



GOSPEL *for* LIFE

Heart and Habits with Dr. Greg Gifford

Season 3, Episode 6 Transcript

[00:00:09] [Intro]: Welcome to the Gospel for Life podcast. We help people grow by connecting truth to life. Here's your host, Darryl Dash.

[00:00:20] Darryl Dash: Welcome back to the Gospel For Life podcast.

Habits have become a very popular topic today. If you know me, you know that I like to talk a lot about habits and think about why they're important for the Christian life and life in general. But some people argue that habits are just a trend, and they may argue that it has more to do with philosophy or self-help than Christianity. So the question we want to explore today is this, the scripture have anything to teach us about the importance of habits in the Christian life.

And to help us think through that question, I'm happy to have Dr. Greg Gifford with us. He's written a really helpful book on the role of habits in the Christian life. And it is called *Heart and Habits: How We Change for Good*. Dr. Gifford is an associate professor of biblical counseling at the Masters University, and he's worked as a full-time biblical counselor and associate pastor before joining the faculty there. And when he's not teaching, I'm a little bit jealous of this, but he enjoys counseling and serving in the church as a local pastor.

[00:01:22]: Here's the part where I'm jealous: working on his Harley, wrestling with his three boys and eating good food with his wife. And Greg lives in beautiful California. We were talking before we hit record about how it's sunny all the time, and I think I could get on board with that. So Greg, welcome to the podcast.

[00:01:39] Greg Gifford: Thank you for having me, glad to be here Darryl.

[00:01:41] Darryl Dash: So I want to begin by asking you, why is everybody talking about habits these days? It seems to be the “it” topic in a lot of circles these days.

[00:01:50] Greg Gifford: You know, it does. I think *Atomic Habits*, the book by Clear, he did a good job at just getting it into the mainstream because there seemed to be this upper echelon of folks, think of like your executive leadership type who are really interested in productivity and habits. But now it's really disseminated down into people like myself where we just want to know how to live a normal life, not an executive leadership, but be more efficient and more productive in that. I would accredit a lot of it to his work, but then in general, we are seeing technology transforming how we are efficient and productive and thinking about our smartphones and our time management tools. And it just seems like we're asking questions on how can we be efficient and productive. And habits are a natural part of that conversation, it seems.

[00:02:44] Darryl Dash: So that would lead a lot of people to conclude that it really is a fad and it maybe has more to do with self-help than anything scriptural. And yet in your book, you trace the idea of habits throughout church history, focusing I think, especially on the Puritans. And I was a little bit surprised that there's so much written by the Puritans on habits. So what can we learn from what they taught on the subject?

[00:03:08] Greg Gifford: Sure. And I tend to agree that if you as a Christian are committed to the authority of God's Word, the inspiration of God's Word, it's hard to find biblical resources on habits. And it does feel like you have to go out to the secular world to get information, and it feels a bit self-help-ish and consequently faddish. I could resonate with that sentiment.

And that's partly what kind of initiated the research questions in my mind, which is how does the Bible speak about this? And then how have theologians thought about habits? So the reason I landed on the Puritans was really because there was this great drop off in theological circles on how we approach habits since the English Puritans, really, there was a biblical counselor by the name of Jay Adams, who in the 70s started talking about habituation is what he called it and rehabilitation. And there wasn't a whole lot of conversation. And some of the ways that he even mentioned and talked about it was dismissed as being overly programmatic and overly behavioristic, so there wasn't a whole lot out there. So I went back to the Puritans, and they helped me grasp the theology and the exegetical aspects that undergird why we frequently practice certain things.

[00:04:27]: So one of the most helpful contributions they make is a distinction between character, which is formed through frequent practice, and that is really

going to be a fundamental way that I tried to approach habits in this. In a classic way, you could refer to habit as character or virtue, however, when we think of habit in 2022, we often think of habit as more frequent daily practices, kind of your regular practices. So they gave me those categories, and then I started to use those categories to read their literature and then also to seek to understand how the Bible speaks to character and frequent practices.

[00:05:05] Darryl Dash: I love the distinction they make there of the character and the frequent practices. And it seems like habits actually are in Scripture implicitly. I don't think they are mentioned a lot by name. I mean, they're mentioned negatively in Hebrews 10 as a negative habit, but certainly the character and then the repeat patterns of behavior are all over the Scripture. So would you understand habits as being sort of implicit in Scripture?

[00:05:32] Greg Gifford: Yeah, I would say implicit, and in a few instances the term habit isn't used, but maybe frequent obedience or kind of like a present tense, continuous obedience. In Philippians 2:12, I think would be an example of that where the church at Philippi is called to obey and work out their salvation in light of who Christ is. And that frequent obedience is something that God uses to help transform their desires or their heart. And so your frequent actions do affect your desires, which is partly what I argue in the book.

[00:06:06] Darryl Dash: So how would you define a habit?

