

Habits - Forming Good Ones And Avoiding Bad Ones

One of the things which, if you are a regular listener to this Programme, you will have heard me say on a number of occasions is that while we live in this world we are free to choose the type of person we want to become. Easy as it is to blame such things as a disadvantaged childhood, or the impact of some particular experience for making us what we are, in fact it is we who make ourselves what we are. The person we become, selfish or unselfish, grasping or giving, caring of others or uncaring, is in our hands. Though this can't be said of children, whose choices are largely made for them; whose values are usually those of the people around them, especially their parents; whose habits are mostly imposed on them, yet it is true with regard to adults. We choose what we become.

In fact what we become is the result of a multitude of choices, all consciously made at the time, the majority of which, once made, become absorbed into our nature and personality and have become unthinking habits. Whereas once we thought about an issue, or an action or a custom, in time what we choose to do becomes instinctive with us. It has to do. We can't be forever making primitive choices. We couldn't function if we had to. We get into the habit of putting the keys in certain places once we have locked the garage, at first choosing a convenient place for them and very soon instinctively putting them there. We no longer stop to ask ourselves whether there might be a better place. The habit is formed and the question passes out of the realm of our conscious decision making processes.

Indeed, the formation of habits is unavoidable. And this is so whether it is with regard to some relatively unimportant matter of where we put the keys once we have locked the garage or whether it concerns the way we think about things, approach people or react to situations which arise. We are very much creatures of habit. Creatures of habits which originally we chose and established with ourselves. A single act, frequently repeated, or a pattern of thinking often resorted to, becomes a habit. And it is our habits which form and fix our nature and character. In the beginning we determine what our habits will be. Once they have become established with us, however, it is our habits which determine what we are and have become. As was once wisely said, "We first make our habits, and then our habits make us". (Dryden) .

All the time we are forming habits which in time will either serve or rule us. Good habits serve us, evil and bad habits dominate and rule us. And while the formation of a good habit requires greater initial effort, we easily fall into bad habits which can be assimilated with astonishing speed. Though there may have been some awkwardness and embarrassment at first, the tendency to exaggerate and tell lies, for example, quickly becomes habitual. It might have been a bit hard at first but it becomes so much easier. Soon the person concerned doesn't even recognise that they are exaggerating, and lying.

Where evil and bad habits are concerned, clearly then it is the first step that we must resist taking. "Beware of actual evils" wrote Svredenberg, "for actually committing an evil, either in thought or action, is what establishes habits. Thus evils are increased, together with their delights, and man is carried away like a piece of wood in a rapid stream." (*The Spiritual Diary* 4479). The fact that bad habits become established with us at all is due to the fact that we invariably look upon what we are doing or proposing to do in isolation and as having no further repercussions in our life. "I'll tell a lie just this once", we say to ourselves, not realising that we have begun to establish a pattern which can be resisted only with greater effort in the future. Once our resistance is broken the first time around it is so much more easily broken the second and third time around.

It is often complained, and there are times when we ourselves complain, that living the life the Lord urges us to live is extremely difficult and well nigh beyond us. And it is true, the difficulty is there. But it is made so much worse by bad habits we have allowed to become established in our lives and conversely, it is made that much easier by the good habits that have been implanted. Clearly this has implications for all who are in any way concerned with the care and upbringing of children. It is possible for us to initiate our children into habits which, if they are good, cannot but be an asset to them as they begin to regenerate when adult, but which if they are evil, can be nothing but a handicap and retard that process. But as adults we can get ourselves into the habit of thinking and doing certain things which remove some of the difficulty referred to. There are times when we feel overawed by the effort which seems to be required to overcome some tendency we have. And yet if we can get into the habit of responding in certain ways, the Lord can come and strengthen and give aid, and it turns out to be not such a difficulty after all.

This point is taken up by Swedenborg in the book, "*Heaven and Hell*", paragraph 533:

"That it is not so difficult to live the life of heaven as some believe", he wrote, "is now clear from this, that when anything presents itself to a man that he knows to be dishonest and unjust, but to which his mind is borne, it is simply necessary for him to think that it ought not to be done because it is opposed to the Divine precepts. If a man accustoms himself so to think, and from so doing established a habit of so thinking, he is gradually conjoined to heaven.... And when he has made a beginning, the Lord performs all the good deeds with him, and causes him not only to see the evils to be evils, but also to refrain from willing them, and finally to turn away from them".

In other words we can train ourselves to respond to situations, to ideas that come to us, to suggested courses of action that cross our minds, so that our way of dealing with them becomes habitual.

We will not have anything to do with the thought, the idea, the suggestion, and will force ourselves to think of something else. And, as is the teaching just quoted, once we make a beginning, the Lord can come to our aid, strengthening us.

Earlier I made the obvious point that we are creatures of habit. We can only be creatures of habit. But habits are actions and responses which have passed from our conscious thinking processes and have become part of us. They are no longer normally thought about, assessed or analysed. And here is the great danger. We make a habit of small frauds and seemingly innocent dishonesty, related perhaps to a tax return. And once the habit is established we no longer question its morality. To the contrary we find endless reasons to justify and excuse it. How then can we break the hold which habits hold over us?

This is where the great necessity of self examination enters in. Sitting down quietly and turning over in our minds the things we have thought and said and done. Asking ourselves whether they really accord with the teaching of the Lord in the Ten Commandments. What have we excused? What are we excusing? Uncomfortable though it is at the time, it is imperative for us from time to time to focus the spotlight of Divine Truth on the darker recesses of our minds. As we grow older our habits become more and more fixed. This is why we constantly need to check and assess them to make sure that those which are becoming fixed are good and orderly.

But of course we put off self examination; tell ourselves we will have more time another day. That these are the things we will look to when we retire. But delay is what makes things more difficult. If we get at something early on, it is easily removed from us. Leave it and it will strengthen its hold on our lives.

More than this, we can consciously work at creating and establishing good habits. We can make it a conscious habit always to respond to certain situations in a particular way. Make it a habit always to respond to hurt and disappointment by recalling the Lord's teaching on forgiveness.

Make it a habit to attribute accomplishment to the Lord and not hold praise and glory to ourselves. As an act of charity make it a habit to listen to what another wants to say to us rather than constantly interrupting or countering with another point of view. Make it a habit to find encouraging things to say about another or what they are doing.

I repeat what I have said throughout this talk that we cannot help acquire habits. It is up to us to make sure that those we do acquire, support and serve spirituality within us, and not stifle and warp it.

The Swedenborg Program – Number 69.

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