

Old and New Habits of Mind and Heart

Colossians 3.1-17

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I once knew a man named Tom who was really quite ordinary, even his quirks were ordinary. Tom knew the English language quite well and could even be eloquent on occasion. But he had one flaw that seemed to bedevil him and his friends on numerous occasions. As with any English-language speaker, Tom could utter the words ‘I promise,’ but he could not, in saying those words, *perform the act of promising*. He would regularly say these words or their virtual equivalents—‘I will be there;’ ‘You can count on me;’ ‘I will do it’—but he never acted so as to keep his promises. His friends soon came to realize that no matter what Tom said, he could not be relied on to keep his word.

What do we make of this all too common phenomenon? At least it means that Tom used the language of promising in an empty way. His words were meaningless because he never stood behind them; he was never present in his words. We could say that Tom never *inhabited* the language and practice of promise-making and promise-keeping.

Søren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian, was critical of his fellow Danes—most of whom claimed to be good Lutheran Christians. He charged that they used the rich language of the faith—such as claiming they were justified by grace, that they had a Savior in Jesus Christ, and that they were the body of Christ in the world—but they did not inhabit the language. He meant that the language of grace and sin and having a Savior was used repeatedly by folk who did not seem to live as though they were sinners who needed a Savior. *The language and practices of the church did not seem to actually form the lives they lived*. They were formed by the language and practices of their bourgeois Danish/European culture. That was the language in terms of which they understood themselves and thought about life and death and made decisions.

Were we to ask these folk if they were Christians, the answer would be an offended ‘of course, we are Lutherans aren’t we.’ Yes, they thought of themselves as Christian and even of their nation as a ‘Christian nation.’

These two stories should focus for us the question of how do we come to inhabit the language and practices we do. When we inhabit a language, then it is that language and its practices that form and shape our lives. It is in and through our language and practices that we construct a world and have patterns of living and thinking and desiring. These deep patterns I am calling the habits of mind and heart in terms of which we understand ourselves and others and have desires and passions. *A habit is a disposition to think or act or feel in a definite way on repeated occasions, and habits of mind and heart are, then, those pervasive patterns of living that form us.*

But if we examine carefully these stories about Tom and Denmark, we might discern a flaw that haunts our lives and our understanding and confuses our hearts: people often speak words and feign practices without actually inhabiting the words and without faithfully performing the practices.

I propose to you *there is a distinctive Christian language and distinctive Christian practices that are necessary for living the Christian life*. There are folk in the church today that think that Christian language needs to be continually updated and kept in step with our modern inclinations and patterns of mind and heart.

I intend to dispel and subvert that basic assumption. The problem for the church today is not that its

distinctive discourses and practices need to be updated to fit modern habits of mind and heart. Rather, *the problem is that most of us who think of ourselves as Christians do not seem to be formed and shaped by distinctive Christian language and practices.* The discourses and practices of Christian faith are designed to change us from our worldly inclinations to fit the patterns of mind and heart that we find in the Colossians scripture read for today.

In order to understand this Colossian passage, it might be helpful to remember that most of the folk in the NT who became followers of Jesus were keenly aware that such following of Jesus stood in *stark contrast* with the ways in which they used to live. They were themselves aware of being caught up in a new pattern of life in which they were giving up old habits of mind and heart in exchange for the new habits of mind and heart that came with confessing Jesus as the Christ of the God of Israel and the Lord of their lives.

This *contrast pattern* between the old way of life—the old habits of mind and heart— and the new way of life in Christ—with its new habits of mind and heart—runs throughout the NT. Yet, it is not as though the new pattern of life came easy and that the old habits gave way to the new without a struggle. *Old habits of mind and habits of heart do not flee without much struggle and disciplined living.* It is wrenching to change old habits, just as it is wrenching to have your life transformed.

My question today is whether we in the contemporary Protestant church in America have lost a sense for just how *radical* it is to be a follower of Jesus in these times. When I say ‘radical,’ I mean it in the original sense as that which ‘goes to the root of something.’ Jesus meant to transform and redeem human lives and thereby go the root of what it means to be a human being created by God and living before God’s impinging Kingdom. I worry that we are more inclined to be formed in our everyday living by these facts about us: our socio-economic status, our consumer habits of mind, and the worldly desires and passions—which we pick up by imitating the significant persons in our lives—that shape our actual living. We may give lip service to being a follower of Jesus Christ, but it seems more likely that we are profoundly shaped by what the NT calls the *principalities and powers of the world*. These are the powers that tell us who we are, what we should desire, and how we should live.

