

“Habits” (Renew Your Mind: Gospel Hope for Mental Health – Pt. 3)

(2 Timothy 1:7)

- **Creatures of Habit**

- It's week 3 of *Renew Your Mind: Gospel Hope for Mental Health*. We've talked about thoughts, feelings, and today, *habits*. How many of you consider yourselves “creatures of habit”? (So, the rest of you are the “loose cannons” and “free spirits”, right?) Imagine doing a “habit audit” of all the things you do automatically. What jumps out? I'm amazed how much *coffee* has habituated itself into my life. Once I'm awake, there are two things I have to do: when my eyes open, I try to first think about God and thank Him—after that, as soon as my feet hit the floor, *I've got to have a hot cup of coffee*. It's ingrained! It's my cue to wake up. I'm the lead “Coffee Maker” in our house. I need the preset coffee pot that auto-brews so it's already there when you wake up. Ours just broke, so we borrowed one from my mom that doesn't auto brew—but I still *pre-fill it* the night before, so all I have to do when I wake up is *press the button*. I'm so meticulous, most days, once the morning coffee is done, I'm already cleaning out the pot, refilling the water and scooping the grounds for the next day *before I even leave the house* so that I know, deep in my soul, *if everything else falls apart that day, at least I will go to sleep that night knowing there will be a pot of coffee waiting the next morning*. (Once in a while, I forget to add grounds, and I wake up to a pot of hot water—those are not good days.) It's bonkers, I know! But: *creatures of habit*.
- What's your thing, what's your routine that's become automatic? All humans are creatures of habit—some are just more structured and others more flexible. But we all need habits to make life work. It's estimated that 40-60% of our actions are *automatic, habit-based*. Imagine having to *consciously think* before everything you did: “*Should I eat today? Should I brush my teeth, should I buckle my seatbelt, should I breath 12-20 times this next minute?*” Habits allow us to grow and adapt; habits make basic things automatic so our brains can direct energy to working out new issues. We couldn't function the way we do if our brains weren't *wired* to form habits.

- MIT neuroscientists discovered the “**The Habit Loop**” to explain how we function: **Step 1) The Cue** (a stimulus triggers your brain into automatic mode to engage a habit—*wake up*), **Step 2) The Routine** (a physical, mental or emotional action you take in response to the cue—*drink coffee*), **Step 3) The Reward** (the positive reinforcement that tells your brain this felt good, providing a burst of dopamine or relief, fueling a craving to repeat it—*feel happy because Coffee Good!*). You can see how this plays out with positive things as well as destructive things. The key to changing habits is becoming aware of steps 1 and 3, then swapping out step 2 with a different routine: discover the cue that triggers it and the reward the drives it, then replace it with a better routine that rewards you in a healthier way. You’ll soon form a more life-giving habit.
- You know one of the biggest factors in habits and mental health these days? *Smart phones*. We have constant access to platforms that *habituate* us to digital life—infinite scroll, reactions, algorithms, addictive content. People (especially youth) spend hours a day on screens, less time outside, less time in face-to-face relationships. You better believe these habits shape us.
- Here’s why I think it’s important to talk about habits when it comes to mental health: sometimes we think of it mainly in terms of what happens in here (our heads, hearts, thoughts, feelings), but the reality is, so much of our mental health is impacted by things that take place *out there*: our environment, routines, lifestyles, *habits*. Sometimes things that have a big impact on our spiritual life are the things that seem “not so spiritual.” The Bible has much to say about habits, and we’re going to dig into one key verse. Before we do, let’s pray—a very good habit indeed!
- **The Gift of Power, Love, Self-Discipline**
 - With all that in mind, let’s open to today’s verse—it’s simple, memorable, and powerful: “**For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.**” (2 Tim. 1:7) Confession: this is the type of verse I feel *great* reading when I think I’m doing good—when my life is in good order, I’m exercising good routines, when I feel I’m doing a good job managing everything, *I love this verse!* But when life feels chaotic and out of rhythm, when it feels like life is “happening to me” and I’m just trying to keep up, when I get caught in a negative

loop of seeking relief through too much mindless numbing that robs the energy I need to do the things that actually restore me—*I don't like this verse so much!* But the reason this Scripture is so amazing is that it actually contradicts that part of me that looks at discipline as something I have to perform, a standard to measure up to if I don't want to be a disappointment—it puts this crucial topic of habit forming within the proper framework of grace and the hope of the Gospel.