[00:06:09] Greg Gifford: I would first of all create those two overarching categories, habit as frequent regular practice to the point where it's almost compulsive or instinctual towards just what you do, and in a sense, you're on autopilot. In that way, think of driving a car, most of us can drive a car without much cognitive intention. We just know that we can shift in this way, that blinker turn signal, you shift the lever one direction, you shift it down for another direction. And at that point, we have done it so many times that it's almost second nature to us. So that's one way to define a habit, your frequent regular practices to where it's almost compulsive or instinctual, people will say second nature to communicate something. You don't have to put a lot of cognitive intentionality to do that thing. The second I would include habit as character or virtue, and that's more of a classical understanding of habit or *habitus* because we're talking about the type of person that you are. And by that we just mean are you a kind person, are you a loving person? Are you a generous person? And if you are those things, that is your character or attributes of who you are.

[00:07:27]: So how did you become those things? Well, that's where I start to talk about habit development. But those two overarching categories are how I would begin to create the sphere in which I'm talking about. And I do my best to

argue that they're not distinct because what you regularly practice will shape or misshape the type of person that you become, which is your character.

[00:07:50] Darryl Dash: I really appreciated your book because it gives that biblical and historical perspective on habits, and I think it's the first book to do that that I've read. I'm sure there are others out there, but at least at a popular level it was very clear and helpful. So Greg, I've heard the argument that there are a lot of habits in literature, even in Christianity these days, but it really has more to do with Aristotle than it does with Scripture necessarily. So could you respond to that? Because there is that argument that it is a very Greek approach to life, and again, Aristotle. So how would you respond to that?

[00:08:24] Greg Gifford: Well, I mean naturally, Aristotle did have a big impact on the way we think about virtue, and even the English Puritans themselves quote Aristotle. A part of my doctoral dissertation was trying to figure out how the English Puritans came to the conclusions they did, and one of those is they actually quote Aristotle. But what they do is Aristotle believes that a habit was something that was determined by you and character was something that is determined by you. And the English Puritans began to reinterpret that, and they used the term supernatural habit. Now that may seem somewhat mystical to us to say supernatural habit, but that would comport more to what we would understand to be new life at the moment of conversion, and that God implants in you certain desires when he gives you a renewed heart. So to talk about the new covenant and a new heart when you first start following Christ, isn't Aristotle, that's Bible, that's what it teaches us. So Aristotle, in a sense, was perhaps right about moral change in general or immoral people, immoral change. But he doesn't go far enough, and that's where the Puritans really are attempting to clarify.

[00:09:51]: Aristotle is just observing morality and immorality. But when a person is transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit in their life, they have a new inner person, a new heart, which leads them to new actions. And those new actions of obedience affect and change the heart. And God uses your obedience to further sanctify your inner person, your heart. So that's why I would say, like Aristotle was part of the conversation and a huge directional piece in that conversation. Yet Aristotle wasn't thinking through the biblical lens. And the English Puritans use Aristotle, but reinterpret his findings, so to speak, through the lens of Scripture.

[00:10:33] Darryl Dash: That's really helpful. And that leads me to ask what is particularly unique about a Christian approach to habits and maybe touching on that because you're getting into our role and God's role in creating habits. I think in the book you write about the Christian approach to habits has a different goal,

which is pleasing God and glorifying God. But probably even the way that we form habits is different because we're relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. So could you touch on some of those things in terms of what makes the Christian view of habits a bit unique?

[00:11:03] Greg Gifford: I think, like you've mentioned, there's the purpose of habits. And I do my best to argue that the number one purpose for habits is not efficiency and productivity. And in my first chapter, I try to lay out that it's glorifying God and the good of people. So our telos in life is to glorify God and to love our neighbor as ourselves, and that informs or it should inform everything that we do. So that doesn't change when we're talking about habit development. In fact, we want our habits to actually glorify God and to do good to people, and that can't be renegotiated.

Then thirdly, our tertiary goal is to be more efficient, better workers, more organized, helpful in our family, those efficiency productivity goals are still legitimate goals, we're just making sure they stay in the proper order. And practically speaking, there are those that really need to develop better vocational habits, they're just kind of a mess in certain ways organizationally. And we would say yeah, you really need to tighten up those vocational habits, but do so in a way that maintains pleasing God as your first priority, blessing others as your second priority, and then you yourself becoming more efficient and productive in your vocational sphere.

[00:12:27]: So that's your purpose, and that purpose is going to transform everything about the practical way I develop habits. Because it's no longer a self-centered effort, it's no longer about me accomplishing my goals and my advancement, this is part of my worship to the Lord. So whatever those tertiary goals are, as long as they're not disagreeing with Scripture, I can pursue them for the glory of God and the good of people. But when I'm practically developing habits, that's also going to inform the habits that I focus on firstly, the habits that are still important, but they're not the first important. The habits that are affecting my family as opposed to habits that are affecting my job or my social sphere. So to think Christianly about habits means that not all habits are created equally, and my calendar habit is not as important as me gathering with my local church, for instance. So to think Christianly, now it's going to affect the habits that I choose to develop or choose not to develop or prioritize first and delay the prioritization. And then obviously that's the prioritization of habits, the purpose of habits. But then I would even say the function of how do you practically develop a habit where you're going to do it in a way that glorifies God and does good to people? You're not going to dishonor the Lord and hurt people in the way you're practically wanting to develop certain habits. So those are the big

picture things, and then there's obviously minutiae that extend off from those overarching categories.