What then are these habits of mind and habits of heart that seem so powerful in shaping us that we hardly notice that we have the habit? Let me say it plainly: *habits of mind* are those habits we adopt that shape how we construe ourselves, construe other persons, and construe the world in which we live. *Habits of heart* are those deep desires and passions that shape the values we think are desirable and will confer on us meaning and fulfillment. Habits of mind and habits of heart are tightly intertwined in the actual ways in which anyone of us lives out our everyday life.

Consider these habits of mind that can grip us like an iron vice: “Everyone does it, so it is all right if I do it;” “nobody likes me;” “you cannot trust anyone;” “people who are different scare me;” “my country, right or wrong;” “the poor are poor because they lack ambition and prefer to live that way;” “I deserve all my financial resources and assets because I have earned them by my own independent labor;” “Everyone should do his own thing and be true to himself;” “my property is mine to do with as I please.” These habits of mind, and many others with which we are personally acquainted within ourselves, can have a powerful hold on how we think, feel, and live.

Who has not sympathized with the dreadful sorrow of persons who have had loved ones murdered or seriously abused. And we are touched when they then cry out for “an eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth,” as though that simply is the divine law for human life. It is *habit of mind that demands retribution for every criminal or immoral act.* This is a powerful and deep habit that shapes our understanding and our passions.

To speak of a contrast pattern in the NT that transforms our old habits of mind and heart and makes us new and different than we were, is to remember the explicit words of Jesus that call for a new habit of mind and heart. In Matthew 5.38-42, Jesus is represented as saying:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not

resist an evildoer with violence. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

I suppose that when Jesus says such things as this, he is sketching for us just what sort of habit of mind and heart he expects his followers to have. It is in this context that I want us now to look at the Scripture for today from the third chapter of Colossians.

Paul is writing to the church in Colossae, which is comprised of folk who think of themselves as followers of Jesus. Paul well knows that being a follower is difficult and demanding, and he admonishes them to remember that they have been “raised with Christ” and therefore must “seek the things that are above.” What does he mean by “above”? He says that above is “where Christ is,” and I suppose this means that those raised with Christ are called to live as Christ lived.

To live in the way of Christ is to be seen in contrast with earlier ways of living in which “fornication, impurity, destructive passion, evil desire, and greed” seemed to thrive. It would take several sermons to fully explore these habits of mind and heart that Paul demands we give up.

But I want to focus briefly on greed. Paul says astonishingly that *greed is “idolatry.”* That seems rather stiff and condemnatory, for isn’t a certain measure of greed what makes the capitalist economy hum? But what is this greed, then, that is considered idolatrous? I propose that it is that habit of mind and heart that is never satisfied with what is at hand but always wants to possess and acquire more. The greedy person is never quite content and feels compelled and quite justified in possessing more and more. This habit of unsatisfied possessiveness is idolatry because the object of the greed displaces God and becomes the deepest passion of one’s life. Greedy folk are centered only and exclusively in the satisfaction of their own desires to the exclusion of all other values. Of course, greed says to itself that it will be satisfied when it gets enough, but it never is able to admit when enough is enough. Greed is a habit of the mind and the heart.

Paul goes on to say that the old way of living includes such habits as anger, malice, slander, filthy language, and lying to others. According to Paul, Christians formerly had the habit of letting their anger burgeon into bitterness and hatred. They formerly had hearts full of malice for those regarded as enemies. They formerly had an inclination to fudge on the truth and to misconstrue the truth when it served and advanced their selfish interests. Well, let us say it bluntly: Paul claims we used to tell lots of lies.

Paul admonishes us Christians “to get rid of such” bad practices. To refer to these habits as *practices* is to teach us that these actions and affections are not just occasional episodes but are repeated over and over again in our living. They are the *deep ruts* in terms of which we live. *They are practices that constitute our living.* They are how we actually live.

We are to give up those old practices and put on “the new self” we have been given in Christ Jesus. When we do that, we will be living in conformity with the fact that we were created in the image of God. When we give up those habits, we will adopt the habits of mind and heart that constitute following Jesus and being raised with Jesus.

What sort of habits of mind and heart does this new self that is raised in Christ Jesus have? That new self has, for example, the habits of compassion, of kindness, of humility, of meekness, and of patience. They “bear with one another,” and they practice forgiveness of one another. In short, they practice loving other persons and seeking harmony with others. They admonish one another, when such is needed, and in all things they are grateful.

Further, they have that habit of singing “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” They do not sing in order to be admired, but neither do they remain silent because they cannot carry a tune. They sing as a disposition of a heart full of gratitude. They sing to God.

