

In the Time It Takes to Form a Habit

An Ash Wednesday Sermon
by Don Cummings

It is said that it takes six weeks of repetitive behavior to either make or break a habit. If I were to ask you to stop what you are doing everyday, no matter where you are, and touch your nose with your left hand, and to do so without fail, within six weeks that behavior would become a deeply engrained habit and you would continue to do it absentmindedly ever after that.

The same is true if I want to break a habit. It will take me six weeks of conscious effort to change a behavior and replace it with another. A few years ago, it dawned on me that getting dressed in the morning would be a little easier if I changed the order of the clothes in my chest of drawers. So, I put the first thing I put on in the morning in the top drawer, the second thing in the middle drawer, and the third thing in the bottom drawer. Maybe your chest of drawers has always been arranged like this, but for some reason my never had been. For at least six weeks after I made this change I would go to my chest of drawers and, by force of habit, open the old drawer where the article of clothing used to be located. It took conscious effort to train my brain and my hand to look for my clothes in all the right places. But eventually, I retrained my brain and now I go to the new locations as absent minded as I used to go to the old ones.

Six weeks is a period of 42 days. Lent is a period of forty days stretching from Ash Wednesday to Easter Saturday. It is a time we have set apart for the development of new habits or patterns in our spiritual life. There was a time when this season was defined primarily by the things we would give up for Lent. But eventually we came to realize that Lent is not essentially about giving things up, so the emphasis shifted from what we should give up to what we should take on during Lent. But Lent is really not about either giving things up or taking things on, neither taking away or adding to our activities or practices,

Stephen F. Bayne reminds us that "the negative aspects of Lent are incidental to its purpose. We abstain from the common amusements and pleasures of life during Lent not because there is something evil in them, but because by so abstaining we set ourselves free for our primary concern. If our pleasures and relaxations were evil, then we ought never to indulge in them. But they are not evil; they are good; yet there are more important things; and Lent is a time for putting first things first."

How would your life change, if in the time it takes to form a habit, you were able to concentrate every day on your primary concern? If you were able, by the rearranging of your life for just six weeks, to put first things first day after day?

My hunch is that as the end of that forty-day period drew to a close, you would not be counting the minutes left before you could take up what you had put aside. Rather you would be glorying in the discovery of what life is like when you've disciplined yourself to be able to put first things first and to chase after the important rather than be chased by the urgent.

What if . . . ? What if you decided to take the season of Lent seriously? What if you committed yourself as a Christian to use this season as a time to form a new habit, a new spiritual

discipline, that would help you become a more fully devoted follower of Jesus? How would your life change if you did that?

Bruce Larson once met a fellow who operated a large management service with 200 employees reporting directly to him. Larson said to the man, "What a stress filled job that must be! How do you handle it?"

The man's wife, who had been following the conversation, interrupted to say, "I'll tell you how he does it. A few years ago at a conference he heard one of the speakers claim that spending five minutes a day reading the Bible would change your life. He made a promise to the Lord to do that and he has never missed a single day since." It has changed his life. As he makes God the focus of his day, he gets perspective on the stress and pressure of his job. He exposes himself daily to wisdom that can help him be a better manager, a better man, and better husband, a more fully devoted follower of Jesus.

Dallas Willard says that the word "disciple" occurs 269 times in the New Testament. The word "Christian" only appears three times and was first introduced to refer precisely to the disciples. The New Testament is a book about disciples, by disciples, and for disciples of Jesus. Even so, this word disciple may not communicate much to some people today, which is why I rather like the expression "fully devoted follower of Jesus. That after all is what a disciple is--someone who is so fully devoted to Jesus that he spends his life following Christ.

But lest we think that "fully devoted follower" or disciple is a special category of super saint, let Dallas Willard set us straight. He says, "the kind of life we see in the earliest church is that of a special type of person. All of the assurances and the benefits offered to humankind in the gospel evidently presuppose such a life and do not make realistic sense apart from it. The disciple of Jesus is not the deluxe or heavy-duty model of the Christian--especially padded, textured, streamlined, and empowered for the fast lane on the straight and narrow way. He stands on the pages of the New Testament as the first level of basic transportation in the Kingdom of God."

I would put it is this way: When Jesus calls us to be his followers, fully devoted to his teaching and the kingdom of God, he calls us to nothing more than what God created us for. And if we miss this calling, we miss the significance for which we were born. The problem is, we have not really believed this in the western church.

Again, Dallas Willard: "For at least several decades the churches of the western world have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian. One is not required to be, or to intend to be, a disciple in order to become a Christian, and one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship. Contemporary American Churches in particular do not require following Christ in his example, spirit, and teachings as a condition of membership--either of entering into or continuing in fellowship of a denomination or a local church. . . . So far as the visible Christian institutions of our day are concerned, discipleship clearly is optional. . . . Churches are filled with "undisciplined disciples," as Jess Moody has called them. Most problems in contemporary churches can be explained by the fact that members have not yet decided to follow Christ."

"Little good results from insisting that Christ is also supposed to be Lord: to present his lordship as an option leaves it squarely in the category of the white-wall tires and stereo equipment for the new car. You can do without it. And it is--alas!--far from clear what you would do with it. Obedience and training in obedience form no intelligible doctrinal or practical unity with the salvation presented in recent versions of the gospel."

Obedience and training in obedience. I want to suggest to you that Lent has been especially designed as a season in the spiritual life of the Christian as a time to come face to face again with the issue of our obedience to God. The forty days of Lent most obviously remind us of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness of Judea being tested and tried and strengthened for his life of obedience to God.

But there are also other periods of forty days in the Bible that Lent can point us to:

The forty days of the flood
The forty days Moses was on Mt. Sinai
The forty days the company of spies explored the promised land
The forty days Elijah spent in a cave on Mt. Horeb
The forty days of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness
The forty months of his public ministry
The forty hours between his death on the cross and the resurrection.

As we work our way through each of these periods of forty during this season of Lent, we will discover a common thread that runs through all of them. In each case, the central issue is obedience to God. We will witness the high drama of Noah and Moses and Israel and Elijah and Jesus struggling in the battle to submit their will to God's will. We will discover what their burning issues were, how they came to terms with God's claim upon their lives and hearts, and the consequences of their obedience or disobedience to God.

I would invite you to use this season of Lent as a unique and special time when you will consciously struggle with the question "what habit or spiritual discipline can I form or strengthen during the time it takes to form a habit that will help me become a more fully devoted follower of Jesus. At this time in my life, what does obedience to God require of me?"

If you ask that question honestly, God will provide an answer to you. When the answer becomes clear, you'll have your marching orders. You'll know, or learn, how to rearrange your life in such a way that you can put first things first, not just during the season of Lent, but going forward every day.

Jot your answers down on the inside of the tent card you received as you entered tonight. Seal your commitment by carrying that card forward with you during communion tonight. Then take it home with you and put it some place where it will remind you daily of your commitment to rearrange your life in such a way that you can put first things first during this season of Lent. Use this time to forge or strengthen a habit of discipleship that will forever change your life. But I must warn you, if you take this challenge seriously, it could change your life forever.

Let this season of Lent impress upon us that discipleship to Jesus is "the very heart of the gospel. The really good news for humanity is that Jesus is now taking students in the master class of life. The eternal life that begins with faith in Jesus is a life in his present kingdom, now on earth and available to all." (Willard)

