

Habits in Religious Life

by J.R. Miller

The ultimate goal of Christian culture is to become 'second nature' to do right and beautiful things, without even thinking about them.

Scripture: Philippians 2:12

Topics: "Authentic Faith", "Spiritual Habits"

Description

J.R. Miller addresses the concern of individuals whose religious practices have become mere habits, leading them to question the authenticity of their faith. He emphasizes that true greatness in Christian life often comes unconsciously, much like a skilled musician or artist who performs effortlessly after years of practice. Miller reassures that while initial efforts may feel forced, over time, these habits can cultivate a character that naturally reflects Christ's virtues. He encourages believers to embrace the process of developing spiritual habits, as they shape one's character and lead to a life that pleases God without conscious effort. Ultimately, he highlights that the journey of faith involves both discipline and the eventual ease of living out one's beliefs.

Transcript

Some conscientious people are anxious because their religious life has become such a matter of habit, that they are not conscious of any voluntary efforts to live right. They feel that their acts and services cannot be pleasing to God, when rendered without any conscious desire to honor him. They are oppressed with the fear that their comfortable religion is really only formality. They pray at certain hours, and go to church at certain times, and they go through regular routines of duties, and they seem to be good and to do good by routine--rather than from the heart. The methodicalness of their piety frightens them when they think seriously about it: it seems to them, that, in all their acts of devotion and service, there should be a spontaneous feeling, ever fresh and sweet.

A little reflection will show us that such anxiety is groundless. All true greatness, is unconscious of itself. It is so of beauty. The sweetest feature in childhood, is its unconsciousness. Whenever the little girl begins to be conscious that she is pretty--her beauty is greatly marred. The highest skill in any art--is that which is not conscious of skill. Poets do their best work--when they are conscious of no effort. They write, as it were, by natural inspiration, just as a bird sings. Artists reach their highest achievements, when they are conscious of making no great exertion. A musician brings the sweetest strains from his instrument, when he is not conscious of trying to do anything great. The highest attainment in any art, is that in which the art

is forgotten. The appearance of effort, mars any performance. All truly great things--are done easily and unconsciously.

The principle is just as true in its application to Christian life. When one is conscious of his spiritual graces--the beauty of these graces is marred. When a man knows that he is humble--his humility vanishes. When one has to make efforts to be generous, patient, or unselfish--he has yet much to learn about these elements. The highest reach in Christian character, brings the disciple back to the simplicity of a little child, when he is utterly unconscious of the splendor of his character in Heaven's sight. This is the culmination--but it takes many years oftentimes to attain to such completeness.

Take piano-playing. You listen entranced to the skillful performer. His fingers fly over the keys, and wander effortlessly over the chords, up and down the octaves--and the music thrills you. You are utterly amazed at the skill he exhibits; yet it seems no effort to him; he does it all as easily as the bird sings its morning song in the grove. This is the ultimate of his art; but it was not always so. Behind what you now see and hear--lie long, patient years of weary, toilsome learning, and tedious, exhausting practice, when he had to pick out each separate note on the key-board, then pass to the next, and search for that.

So you see a Christian who is very patient, or has great meekness. He is not easily provoked. When he is insulted, his face grows a little pale--but there is no outburst; no anger clouds his brow; no passionate word escapes his lips; he rules his own spirit; he speaks the soft answer, or is silent; or, he has wondrous Christian joy. He has sorrows--but amid them all, his heart rejoices. His life is a "song in the night," or he has attained rare, almost unearthly, spirituality. He seems to have actual converse with heaven. A celestial brightness clings to him. He walks the earth as if he were a visitant from another world; his daily life is a prayer, breathing out a silent, unconscious influence of heavenliness, as a sweet flower pours out fragrance on the common air. Or he lives a Christian life of superior nobleness. He displays the graces of the Spirit in unusual measure. He manifests Christ's hidden life wherever he goes. His life is one of great usefulness, as, with beautiful unselfishness, he ministers to the good of others. His heart is touched by every cry of distress, and his hand goes out to give relief to all suffering and need--and all this costs no effort! It appears easy and natural for him to be just such a Christian, and he seems unconscious of any pre-eminent attainments.

Looking at such characters and lives, many feel discouraged. They say, "I can never be such a Christian!" Or perhaps they take another view of it, and say, "It costs these men or women nothing to be godly Christians; it is easy and natural to them. They have to make no effort to be true, meek, gentle, unselfish, or good-tempered and sweet-spirited. If they had my quick, fiery nature--they could not be so! If they were made of tinder, as I am--they would not be able so to rule their spirits under keen provocation! If they had my fiery emotions, they could not be joyful when sorrow sweeps over them! If they had all my peculiarities of constitution, circumstance, and environment, all my trials and difficulties--they could not be such lovely, full-rounded Christians!"

