened when acted upon, habits are strengthened when repeated. The law of addition or multiplication is connected with habits. One habit plus another habit does not equal two habits, but it opens the door and feeds a hundred more just like it. Habits increase and multiply after their kind. If you have a good habit, it will attract another good habit. If you have a bad habit, it will attract another bad habit. The Apostle Paul said, "...the love of money is a root [source] of all sorts of evil..." (1 Tim.6:10). Covetousness or greed is the spring from which all sorts of other kinds of evil come. The same is true of bad habits. In Galatians 6:8, the Apostle says, "For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life." Again, habits give birth to babes after their own kind. When we see a man facing a tragic consequence, most of the time it is not the result of one bad act, but of many little acts which made up one terrible act with tragic consequences.

Why do habits gain power by repetition? Scientists tell us that when a stone is dropped from a high point it falls so many feet -- sixteen feet during the first second. The next second it does not fall the same number of feet, but has acquired increased speed, and falls four times the distance it did during the previous second, and each succeeding second the speed is greater and swifter. The earth has a strong gravitating power over it, draws it more quickly down, and it acquires momentum and gathers increasing rapidity as it falls<sup>4</sup> Such is the case with sin. It moves slowly at the start; but when it has begun, it increases in force and speed with tremendous might.

### **2. The power of habits steadily grows until it dominates the will.**

The power of exercising the will promptly, in obedience to the dictates of conscience or truth, is essential in spiritual and character development (Ps.119:4). In other words, you will only grow in proportion to your obedience. However, when we form habits, they become such a part of the fabric of our lives that they seem impossible to leave. Even if the consequences are deadly, the habit can become the most important factor in a man's life. Even after the pleasure of the habit are long gone, the vise-grip of a habit's power on the will still remains.

In South Africa, there is a curious plant known as a hook-thorn or grapple-plant, said to bear some of the resemblance to the cuttlefish. The large flowers are of a lovely purple hue and spread themselves over the ground or hang in masses from the trees and shrubs. The long branches have sharp, barbed thorns, set in pairs throughout their length. When the petals fall off and the seed vessels are developed and fully ripe, the two sides separate widely from each other and form an array of sharp-curved hooks.

In one of the Kaffir wars with England, the English soldiers suffered greatly from this plant. If one hooked thorn caught a coat sleeve, the first movement at escape would bend the long slender branches and hook after hook would fix its point into the clothing. Struggling only multiplied the number of thorned enemies, and there was no way of escape except to stand still, cut off the clinging thorns, and remove them one by one. Many English soldiers were killed by the spears of a Kaffir soldier while trying to free themselves. This is a vivid illustration of the dangerous power of an evil habit, which, through long indulgence, hooks into a man's very heart and holds him against his reason even to the point of death! <sup>5</sup>

The power of habits is far greater than words can rightly convey. So, let me seek to describe some of the actions and reasonings I have seen and heard from those struggling with enslaving habits.

The man enslaved to a sinful habit:

- \* Is continually *making resolutions*, but because his will is as weak as a spider's web, they are easily broken by the slightest temptation.
- \* Has failed so often that his will now *refuses* to rise to the endeavor of getting free.
- \* Attends church and Bible study, and even bows his head in prayer, but these means of grace seem to be of *no use at all in holding him back from sin*.
- \* Secretly fears exposure and even the final day of judgment, but he's at wits end concerning *how* to escape.
- \* Is haunted by the feeling that, *if they really knew me as I am*, they would reject me as a rank unbeliever, rather than caring more about what God thinks.
- \* Is terrified by the thought of the *shame and disgrace this habit would bring upon his spouse, children, and friends*, but feels powerless to do anything about it.
- \* *Becomes more reckless* as Satan continues to suggest to him that he cannot regain what was lost and had better enjoy all he can because it soon will end.
- \* *Becomes more perverted in thinking and reasoning*, as thoughts of logic and truth seem to disconnect, while doubts arise and dominate his thinking more than the truth he hears.

#### **Recap:**

- \* *We conceive habits in the mind, but form them by repetition and then they become elements of our character.*
- \* *Our repetition of each act strengthens the power of our habits and they steadily grow until they dominate our will.*

#### **The Remedy of Habits**

As Jeremiah points out the hopelessness of changing habits, are we to remain in defeat? Can we do anything if years of habits have bent our nature into a shape that is deformed and ungodly? Is there no hope for the Ethiopian or leopard? Is there any hope for you and me?

Thank God there is! However, the change can only begin at a spiritual point -- *the point of repentance!* Let us remember that the call to repentance by God is not disingenuous just because man is enslaved. It is within the reach of every sinner (*Acts 17:30*), yet it is one of supernatural grace.

We must admit that it is next to impossible for any man who has arrived at the formulation of an ingrained habit to turn around. However, a true sorrow for sin may be received in answer to prayer, the study of Scripture (*Rom.10:17; Heb.11:6*), and the contemplation of Christ and His cross (*1 Cor.1:18*). This is not the work of man, but the work of the Holy Spirit.

Man can do a lot with himself, but only God can "*create*" in him a "*clean heart*" (*Ps.51*) and make him a "*new creature*" (*2 Cor.5:17*). That which is impossible with men is possible with God. We cannot change the black man's skin or the leopard's spots, but God can.

**Jeremiah 32:17** -- "*Ah Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You.*"

When once God links us to Christ, that union breaks the terrible chain that bound us in the past (*Rom.6:17-22*). We are animated by a new motive -- "*...the love of Christ controls us...*" (*2 Cor.5:14*). We are set in a new world which is yet old (*2 Cor.5:17*), and given a new power to overcome (*1 John 4:1-3, 5:1-3*).

#### **Practical Counsel to Those Trapped in Spirit-strangling Habits**

1. Remember that Satan will endeavor to persuade you that there is no hope. Don't believe him. (*John 8:44*)

2. If you are distressed and convicted about your sin, take it as a gesture of grace that God has not given up on you. (*Rom.1:21ff*) (*Rom.1:21ff*)
3. Remember that God has delivered many others who were at the same place or lower than you. (*1 Pet.5:9-10*)
4. Rouse yourself to use all the means of grace and help that God has given to you. Leave none unapplied. (*Jer.15:16, 17:13-15*)
5. Set special seasons of prayer. (*Mark 9:29*)
6. Avoid occasions to sin by putting every hindrance you can in the way of your sin, like avoiding isolation, altering your schedule, and reading the Scriptures and books that deepen your sense of sin and your fear of God. (*Rom.13:14*)
7. Seek the counsel of your pastors and elders. (*Prov.24:6; Heb.13:7*)
8. Fill up your time and your hand with useful, absorbing spiritual work. (*1 Cor.15:58*)
9. Don't despise small victories; they lead to greater ones. (*Zech.4:10*)
10. Pray without ceasing and remember that God is able and has promised to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Christ. (*1 Thess.5:18; Heb.7:25*)

**Resources:**

- 1 Webster's II, *New Riverside Dictionary*
- 2 J.I. Packer, *Keeping in Step with the Spirit*, p.110
- 3 James Hasting, *Great Texts of the Bible*
- 4 James Hasting, *Great Texts of the Bible*
- 5 L.A. Banks, *The Sinner and His Friends*, p.168

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