

MODULE 4

CHARACTER & HABIT

The Making of Character

HABITS

A young man went to New York City to study to be an architect. Later he became a contractor and builder. He made a million dollars in a few years. One day, going down the street, he met an old man, ragged, dirty and filthy. He recognized him, however, as an old-time friend who had helped him when he first came to New York City. He stopped him and said, "Hello, John! I am glad to see you. 'Where do you live?'"

The old man told him.

Then the young man asked, "Is your wife living?"

"Yes," said John.

"Well, I'm coming down tomorrow night to see both of you."

The next night he sat in a little hovel of a room and talked with John and his wife. After finding out their condition, he said to the old man. "If you will cut out the booze, stop your gambling, live an honest, upright life, I and take care of your wife as you ought to, I'll give you a chance to make some more money."

John promised that he would do it. Then said the young man, "Come to my office tomorrow, and I will give you something to do."

The next day he appeared at the office and the young man pulled out of a drawer some specifications and a blueprint of a cottage that he wanted to have built on a lot in the suburbs of the city. He said to his old friend, "Now I want you to take these specifications and erect this cottage for me. I want you to pay all the bills. I'm going to put a sufficient amount of money in the bank in your name. You can draw on the money for building the house and take out 10 per cent for your salary. When the house is completed report to me." The old man went to work, but his native meanness got the better of him. He cheated. Wherever he could put in cheaper material and take out the money for the better, he did it. He saved, and stole quite a bit of money in that way.

When the building was finished, he reported that he was ready to turn the house over to him. The young man said, “I’ll be down at your apartment tonight.”

That night he sat and talked with the old couple. Finally he said, “For the sake of the old friendship, and due to the fact that you gave me my first opportunity to make some money when I came to New York, I’m going to make you a present of this house and lot.”

The old man felt so humiliated that he had cheated, he broke down and wept. The young man asked him, “What was the matter?” The old man confessed what he had done, and pleaded to be forgiven and asked that he be given another chance.

The young man said, “John, I’m going to forgive you and give you another chance. I hope you have learned your lesson. And I’m sorry you cheated, for you must live in the house you built.”

This is true for every one of us. We must live in the houses we build. If we build a physical house that’s full of aches and pains because we have cheated, we’ll have to live in it. If we build a mental mud-hut, and grovel around in the dirt and filth of our thinking, we’ll have to live in it. If we build a moral character that is rotten in the foundation, and is going to tumble in on us some day, we’ll have to live in it. You will not live in my house; I will not live in yours. This is a thing to be remembered, and we ought to repeat it until we really learn it—I must live in the house I built.

We are building our lives. Job said, “The waters wear the stones.” We must not underestimate the power of routine. This is what Job says—that water, which is not as strong as a rock, can, by a constant routine of flowing wears a stone smooth and could even dissolve it completely if is given enough time. This is the power of so little a thing as a thought or an action. By themselves they are almost powerless, but by routine, over a given course of time they form habit and habits make up our character. Our character is built of habits.

We build our lives each day with the bricks of habits we have—little and often make much.

Do you need to replace a bad habit with a good one? A Princeton University study claims if you do the same thing every day for 28 consecutive days it will become a habit.

Two of England’s greatest poets—Lord Byron and Percy Shelley—were good friends. So good, that they purchased adjoining cottages on a lake in Switzerland and spent their summer vacations together.

The summer of 1816, the two poets and their wives spent pleasant hours on the Swiss lake or wandering on its shores during the daytime, but seemed to have been a bit bored after

dark. To add excitement to the evening hours, the two couples decided to tell ghost stories. Shelley's wife Mary, just 19 years old, didn't profess literary skill and felt a bit intimidated by the other three, and she couldn't come up with a good ghost story right away. In fact, it took her several weeks to concoct one, but when she did it was a gem. It was so good her husband and the Lord Byron's insisted she expand it and commit it to writing. She did, and we remember the tale today, nearly 200 years later, as Frankenstein.

Frankenstein, to most of us who have seen one or more of the unending series of movies coming out of Hollywood, is the name of the but this is not so. Frankenstein was the name of the scientist who formed the monster; the monster is actually nameless.

The story of Victor Frankenstein and the monster he created is a brilliant exercise in the macabre, a novel of tense and steadily mounting horror. But it is more than shock entertainment; it is a metaphor to frame a poetic truth. The monster is both lovable and hateful, both pitied and feared. He wanted his creator to somehow give him endearing virtues, qualities that would make him lovable and, acceptable. But Victor Frankenstein was so horror stricken with the grotesque monster he had created that he refused. The monster then took revenge by murdering, one by one, the family and friends of Dr Frankenstein.

Dr. Frankenstein was faced with a life he made or created. In a sense we are creating a life. What is in it is up to us. What have we built so far?

