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# HABITS OF THE HOUSEHOLD

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PRACTICING THE STORY OF GOD  
IN EVERYDAY FAMILY RHYTHMS

 ZONDERVAN  
BOOKS

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*Habits of the Household*

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A couple of years later, it still does.

We now have four boys, and a nighttime blessing is a keystone habit of our evening routine. That said, board books are still weapons, naked wrestling matches are still more common than I'd prefer, toothbrushes are still the most sacred of household property rights, and I still spend a significant amount of time evaluating my life in hallways. But the thing that is different is—well, me. The circumstances are mostly the same, but my reaction to them has dramatically changed. And that is the power of a good parenting habit: by changing our knee-jerk reactions to ordinary situations, we uncover different ways of letting God's grace guide our hearts—and our children's hearts—into new patterns of life together.

This may be counterintuitive at first. It was for me. We don't often think about habits and the heart being so interconnected. But they are. To steward the habits of your family is to steward the hearts of your family.

And that's what this book is about.

## **The Heart Follows the Habit**

"You're going to love school today," I tell Whit as I zip up his coat. "You have PE, which means you get to go outside," I go on as I tie his shoes. "And if you see your brother Ash in the hallway, make sure you give him a fist bump," I remind him as I buckle his seat belt, "because brothers stick together, okay?"

This is a remarkable moment, and totally normal. You do it too. We do complicated, difficult tasks on autopilot. We flip pancakes and change diapers while also doing much more important things like chatting with a spouse or mulling over a work problem. We can do this because of the amazing phenomenon of habit.

## Reimagining Household Habits as Gospel Liturgies

Habits are fascinating little things. They are the things we do over and over, semiconsciously to unconsciously. By definition, they are, of course, little. But the aggregate impact of habits is as big as each habit is small. Habits not only occupy most of our time, they form most of our minds. There is a neurological reason for this.

Modern neuroscience has shown us that habits occur in the deepest parts of our brains, the basal ganglia, which are the parts that churn on autopilot while the higher order thinking does its complex acrobatics.

This is wonderful because it frees up our higher order thinking for more important things. This is why I can tie shoes and buckle seat belts while also teaching an important lesson to Whit about how brothers are to show affection in public.

On the other hand, you can see the absence of habit's magic when you watch a toddler try to tie their own shoe—the task consumes every bit of mental energy they have. You could not break through if you were a bear on a unicycle.

This capacity of our brains to work in lower order habit while higher order thinking cruises along uninterrupted is one of God's wonderful neurological gifts to us.<sup>2</sup> When done right, we can accumulate all kinds of wonderful processes in our lower order thinking, and they become completely natural to us: the drive home, a hug on the way out the door, a nighttime blessing, a dinner table prayer, catching a football, cracking an egg,

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2. I will refer to the difference between lower and higher order thinking throughout the book. Sometimes I will also refer to the upstairs brain and the downstairs brain. In general, the lower part of the brain is the part that handles basic, ongoing, and survival-oriented tasks like fight or flight, and rest and digest. Meanwhile, the upper brain helps us do the more sophisticated work of being human like using logic, processing new information, and solving complicated problems. I will summarize the key takeaways, but if you want more on how these parts of our brains affect our life of habit, see Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (New York: Random House, 2012).

or rubbing your spouse's neck. Whether rote or romantic, habits allow us to carry on in a world that's plenty complicated enough without needing to second-guess ourselves constantly.

But the neurological downside of habits is as powerful as the upside. The same feature that allows us to perform a good habit without thinking about it makes it hard to change a bad habit even when we are thinking about it. Picture a wagon wheel in a rut. It takes no effort at all to stay in the rut. But it takes incredible effort to pull the wheel out of it.

Good or bad, a rut is a rut, and our brains love ruts.

Your basal ganglia are so good at staying in the rut that you cannot just tell them to get out. Your lower brain has spent its whole life ignoring that higher order thinking. It's supposed to, after all. Its job is to keep you in the rut regardless.

In other words: *You can't think yourself out of a pattern you didn't think yourself into.* You practiced yourself into it, so you have to practice your way out.

Take my nighttime routine. I knew in my higher order brain that I didn't want to spend another evening barking orders at my children. But when I slipped on the water in the hallway, the basal ganglia (which house the fight or flight response) were triggered, and I flipped into the habit of fighting my way through the evening. The norm unfolded not just without much thought but even in spite of my thought.

This is why habits are so neurologically formative: like a rut, they take us somewhere. They have a destination even when our minds are opposed to it.

But habits are not just neurologically formative. Habits are also spiritually formative.

Because when our heads go one way but our habits go another, guess which way the heart follows?

The heart always follows the habit.

### Seeing Ordinary Habits as Liturgies of Worship

Why? Because habits are kinds of liturgies. They are little routines of worship, and worship changes what we love. Habits of the household are not just actions that form our families' routines, they are liturgies that form our families' hearts. This is why we should choose them so carefully.