No doubt, there is something in temperament and constitution--but there is far less than many of us claim. It is very convenient to have such a scapegoat on which to pile the responsibility for bad temper and execrable living--but the difference usually is--in the culture of the life. It is just as in the case of the pianist. You see the matured character, the disciplined spirit, the trained life--and you marvel at the ease, the perfectness, the unconsciousness, with which these beautiful things are done. But you know nothing of the years which lie behind these results, in which there were exertions, efforts, struggles, and failures; amid which, a thousand times, hearts grew faint, and spirits sank almost in despair. What we admire and

envy in the finely cultured character, is not the spontaneity of unschooled nature--but the result of years and years of patient and painful discipline, by which a disposition, perhaps coarse and crude and impetuous--has been trained into refinement, gentleness, and calm peace.

The tendency of all faithful and true living--is toward the confirmation and solidifying of Christian character. We grow always in the direction of our habits and efforts. He who continually struggles to be unselfish, will have many a conflict and many a defeat; but at length he will learn to exercise an unselfish spirit without any exertion. The wheels have run so long and so often in one track--that they have cut deep grooves for themselves, into which they fall, as if by nature.

Yet this does not take away from the moral character of the acts themselves. Indeed, it shows, that, instead of doing certain specific things in detail to please God--the whole life has become bent, trained, and solidified into conformity with holiness. It shows, that, instead of piecemeal obedience, holy principles have become wrought into the very fibre and quality of the soul. There may be less feeling, less emotion, less consciousness of trying to please God in the minute acts of life; but the character itself has taken on the stamp of holiness, and the natural motions of the soul have been trained into the grooves of righteousness. Yielding habitually to the monitions of the Spirit--the life has been transformed more and more into the image of Christ, until unconsciously, and without effort, the Christian does the things that please God.

This is the ultimate of Christian culture. It has in the highest and truest sense become "second nature" to do right and beautiful things, and not even to stop to think of them as right and beautiful, or to weigh their moral character. Who does not know some quiet Christian life, which makes no pretension to greatness, which is simple, humble, modest, unobtrusive--and yet performs a blessed ministry, breathing fragrance and joy all about itself?

The more we watch the seeds which grow and bring forth fruit in this world--the more shall we learn that they are oftenest those that are unconsciously dropped, when the sower knows not that his hand is scattering golden grains of life. When we try to do something great or dazzling--nothing comes of it. God seems to blight the things we do with large intent; then, when we do some simple thing, without pretentious purpose, or any thought of excellence or fame--he makes the results immortal. Surely no one will say that these beautiful things possess no moral quality, because they are wrought unconsciously, or through force of long habit.

A ripe Christian character is simply a life in which all Christian virtues and graces have become fixed and solidified into permanence, as established habits. It costs no struggle to do right, because what has been done so long, under the influence of grace in the heart, has become part of the regenerated nature. The bird sings not to be heard--but because the song is in its heart, and must be expressed. It sings just as sweetly in the depths of the forest, with no ear to listen, as by the crowded thoroughfare.

Beethoven did not sing for fame--but to give utterance to the glorious music that filled his soul. The face of Moses did not shine to convince the people of his holiness--but because he had dwelt so long in the presence of God, that it could not but shine. Truest, ripest Christian life, flows out of a full heart--a heart so filled with Christ that it requires no effort to live holy, and to scatter the sweetness of grace and love.

It must be remembered, however, that all goodness in living begins first in obeying rules, in keeping commandments. Mozart and Mendelssohn began with running scales and striking chords, and with painful finger-exercises. The noblest Christian, began with the simplest obediences. The way to become

skillful--is to do things over and over, until we can do them perfectly, and without thought or effort. The way to become able to do great things--is to do our little things with endless repetition, and with increasing dexterity and carefulness. The way to grow into Christlikeness of character--is to watch ourselves in the minutest things of thought and word and act--until our powers are trained to go almost without watching, in the lines of moral right and holy beauty.

To become prayerful, we must learn to pray by the clock, at fixed times. It is fine ideal talk to say that our devotions should be like the bird's songs, warbling out anywhere, and at any time, with sweet unrestraint. But in plain truth, to depend upon such impulses as guides to praying, would soon lead to no praying at all. This may do for our heavenly life; but we have not gotten into heaven yet; and until we do--we need to pray by habit.

So of all religious life. We can only grow into patience by being as patient as we can, daily and hourly, and in smallest matters, ever learning to be more and more patient until we reach the highest possible culture in that line.

We can only become unselfish by practicing unselfishness wherever we have an opportunity, until our life grows into the permanent beauty of unselfishness. We can only grow better, by striving ever to be better than we already are, and by climbing step by step toward the radiant heights of excellence.

Thus our daily habits carry in them the buds and prophecies of our future character. The test of all moral life--is in its tendencies. The question is not, What point have you attained to? But, Which way are you tending? In what direction is your growth? Is your character tending and aiming toward patience, gentleness, truth and love? Or toward impatience, hardness, falsehood and selfishness? What is the trend of your spiritual habits? We grow always in the direction of our daily living. The powers we use, develop continually into greater strength. The graces we cultivate, come out more and more clearly in our character.

A bird that would not use its wings, would soon have no wings that it could use. Made to soar above the earth as our souls are, to fly toward God and heaven--if we only grovel in the dust, and do not use our wings, we lose the power to soar, and our whole life grows toward earthliness. But if we train ourselves to look upward, to walk erect, to gather our soul's food from the branches of the tree of life--ur whole being will grow toward spirituality and heavenliness.

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