John Powell said, "We are creatures of habit. Old cranks have practiced all their lives, just as old saints have likewise practiced all their lives."

Confucius said, "The nature of men is always the same; it is their habits that separate them."

Slide 2

Habits are like cork or lead. They tend to keep you up or hold you down.

Habit, unlike instinct, must be acquired by practice. We are not born with habits as animals and birds are born with instincts. We are given the opportunity of choosing what habits we will form, good or bad.

William James, the well-known American psychologist, wrote a famous and brilliant chapter on habit. Habit, he pointed out, is extremely important and useful. It is the great fly wheel of society which keeps things in regular motion. It is supremely important for people to make habits serve them instead of letting habits master them. Cultivation of good habits puts great resources at one's disposal. Letting bad habits grow puts a ball and chain on one's feet.

Habits are important also for our religious life. To appoint and cultivate regular hours for

prayer, Bible reading, and churchgoing serves to promote our Christian life. Such habits simplify matters. They facilitate and promote devotion.

Our life is made up of habits that we choose.
You tell on yourself by the friends you seek,
By the very manner in which you speak,
By the way you employ your time,
By the use you make of dollars and dimes.
You tell what you are by the way you walk,
By the things of which you delight to talk,
By the manner in which you bear defeat,
By so simple a thing as how you eat.
By books you choose from the well-filled shelf,
By the places you go and what you watch on The video.
In these ways and more you tell on yourself,
So there's really no particle of sense,
In an effort to keep up false pretense.

Slide 3

Life is made up of little things.

Consider what little things mean. Can you remember back a few short years ago, when you were first having lessons in grammar, how the teacher stressed the importance of proper punctuation? Did you not find that a misplaced comma or period could completely change the meaning of a sentence or a paragraph? Consequences vast and far-reaching have followed the use or misuse of the more or less in significant comma. Issues involving millions of dollars have depended upon the presence or absence of this little punctuation mark. Crimes have been committed, large bribes offered and accepted, lengthy lawsuits entered upon, and wordy warfare carried on, all because of a comma. Let's take an example.

When the Customs Tariff of the United States was being printed in 1864, some manufacturers managed to bribe a few officials of the Government Printing Office to alter the position of a comma in one of the numbers under the heading, "Tinned Sheet-Iron." Strange to say, the fraud was not discovered until 1881. Meanwhile the Treasury had lost by this means nearly fifty million dollars.

Again, when a later tariff bill was prepared for the printer, the mistake of a clerk in using a comma instead of a hyphen opened the door for foreign fruits to be admitted into the United States without the payment of duty for a whole year. As a result, two million dollars were lost to this country.

Businessmen and women who use secretarial help extensively in their work know that a new and inexperienced stenographer will make many mistakes in punctuation, not

realizing that the very success or failure of a business may depend on the correctness of some contract or other legal document. Even in a letter correct punctuation is very necessary.

Slide 4

Punctuation is a small thing but so important.

A speaker delivering a devotional message brought out the fact that the position of the little, insignificant accent mark in a word may determine its meaning. He was using mostly Greek words, and they had very little meaning to most; but when he gave a few examples of some English words, those listening became even more interested and fascinated. As soon as one person in the audience had an opportunity, he began to search his dictionary for some of these words. Here are some of those words, along with some from other languages.

Take first the word, “minute” (mĭn'it). It means the sixtieth part of an hour; a brief note or summary in writing of something to be remembered. Then, take the same word with the accent placed differently—“minute” (mĭ-nōt'), which means exceedingly small, unimportant, trifling.

Another example is the word “desert” (dĭ-zŭrt'). It means to depart from, or leave; “desert” (dĕz'rt)—a region without vegetation. Still another, “record” (rĕk'rd), the official copy of a document; known facts about a person or thing. “Record” (rĭ-kôrd'), to write in a book, or make a tape. The speaker, Dr. George Ragland, gave these examples: The Greek word “thea,” if accented on the first syllable, means a sight; if accented on the second syllable, it means a goddess. The Spanish word “papa,” if accented on the first syllable, means potato; if accented on the second syllable, it means father.

In Spanish El Papa is the Pope. La Papa is a potato. A man once preached on La Papa in Roma. Of course he was saying, “The potato in Rome.”

Scores of others might be mentioned. The thought that the position of the accent mark may determine the meaning of the word begs the question: Is not this same thing true of life? It is important how we punctuate life and what we accent in life.

The things to which we give emphasis, the things we accent, the things that dominate our thoughts and our actions will largely determine our destiny and our happiness. Will they not also determine our influence and our usefulness in this world? The ideals that fasten themselves - in the hearts of men determine the things they do.

The wrong attitude of an individual toward society, toward his family and friends, toward his business and his associates, toward right and wrong, toward honesty and dishonesty,

toward truth and falsehood, can only result in unhappiness. Whereas the right attitude and the right emphasis on these and other things can completely change a life, a home, a city, or a nation.

