

Good Habits

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Do you have any bad habits?

We commonly speak of habits as being either good or bad, and by habits we sometimes mean practices which, through constant repetition, are done without a conscious act of the will. Habits may also refer to the manner in which we go about the routine matters of our life.

There is a distinct difference between habit and what we call instinct. A baby is normally born with certain inherent qualities by which, without being taught, it cries and coos, and sucks; this we call instinct. God has so created a child that without receiving instruction in these things it does them, as we say, instinctively. It is, however, necessary to teach a child to speak, to write, or sing. This teaching may be accomplished first of all by example and demonstration and later by explanation and command and finally by reading and study.

Thus also habits are formed, for if a child repeatedly sees or hears a thing said or done, he will also say and do the same thing, and it becomes a habit.

Thus we see how marvelously God endows the child with latent qualities, which, when labored with, produce the result of its being able to repeat what is explained and to duplicate what is demonstrated to him. Therefore it is so tremendously important, even to the infant and very young child, what it sees and hears.

The educational world in general fully recognizes these facts also, although not ascribing the marvels of it to God, yet using and working with them to try to produce qualities which it terms character, morality and good citizenship. It also attaches tremendous importance to **what** a young child is taught and **how** it is taught. It believes that not only example, but also its environment plays a very important role in the development of a child. Forming good habits early in life produces good character, they say. It is strange that although knowing and recognizing these facts, the world so often fails to follow and live up to its own standards and ideals.

Now what must **we** say who profess to live by and out of the Word of God? We also recognize the fact that a child normally repeats what it sees and hears, and we also think it to be of the utmost importance that the child be made to see and hear, by example and precept, that which is good.

What then is different about our approach, and how do we conceive of habits?

Essentially our approach is diametrically opposed to that which we commonly come into contact with, because the child is usually presented as being naturally good, although undeveloped. This development, if properly nurtured in a suitable environment, under capable leadership and good example, will produce excellent results. We, on the other hand, by the authority of the Word of God, confess that the child (man) is, by nature, depraved—“incapable of doing any good and inclined unto all evil”—**dead!**

This confession necessitates that we view the facts in an altogether different light than the world does. They begin with a naturally good child and we begin with an evil one. They commence with a live one; we with one dead by nature.

These opposing views produce also opposing results, for we believe, again by the authority of the Word of God, that given all the suitable environment, all the proper nurture, and all the capable leadership and good example, the end result is still a “dead” child. It is like a dead tree, which, the more one waters and fertilizes, the more rapidly the decay progresses.

Can we in the light of the foregoing in any sense speak of teaching a child good habits or of helping him to form good habits?

Not surely, if by teaching or forming good habits is meant that a child naturally dead and unregenerate can be taught to do things good and pleasing to God, nor can such a child be aided to form habits that might produce this result.

In what sense can we then speak of good and bad habits, and must we teach our children good habits?

It must be borne in mind that God does not look on the outward habit but on the inward motive and that only that can be pleasing to the Holy God which is done out of the motive of love to Him and a desire that His Name alone may by it receive all the praise. Measure all your deeds and words and thoughts by that absolute standard and you will be forced to confess that all **your** works are as filthy rags—"God be merciful to me a sinner."

We must seek a suitable environment, give capable leadership and good example to our children according to God's Word. We must teach them good habits and warn and admonish them to refrain from all bad habits.

We do not mean to confine this as referring only to our young children, for it surely pertains to each one of us. We must cultivate good habits and must continually fight against the bad habits which we so easily form and follow.

You have, no doubt, often heard the remark in sermon and prayer that our coming to church and our coming to God in prayer must not be out of custom or habit. By this is meant a formal, superficial, outward coming to the church building without a spiritual hungering and thirsting to come to God's house to hear His Word speak to us and to feast on His spiritual food and drink, which builds and nourishes our fainting souls and laves our spiritual thirst—or on the other hand a lethargic mumbling of a few words and phrases without a pouring forth of our hearts and a lifting of our souls in praise to God in prayer. This is truly an abomination to God.

God is a God of means and therefore we take our small children upon our knees and teach them the habit of prayer and later take them by the hand and lead them to church, so that they may learn the church-going habit. We send them to catechism and later to societies in order that God, by grace may use these things as means in His hand to bring our children unto Himself. Thus not mere outward form and custom, but habits sanctified by God's grace are pleasing to Him and are surely enjoined upon us and upon our children as means that we may grow thereby.

We learn by doing and form habits by repeatedly doing. Let us then do that which is good in His sight in order that, by doing that which is good and fleeing from evil, we may grow in sanctification **and grace**.

"Little children, keep yourselves from evil."

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