Think of it like this: when it comes to spiritual formation, our households are not simply products of what we teach and say. They are much more products of what we practice and do. And usually there is a significant gap between the two.

If our hearts always followed our heads, we would not need to practice the things we learn. We'd just learn about it and the rest would follow. But that's not how humans work, which is why the biblical understanding of sanctification is not just about education and learning but about formation and practice as well.<sup>3</sup>

We are tasked not only with learning the right thing, which takes concentration and thinking,<sup>4</sup> but also with practicing the right things, which takes formation and repetition.<sup>5</sup>

Consider habits of the household as an effort to unite education and formation. Think about them as ways to align our heads and our hearts so we don't just know the right thing to do, *we also love doing the right thing*.

The neurology and spirituality of habits can seem complicated (especially if you haven't thought about any of this before), but few matters are more practical than the spirituality of habit.

3. Phil. 4:9: "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."

4. Prov. 4:6-7, for example, or the emphasis on knowledge and understanding in Col. 1:9-10.

5. Prov. 22:6, for example, or the complementary emphasis on growing in good works in Col. 1:9-10.

Here are some examples of how I've seen the interplay between my head, my heart, and my habits in my parenting life:

### WAYS NEW HABITS LEAD THE HEART

**My Head Thinks ... I want to be a patient person with my kids.**

**My Old Habit Leads My Heart...**

But my default habit is to reprimand them for every spill, which leads to an impatient mood of constantly snapping at them.

**Until a New Habit Leads My Heart...**

Until I cultivated the habit of always saying (often through gritted teeth), "That's okay. Why don't you help me clean it up?" Saying this paves the way to a shared cleanup process instead of another reprimand. I *feel* more patient because I *practice* talking patiently.

**My Head Thinks ... I want to give my kids my full attention.**

**My Old Habit Leads My Heart...**

But the morning news notifications on my phone always get me mad and worried. I'm usually absent and distracted through the morning as we get the kids out the door.

**Until a New Habit Leads My Heart...**

Until I cultivated the habit of turning off all notifications and not using my phone before drop-off. We are formed in the image of what we habitually gaze at. The habits of our hearts follow the habits of our phones.

**My Head Thinks ... I want to use moments of discipline to teach my kids, not just be angry at them.**

**My Old Habit Leads My Heart...**

But my constant reaction is just to get mad and yell when they act out in the same ways over and over.

**Until a New Habit Leads My Heart...**

Until I practiced the habit of pausing and praying before I discipline. I didn't realize that I am the one who needs a timeout. The prayerful pause doesn't make what they did right, but it helps my heart remember I'm a broken and needy child of God, just like they are. A carefully chosen habit for my kids changes my heart for my kids.

### My Head Thinks ... I want to pray for my kids.

#### **My Old Habit Leads My Heart...**

But it just never happens. I worry a lot for them, but I never actually pray.

#### **Until a New Habit Leads My Heart...**

Until I practiced the habit of praying at their door each night before I get into bed. Sure, it is only a minute or so, but I realize that while my heart isn't good at spontaneously praying for them, it was very good at getting into a nightly routine of praying for them.

I will unpack all of these examples more in the chapters to come, but notice that just like me, most parents *want* to be patient, attentive, and loving parents who pray for their kids and show them gentleness. But until our hopes make their way from our heads to our habits, nothing changes. The idea of the parents we want to be remains stuck in our minds, and our kids suffer for that.

But it doesn't have to be that way. It is possible to practice habits of the household that lead our hearts, and our children's hearts, in new directions.

That said, let me also be careful and clear. This book will not claim that there are some easy life hacks that can kickstart your best parenting life in a couple of days. Nothing important is easy. So I will not claim that rethinking the habits of our households is easy in any sense. But what I will claim is that these habits profoundly matter to our families' spiritual formation, and changing them is possible.

It may be the most important thing you do as a parent.

### **Habits of the Household as a "Rule of Life"**

The idea that we should be attentive to our communal habits is not new. Not at all. There is an ancient monastic term for this



idea. It's called a "rule of life." A rule of life is a pattern of shared habits intended to shape a community in the love of God.

The concept of a rule of life gains some of its roots from the story of Daniel and the way he and his fellow servants insisted that while they would serve in Babylon's courts, they would follow a different pattern of living. Their commitment to specific habits of eating, drinking, and praying (their rule of life) is what allowed them to be "in the world, but not of it."<sup>6</sup>

We see a similar idea in the early Christian church described in Acts 2. Early believers' conversions led them to adopt habits radically different from the world around them.<sup>7</sup> The distinctiveness of their habits set them apart, called them to the commitments of their faith, and attracted many others to join them.