Life must have correct punctuation and correct accent. Little things can add up to big things.

If we are to live life at its best, we need to enroll in the University of Life. As in every institution of learning, there are some required courses and some courses. So in this world university we learn from Jesus that there are some things in which we have no choice, while in others we are free agents.

Slide 5

Look briefly at the required courses in this university of life.

The first one is life itself. We did not choose to be born; we were not consulted about living at all; but now that we are here, there isn't anything we can do to stop living. We have to live. It is required. There is no escaping. Someone may say, "I can destroy myself, or I can take my own life." The answer, of course, is that you can destroy your body and the temple in which you live. You can wreck it, and it will go back "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, and dust to dust," but you will keep on living. Life doesn't end at death. Jesus proved it in his resurrection. His teachings are full of this truth. This is one of the things that Jesus wanted us to "learn of me." Live you must; it's a required course.

The second among these required courses **is death.** There will come a time when each of us will walk down the "valley of the shadow." One day our long-distance call will come, and we will "shuffle off this mortal coil." We may as well smile about it as cry. We cannot change it. We can't bypass death. It, too, is a required course.

But we turn quickly and joyfully to the electives in this university of life. There are many of them, but look closely at three.

Why this passion for shaking people out of ruts? Most of the people who are in ruts are much nicer, and much happier, than the people who are not. Ruts are the wise old wrinkles that civilization has traced on the earth's ancient face.

But it is what rut you're in that is important. There was a sign that was on the beginning of a well rutted dirt road, and it said, "Choose well your rut—you're going to be in it a long time." That is good advice for life.

Your life, and mine, my friends, depend for their driving power upon our instincts, our habits and our choices. Instincts and choices are the raw material of habit, and in a real sense habits are the material from which character is distilled or compiled. Character, as John Stuart Mill said, is a perfectly fashioned will, that is, a will which by effort has

become habituated to the noblest choices, so that almost unthinkingly, or quite unthinkingly, it turns towards righteousness, goodness and loving-kindness.

Now I suppose even the most intelligent among us here scarcely realize how much habit makes up our life. In the late Professor William James' little book, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*—which is worth many volumes much more pretentious—he says that probably ninety-nine hundredths, or hundred and ninety-nine thousandths, or 99.9% of our life is made up of habits. At one time you and I had to erect ourselves to stand upright; we were thinking every moment of balancing ourselves; that was the tremendous effort of our childhood. Now we stand upright as a matter of course. Again every step we took was an effort of will; that was the exhausting toil of early childhood. Now we walk without thinking about it.

We can sometimes see these physical habits in the process of formation. Things like holding a door open for a lady. It becomes a habit by the constant doing of it. Saying thank you is another thing we make a habit by doing it.

Habit becomes so truly “second nature,” or, as the Duke of Wellington said, “ten times nature,” that often we are suddenly compelled to do that which our wills forbid. The instance that a well-known physiologist gave is worth mentioning. A soldier who had retired from the army was serving as a butler. On one occasion an old colonel who knew him happened to be dining at his master's house. Just as the butler was entering the room with a dish in his hands the colonel suddenly gave the command “Attention.” Immediately the soldier's hands fell to his sides; he stood erect at attention and the dish lay on the floor! The habit of instant obedience to a military command had taken such possession of him, that when he heard the word of command he obeyed automatically.

In the same way, we are largely the creatures of mental habit. At one time it was only by painful effort that we were able to put letter to letter to form even a word of three letters, but now the putting of letters together has become “second nature,” and we are able with a minimum of exertion to form words. At one time we had to make an effort at attention. Unless the words spoken were simple and attractive our minds immediately wandered; now we have formed in some degree the habit of attention and we can listen with little exertion.

Sinclair Lewis wrote in *Babbitt* in chapter four, “[Babitt] stopped smoking at least once a month. He went through with it like the solid citizen he was: admitted the evils of tobacco, courageously made resolves, laid out plans to check the vice, tapered off his allowance of cigars, and expounded the pleasures of virtuousness to every one he met. He did everything, in fact, except stop smoking.”

Bad habits are like comfortable beds—easy to get into, but hard to get out of.

Picture the autumn, when the trees have shed their leaves that two or three leaves have stuck fast on the branches, and have clung to them all the winter through. Storms have beaten them, frosts have bitten them, snow and rain have blackened them, yet they have held fast to the tree. But when the spring has come and the sap has begun to ascend and push its way through every branch and every twig, the leaves have disappeared. They were pushed off by the rising tide of new life; for death can never stand before life. So it is with us. Those old, inveterate habits that belong to our fallen nature are tough to get rid of. We battle with them and try to beat them off, but again and again we are defeated.

It is so true that it is easier to prevent bad habits than to break them.

Bad habits, man's mortal enemies, must be slain or they will slay him.