- 1 and 2 Timothy are part of the “pastoral letters” where Paul directly encourages individuals he worked with. Timothy was a young leader Paul had personally prayed over, mentored, and placed in leadership over a challenging church setting in Ephesus. Timothy was probably in his 30's. He's mentioned often in the N.T., and some scholars think there's evidence he was more of a shy leader, he might have struggled with confidence and leadership anxiety. It's hard to be certain, but know that he definitely faced a challenging leadership environment as a young pastor in Ephesus, so Paul encourages often. Paul opens 2 Timothy with words of grace and empowerment. He challenges Timothy to continue serving as a faithful minister of the Gospel. He reminds him of the moment Paul laid hands on him to pray for the Holy Spirit to fill his life, and the gifts of God were poured him by God's Spirit. Then he gives these words: *“For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.”*
- There are a few other times when Paul warns Christians not to give into a “spirit of fear” or timidity—once is in Romans 8, he references Exodus when the Israelites wanted to go back to Egypt instead of into the Promised Land, because the familiarity of captivity seemed easier than the fear of the unknown in God's new territory. We all know that sense of reluctance, that hesitation that sometimes overtakes us when we second guess and wonder, *“Do I really want to go all in? Would it be easier to play it safe? Do I have what it takes to go into this unknown territory?”* How often these feelings creep in, whether it's leadership, family, work, faith. Paul says with conviction, *that's not the Spirit God gave us!* When you feel that way about something you know God wants you to do, *that's not the Holy Spirit*, that's your flesh, your old sinful nature talking! On the contrary, the Spirit God gives to us is a Spirit of *power, love and self-discipline*.

- Here's what I love about this verse. It's so obvious, but I am so engrained (habituated) to a mindset of performance and self-criticism that I miss what it's *actually saying*. I hear "power, love, self-discipline" and I automatically think, "try harder, do better, behave" and, "you're not doing enough." But that's focusing on *my own power* and that's precisely what it's *not saying*. What are the key verbs? **"For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline." (2 Tim. 1:7)** How many of you struggle with confidence? How many struggle to love well? How many of you struggle with self-control?
- Paul is not saying to Timothy and us Christ-followers: *figure that out, knock it off, be better!* He's saying, *hey, those things are what the pre-Christ version of you struggles with—but Christian, let me remind you that once you said yes to Jesus, you received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who now dwells within you as a comforter and guide, and He gives us a very different spirit than the one you inherited from Adam and Eve—He gives you the gifts of power, love, and self-control. Instead of trying to do this project on your own, let God take over your life and learn to receive His gifts of grace that transform the way you think and live. God gives us power, love and self-control (or a sound mind, wisdom, discipline).*
- Some commentators talk about how this "triad" of gifts forms a mature Christian character: we tend to emphasize *one* at the expense of others. Some only want to talk about *power*—let's do something great for God! But they neglect love and wisdom. Others only want the love—but maybe they shrink back from the hard stuff and don't want to worry about ordering their life. And others just focus on being very prudent, self-disciplined—but they won't venture into areas that require God's power, or do the radical loving stuff. We need the Spirit to develop all 3 in us—*power, love, self-discipline*—to grow in the fullness of Christ.
- **Making a Rule of Life**
 - Today, we talk about "spiritual disciplines" as habits and practices that help form us in Christ-likeness. Things like prayer, Scripture, worship, service, witness, and much more. Spiritual discipline is a good term, but there's an older phrase I think is even better at capturing what the Bible really means: previous generations of Christians called these habits **Means of Grace**. This places the emphasis in the