The idea that our faith should lead us to commit to communal habits was formalized in the monasteries of famous church fathers like St. Augustine and St. Benedict, each of whom wrote a rule of life for their monasteries. If you read these wonderful documents, and you should, you will find them equal parts inspiring and eccentric. Some of the habits are nitpicky (like how much wine should be allocated to a monk),<sup>8</sup> some of them are awe-inspiring commitments to community and friendship (like Augustine's "whenever you go out, walk together, and when you reach your destination, stay together"),<sup>9</sup> and many others are exactly what you would expect—rhythms of prayer, Scripture reading, and eating together.

But what you can't miss if you read these rules is the thing that motivated them: *love*. Daniel, the early church, and the monastics all were simply living out Jesus' summary of the law—the

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6. The phrase often used to summarize John 17:14–19.

7. Acts 2:42–47.

8. *Rule of St. Benedict*, chapter 40.

9. *Rule of St. Augustine*, chapter IV, sentence 2.

## Reimagining Household Habits as Gospel Liturgies

essence of Christian life is loving God and loving neighbor. Out of centuries of this tradition of communities choosing their communal habits carefully, a new phrase began to grow: “the school of love.” All kinds of spiritual communities have used this phrase since, and with good reason.

The most Christian way to think about our households is that they are little “schools of love,” places where we have one vocation, one calling: to form all who live here into lovers of God and neighbor.

This is not a works-based legalistic endeavor, it’s a grace-based beautiful one.

When brothers and sisters who came before us set out to form communal habits, they weren’t trying to prove or earn anything. They were trying to create a framework of habit on which the love of God and neighbor could grow. In fact, the Latin root for the word *rule* didn’t mean a law you had to obey. It connoted a bar or a trellis—a framework that allows life to flourish. ★

These communities realized that if they didn’t shape their trellis of habit, the world would shape one for them. They were saying, “If we don’t have radical communal habits to form us, we will end up conforming to the communal patterns of the world around us.” ★

They saw with clear eyes that their world was malforming people into typical Babylonians and Romans. Lives that were blind to seeing God for who he is. Lives that were ordered around the love of self, the love of power, the love of riches, and the love of sex. Lives that look, from our perspective, suspiciously American.

The phrase *rule of life* might be new to you, but the concept is not. We all have a set of communal habits we are defaulting to. But most of our families are defaulting to the American set of habits, the American rule of life.

By not choosing our habits carefully, we are falling back on rhythms that are forming us in all of the usual patterns of unceasing screentime, unending busyness, unrivaled consumerism, unrelenting loneliness, unmitigated addictions, and unparalleled distraction.

“Systems are perfectly designed to get the results they are getting,” so say the business gurus.<sup>10</sup> Our contemporary system of cultural habits is the same. The cultural default is perfectly designed to produce the kinds of families it is producing. We are familiar with them. So why would we, as Christians called to be ambassadors of Christ, default to this American rule of life?

In suggesting that we reconsider our habits of the household, I am suggesting that we reclaim the idea of creating a rule of life in our families so we can produce something other than the typical anxiety-ridden, depression-prone, lonely, confused, and screen-addicted teenager. So we can form children in God’s love. So we can train them in meaningful relationships. So we can teach them the peace that comes with knowing the unconditional love of Jesus. So we can create homes that are missional lights in a dark world.

We need a household rule of life if we are to become families that love the world like God loves us. This is an urgent matter for our families, and it’s also an urgent matter of neighbor love. We cannot be the lovers of God and neighbor we are called to be without examining the habits of the household.

## Being Parented by God

I’m in the hallway again, but this time it’s before I go to bed, and I’m praying at their door. This is another little habit that was born

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10. Quote often attributed to W. Edwards Deming.

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half from intention and half from desperation. I often visit their door in the evening before sleeping and say something like this: “God, please parent me so I can parent them.”

It is years later now, and the more I’ve thought about habits and formation in the family, the more I’ve realized how connected we are. My habits are forming me into a certain kind of parent. My parenting is forming them into certain kinds of children. We are all, together, forming each other into a certain kind of family.

There is no escaping habits and formation in the family. We become our habits, and our kids become us. The family, for better or worse, is a formation machine.

The stakes are high, and if all we looked at is what we’re doing as a family, this talk about habits would be an incredible burden.

But not if we look up. When we look up, we see that we have a heavenly father, a divine parent who is parenting us. He is forming us into perfectly loved children of the King. We do not have to invent anything, carry anything, or bear the final burden of parenting. We just get to follow someone.

The Christian posture toward habits of the household is not about carrying our families on our backs and hiking up the steep mountain of life. It is much more childlike than that. It is simply about taking hold of the outstretched hand of our heavenly Father and following him, one baby step at a time.

Our best parenting comes when we think less about being parents of children and more about being children of God.

So don’t worry. Rethinking the habits of your household isn’t a heavy burden. What’s heavy is continuing to do nothing. What’s burdensome is continuing to follow default cultural habits. But taking the hand of God and being willing to follow him wherever he leads—that’s light. It’s the posture of a child.

Someone who is stronger than you and who loves you is in charge. And that’s good news for parents *and* children.