It is like when David looked out and saw Goliath and heard him say, "Send me a man to fight and if he wins we will serve you and if I win you will serve us." He realized that he would either slay or serve this giant. It is the same way with our destructive habits. We will either slay them or serve them.

It is mighty hard to shake me;
In my brawny arms I take thee;
I can either make or break thee; I am Habit!
Through each day I slowly mold thee;
Soon my tight'ning chains enfold thee;
Then it is with ease I hold thee; Thus is Habit!
I can be both good and vile;
I can e'en be worth your while,
Or the cause of your bitter cry I am Habit!
Oft I've proved myself a pleasure;
Proved myself a priceless treasure,
Or a menace past all measure;
Thus is Habit!
Harmless though I sometimes seem, yet
My strange force is like a magnet;
Like a great and greedy dragnet; I am Habit!
Though you sometimes fear or doubt me
No one y has lived without me;
I am present all about thee; Thus is Habit I
Choose me well when you are starting
Seldom is an easy parting;
I'm a devil or a darling!
I am Habit!
Let me give you a riddle.
I AM your constant Companion.

I am your greatest helper or heaviest burden.

I will pull you onward or drag you down
to failure.

I am completely at your command.

Half the things you do might just as well
be turned over to me and I will be able to do
them quickly and correctly.

I am easily managed—you must merely be firm with me. Show me exactly how you
want something done and after a few lessons I will do it automatically.

I am the servant of all great people and,
alas, of all failures, as well.

Those who are great, I have made great.

Those who are failures, I have made failures.

I am not a machine, though I work with all the precision of a machine plus the
intelligence of a person. You may run me for profit or run me for ruin—it makes no
difference to me.

Take me, train me, be firm with me, and
I will place the world at your feet. Be easy
with me and I will destroy you.

Who am I?

I am habit!

Farmer Brown and farmer Green were neighbors. Farmer Brown had a dog that loved to chase cats. Farmer Green had a cat that hated dogs. Whenever Brown came to visit Green, his dog would come along. As soon as the dog got into Green's yard the dog and the cat would be off, and the cat would fly at top speed around the house with the dog in hot pursuit. As they came out from behind the house, the cat would take a flying leap and make his escape up the big maple tree. This happened every time Brown came to visit Green. After a few years Green cut down the tree. A couple of days later Brown and his dog came to visit. The dog and the cat took off. Out from around the house came the cat with the dog right on his tail. The cat was thirty feet in the air before he realized that something was different.

Slide 6

The Power Of Habit!

A conductor on the Santa Fe was converted and united with the church. After he had been faithful in his religious duties for some weeks, he was asked one Sunday morning to help take the offering. He started down the aisle, and all went well until he came to a richly dressed woman. She allowed the plate to go past her, whereupon the conductor unconsciously reached up for the bell rope to stop the train, and said, "Madam, if you don't pay, you'll have to get off."

The power of habit!

Years ago the Denver Zoo had a difficult decision to make. They were offered the gift of a beautiful, large polar bear, but the problem was that there was no existing room for the bear. At the time of the gift the board of directors was in the middle of a fund-raising campaign to renovate the zoo. They changed the strategy to include a magnificent habitat for the polar bear in their renovation plans.

In the meantime the bear was put in a small temporary cage. The space was so small that it could only take three steps, turnaround, and walk three steps back.

Because of unforeseen delays the construction took three years, but the bear's new home was grand—waterfalls, caves, and lots of space. The bear entered its new home, looked around, took three steps, turned around, took three steps back, and turned around.

The power of habit!

There is an ancient story of a sentry standing day after day at his post with no apparent reason for his being there. One day, a passerby asked him why he was standing in that particular place. "I don't know," the sentry replied, "I'm just following orders." The passerby then went to the captain of the guard and asked him why the sentry was posted in that place. "I don't know," the captain replied. "We're just following orders." This prompted the captain of the guard to pose the question to higher authority. "Why do we post a sentry at that particular spot?" he asked the king. But the king didn't know. So he summoned his wise men and asked them the question. The answer came back that one hundred years before, Catherine the Great had planted a rosebush and had ordered a sentry placed there to protect it. The rosebush had been dead for eighty years, but the sentry still stood guard.

The power of habit.

Habits have a tendency to take our life in directions we would never have chosen. Good habits can guide us through treacherous times and situations where we aren't sure what to do and lack the foresight to realize the dangers ahead.

Bad habits are often seemingly fine at first, but they can lead us into treacherous waters. They are like a smooth river on which a young boy is floating—seemingly harmless—which then becomes swifter—very exciting—then becomes a rapids—somewhat scary—and finally goes crashing over a waterfall—devastating, possibly even fatal.

St Augustine said, "Habit, if not resisted, soon becomes necessity."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Slide 7

1. What is habit?

2. How are habits formed?