



Ten Habits That Make Your Life Better

Habit One

The other day I was walking, and it was at about 6:30 in the morning. Someone came to a stop sign but did not stop. She just rolled into it slowly and seeing no one approaching the crosswalks, blew through it. I was surprised by it and rather critical in my mind. What if someone was there she didn't see. It seemed awfully risky to me, endangering the lives of others. As I was walking along, the Lord reminded me that I had done the exact same thing just the week before. In that moment, I felt a flash of guilt and ashamedly admitted to the Lord I had been wrong. What struck me was how little thought I originally gave to my violation of the law. Some would argue that it was not a big deal what I had done but the truth is that it was wrong and what bothered me most was my near total lack of concern earlier about what I had done and how easily I shrugged off my illegal action...not to mention the risk I took of perhaps hitting someone I did not see.

Not everyone feels guilty when they do wrong. Sometimes we pass it off as insignificant or ignore it altogether. Obviously not all guilt is the same. At times we barely notice it. Other times it eats us alive. Shakespeare in his play Macbeth brilliantly described the psychological havoc guilt can have on you. Lady Macbeth convinced her husband to have King Duncan killed when he stayed in their home so he could steal the throne from him. Afterward, even though she did not actually help kill the king, Lady Macbeth began sleepwalking and in her dreams her hands were covered with Duncan's blood and try as she would, she could not remove it. Macbeth himself began to imagine he saw Duncan's ghost. Rarely does guilt have such an intense psychological impact on us but scientific research has shown that it does in fact alter sections of our brain. MRI studies have made it clear that there are specific regions of the brain that register guilt and are impacted by it. King David of Israel famously sinned and admitted the impact his guilt had on him psychologically as well as physically. **My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear. My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly. I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning. My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body. I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart. All my longings lie open before you, O Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you. My heart pounds, my strength fails me; even the light has gone from my eyes.** (Psalm 38: 4-10 NIV)

Admittedly David experienced extreme levels of guilt and his sin was outrageous and horrific. But you would be wrong to shrug off David's physical and psychological response to his guilt as unique to his terrible wrong-doing. Guilt impacts you psychologically and physically. Guilt increases depression, anxiety, it makes you more irritable and reduces your sense of self-awareness. The longer you carry the weight of your sin, the less likely you are to see yourself clearly. If you overlook the wrong you do for any extended period of time, you will start to ignore other parts of you that are important. For a few years, even though the people cutting my hair commented on how my hair in the back was thinning, I did not try to see for myself what was happening. Only recently did I discover what everyone else knew about me. I had a legitimate bald spot on the back of my head. When we don't deal with our guilt the right way, we start to miss crucial parts of our personality, our behavior, and our reactions to stress that others see firsthand, but we miss. That is why relationships can mysteriously come apart and we have no idea why. We assume that it is because there is something wrong with the other person or persons when in fact, we are a part of the problem and perhaps even the leading cause of it.

Guilt is a weight we carry that is completely unnecessary. Whether the wrong we have done is big or small, it impacts us in some way to our harm. We don't need to carry the weight of sin. God has a plan to make your life better and this is the first habit you need to implement immediately. Confession of wrongdoing.

One of the most important statements on mental health and happiness was written by King David. **Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.** (Psalm 32: 1-3 NIV) Keep in mind that the Hebrew word translated blessed has to do with happiness. Twice David reiterates it. You are happier and better off when you confess your sins, your wrongdoing so that God takes the guilt away from you. Like a heavy sack of weights on your back, wrongdoing weighs you down and takes some of your happiness away. The more the sin of your life goes unconfessed, the greater the harm to you physically, emotionally, and of course spiritually. The first habit for a better life is to get rid of that terrible weight you carry and confess your wrong to God so He can relieve you of the burden. For many, and this may be true of you, unconfessed sin is literally killing them. It is certainly robbing them of the happiness they could enjoy and likely is damaging their health.

The strategy of this first habit for a better life is two pronged. First, confess any sins on your part that come to mind to God. **If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.** (1 John 1: 9 CSB) Here is where this first habit gets quite interesting. The Greek term translated 'cleanse' means "to prune". It was used to describe the actions of gardeners who cut off unproductive or dead branches so the plant or tree would be healthier and more productive. What does God do for you if you confess your wrongdoing to Him? He supernaturally improves your life. He makes you more productive by eliminating from your personality the parts of you damaged by your sin. Another way to put it is that He "upgrades" you each time you confess your sins to Him. This is not how you gain salvation or eternal life. That comes solely from the death of Christ and His sacrifice. **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.** (Ephesians 2: 8-9 NIV) Salvation is not yours because you confess all your sins to God. It is a gift to you from God and you gain it when by faith you receive the salvation our Lord offers you. **But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** (Romans 5:8 NIV) When Jesus Christ died on the Cross, He did so to provide you with salvation. Confession of sin is not so that you will gain eternal life. It is to enable you to enjoy your eternal life. You confess each sin to God that He points out to you so that you can get rid of the damage your sins have caused you.

Here is the second prong of Habit one for a better life. Admit to those you have wronged by your bad behavior that you did so. Confess those sins to them. **Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.** (James 5: 16a NIV) When you realize you treated someone badly, set a lousy example or said something that hurt the person in some way, admit it and let the person know you were wrong. The benefit to you is that healing takes place. You are healed. Perhaps not of some disease or injury but inside you, at the heart level, the damage your sin has caused you gets fixed by God. You may not be forgiven. It could be that the other person will hold a grudge against you. Don't worry about that. You will be healed when you admit you were wrong. You no longer have to worry about being "caught". You can breath a great sigh of relief that the heavy burden is off your shoulders. You are free of the guilt and the damage of it in you is healed by God. The happiest people are those who keep their accounts clear. They have no sins on the ledger that they have hidden from God or those they have wronged. Their hearts are free of guilt, and they have shown by their honesty and accountability that they can be trusted. If you want a good life, then practice Habit One. Confess your sin to God and to those you have wronged.