proper place: **not on our strength of will and discipline, but on His empowering grace.** These spiritual habits we form are best understood as **means by which we increase our reliance on God's grace.** Spiritual disciplines, means of grace are **habits by which I position myself to receive the grace of God.** It is God's grace, God's gift, which transforms me by the renewing of my mind (like Rom. 12 says). The Gospel of Jesus is not a Gospel of behavior management that says if I just try harder I'll be better. It is not a Gospel of cheap grace that says I can do whatever I want now that I've got a ticket to heaven. It is a Gospel of transformation by grace through a relationship with Jesus. When we talk about the gifts of power, love and self-discipline, what we're saying is: *turn to God in those moments of weakness and rely on the Holy Spirit who lives in you to give you the strength, the goodness, the wisdom you need, to form a new way of life, following the way of Jesus step by step, day by day, in community with others.* Ask Him to help you discover that "trigger" and "reward" that's driving you, then invite the Holy Spirit right into the middle of that: *Lord, fill this destructive habit with your presence and replace it with something that will give me the Life I'm really longing for, activate your gifts of power, love and self-discipline right in the middle of my broken loops of sin.*

- Some of our struggles with mental health and spiritual growth aren't just from inner thoughts and feelings, but from lifestyles that lead to a lack of well-being. Your soul is trying to tell you, *something is wrong. Your body needs sleep, your heart needs connection with others, your soul needs time in God's creation: get out of the basement, touch some grass!* Build a life based on the rhythms God created you for instead of broken systems of isolation and self-centeredness.
- So, we really need practical tools that we can live out and I want to give you something special today: A long time ago, Christians developed what's called **"A Rule of Life," Regula Vitae.** It's time-tested and believers still use this concept today. This "rule" is not a box, a cage, a barbed-wire-fence around your life. spirit of a rule of life is more like a *trellis* that provides the structure to grow, thrive, and be fruitful. It takes the biblical means of grace, and sets a lifestyle of daily, weekly, monthly, seasonal habits that build your life on the *rhythms of grace*, based on the way God has wired you and the season you're in. It's like an audit of your habits,

time and energy that helps you rebuild your routines and lifestyle with Jesus.

(Slide) Follow this link for a free online tool to help you make a rule of life. You won't get it right away, it takes times to practice and figure out what you really need for this season. But try it out, ask the Spirit to help you, and build a life based on the rhythms of grace instead of the patters of this world.

- **Sleeping with Bread**

- All of us are being shaped and disciplined by something: it's just a question of *what's forming you*. If you want to be formed by *Jesus and His Kingdom*, you have to be intentional to receive His grace and truth into the daily details, the habits of your life. That's the process of *renewing your mind*. You could start as simple as looking at how you start and end your day: do you have an intentional rhythm that anchors you in God's grace, or do you automatically start scrolling on your phone, checking email, numbing out? Really simple steps in this one area can change your life.
- I talked about how I start and finish my day thinking about coffee—it's funny, but it makes me think of another story that's more meaningful. Spiritual directors sometimes use the analogy of "sleeping with bread". It comes from a WWII story: in Europe, cities devastated by war were filled with orphans who had to figure out how to survive alone. When relief workers came and brought them in, these kids were traumatized by the fear of going hungry and not being cared for. One story says they started to send children to bed with a little loaf of bread—just to give that security, to remind them they could go to sleep without worrying about the next day.
- There's something deeply resonant in this story: all of us have a kind of "orphan spirit" apart from God. We go through life reaching for survival and relief on our own. Once we come to Christ, we become children of God. But we need habits that remind us that *we have everything we need in Him*. "Sleeping with Bread" means starting and every day nourished by God's grace and truth. We habituate our lives with the awareness that *we are children of God*: **"For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline."** (2 Tim. 1:7)