Paul ends this passage with the following invitation: “whatever you do, in word and deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” This is admittedly astonishing. Do everything, whether in word or deed, in the name of the Lord Jesus? Is not this a strange habit to be cultivated? Isn’t it profoundly at odds with the typical words and deeds the world teaches us and that are deeply ingrained in us?

I do not know about you, but I find these words of Paul sobering. We all claim to be Christians, but honesty forces us to admit that we do not seem imbued with the spirit of living about which Paul is talking. Who among us does everything in the name of the Lord Jesus? Surely this is an impossible recipe for living.

Yes, it is impossible if we are simply left to our own determination and strength of will. It is impossible if we think of ourselves as autonomous, independent persons who do not really need other persons in order to be Christian. But we are not left to our own devices—there is a gracious Savior for us.

So, let us think through again what this *Christian pattern of life* is.

First, Christians are those folk who know themselves raised in Christ and forgiven in him. It is impossible to know yourself forgiven until you learn how profoundly you are a sinner and how deeply and passionately you have been living in ways rebellious to the ways of God. We do not even begin to grasp the power and wonder of Christ’s forgiveness and grace until we learn to be truthful about our own sinfulness. Without the grace and forgiveness of God, the Christian life is impossible.

Second, we are not led to believe by Paul that becoming a new self in Christ is something that magically befalls us, from which all virtue seamlessly flows. It is a strenuous transition to throw off the old practices and switch to some new practices that will empower us *to learn how to be faithful and in conformity to Christ*. It takes time—even a lifetime—to develop those new habits of mind and heart that are reconciling and redemptive.

Third, it takes *discipline* to learn how to be a follower of Jesus, and the place where we can learn how to be such a follower is the *church*. It is in the church that we find the practices that can discipline us into a new way of living. It is in the church that we learn how to love, how to worship God and sing praises to God, how to read the Bible as Holy Scripture, how to understand enemies in such a way that we can love them and make peace with them. *This is why the distinctive language and practices of Christian faith are simply essential to and precious to the life of the church*. We cannot be Christian as the lonely stranger who can do it all by himself.

Fourth, it is in the language of the church that we will learn to overcome and throw off those habits of mind and heart that are so detrimental to our own salvation and the well-being of others. It is not as though we could learn on our own that Jesus is our Savior and pattern of life to us, that self-giving is expected. It is in the church, when it is richly grateful for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that we learn we have a Savior who forgives our sin and will endow us with a courage that every tyrant and every liar fears.

In short, it is the *disciplined life* that finally knows just how much we need grace and how regularly we must feast at the Lord’s Table as gracious nourishment for our needy souls. It is in the church that we will *learn how to pray and what to pray for*. It is one of the great absurdities of worldly language that we all already know, without tutelage and practice, how to pray. Did not Jesus’ disciples ask him to teach them how to pray!

The virtues of love and patience and courage grow exponentially as they are practiced repeatedly. We cannot love, as a habit of the mind and heart without the discipline of loving others, and those others include the stranger and the enemy.

When the church itself is alive and well, then its members are those who *inhabit* the distinctive language and practices of the Christian faith. When they so inhabit the language and practices, they come to have habits of mind and heart that renew human life and create truthful, faithful, and reconciling human communities.

So may all of us be transformed in our habits such that we might learn how to do everything in the name of the Lord. It is indeed a narrow and harrowing way if we are left to our own devices. But by the power of the Holy Spirit working within us and through the language and practices of the church, we can grow — and struggle to grow — into that truth of life and death that we call the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

All this dear friends, I have dared to proclaim in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all. Amen.

SOME NOTES:

The theme of the desires and passions of the heart, and its habits, is central to my understanding of human existence and the Christian life. In my Grammar book, see pages 307-12, 318-19, 362-63, 543-45, 585-86.

On the principalities and powers of the world and the related concept of force fields, see pages 256, 281-82, 318-19, 350, 354, 359, 535, 548, 572, 630-31, 704, 732.

Of course, modern psychotherapy pivots around practices of transforming and reordering those deep habits of mind and heart that seem to thwart human fulfillment and happiness. However, the various therapeutic practices are often guided by models of human fulfillment and happiness that are seriously at odds with a Christian understanding. See the engaging discussion of these issues by Robert C. Roberts, *Taking the Word to Heart: Self and Other in an Age of Therapies*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993) and *Limning the Psyche: Explorations in Christian Psychology*, eds. Robert C. Roberts and Mark Talbot, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997).

For an insightful study of those habits of mind and heart that remain powerful in American life, see Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

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