[00:13:57] Darryl Dash: It's really good. And in the book you actually provide a bit of a schema for which habits to maybe focus on first, and I find that really helpful and practical. What would you say to somebody who comes to you and says hey, I really want to learn how to begin to build habits and my goal is to glorify God. I realize I need to focus on loving God and loving others and then maybe getting my life in order so that I'm glorifying Him with every detail of my life. Where do I start in building habits?

[00:14:27] Greg Gifford: I would have them start to understand or maybe just be refreshed on the spheres of habits. And I'm looking for an exact chapter here, it's roughly chapter nine where there are priorities in habit development. And what I do my best to do is to biblically delineate what spheres are more important. Because one of the things I did not want to do Darryl, I didn't want to help people do this. I didn't want them to get better at their vocation and to grow in being spiritually hardened. In fact, I think that's where a lot of the modern literature gets it wrong because they can't speak to that. They want to help you accomplish your nutritional goals, your exercise goals, your vocational goals, your time management goals, but they don't speak to the spiritual aspect of your relationship with the Lord. So it's imperative for a person that's saying, if I want to grow and maybe tighten up certain areas of my life, it's imperative for them to know the spiritual priorities. And I would say the spheres of life are based off of biblical prioritization.

[00:15:38]: So if your relationship with the Lord is a mess, don't start with your time management habits, you need to start with the disciplines of reading the Bible. And being in a local church, giving to that local church, serving in the local church, repentance, and meditation on the Scripture. Those are some fundamental habits that will make you better in the other spheres. But don't jump to the other spheres of life without first addressing the things that are of most importance. I mean Jesus says you can gain the whole world and lose your own soul. So there's no point of working on vocational habits if your relationship with the Lord is not correct, as it should be.

[00:16:22] Darryl Dash: So identifying the right spheres and beginning there and prioritizing them, and then what do you do even to begin to develop habits in the most important spheres?

[00:16:31] Greg Gifford: Yeah, I try to give you ideas for habits to consider, and examples are going to be found in chapter 10, where if we're like hey, our relationship with the Lord is not good. So I give you examples of Bible reading

and meditation, prayer, biblical thinking, confession and repentance, attending a local church. And then I give examples in the personal sphere and then the familial sphere, and then out where we're going to go. So I'm doing my best where people that are just wanting to grow can go through here. Also, there's an inventory that I provide, there are example habits that I provide, things where they can go through and assess, and that's if there's not a crisis.

What I find, Darryl, is that if a person has a problem, they know the habit they need to fix. And so they don't need help discerning the habit, they just need help actually implementing the habit they know. Whereas those that's not necessarily a problem or a problem yet, are the unknown habits that I talk about in the book, and that's where an inventory can be helpful or examples can be helpful. So those are the ways that I've tried to help, but it's not exhaustive.

[00:17:41]: So it's an opportunity to prime the pump, so to speak, to help them get to thinking. So that's my best attempt in a sense of what might you develop or an inventory to ask you questions on maybe where you should focus for habit development.

[00:17:56] Darryl Dash: So I'm sure you've met people who say "Oh, habits are good for other people, I'm not really good at habits, I like to be spontaneous." What would you say to somebody like that?

[00:18:06] Greg Gifford: I would say spontaneity is a habit that you've developed, and it doesn't necessarily mean spontaneity is wrong. But you and I will have habits, we all have habits, it's just are we willing to identify them as such? And if you view them as constrictive or limiting, then I would just say you're not viewing them accurately because we all have frequent practices that we conduct. So to see yourself as not wanting to be fettered by greater habits, I think it's just inaccurate because your habits are going to be existing. The habit of not using a calendar is just as much a habit as using a calendar, in that sense.

[00:18:50] Darryl Dash: Is there a sense in which people develop habits differently? I don't know if you've read Gretchen Rubin's book *The Four Tendencies*, she argues that there are four kinds of habit keepers, and some need internal motivation, some need external. And she just goes through different types, including one type that's kind of resistant to habits. Almost like, now that you've told me that I need to read scripture, I'm just not going to read scripture on purpose. Have you thought about just how different people would build habits differently based on their temperament?

[00:19:21] Greg Gifford: I didn't speak to it a lot in this book. I do see experientially the way the Lord has knit us and gifted us, it is often reflective in

our pursuit of habit formation. If you're highly relational, then oftentimes people are the reward, in that sense, if you're highly task-oriented, then accomplishing a task is the reward. So your affirmation is you got your task done, and that's all you needed for a reward in your habit development. Whereas if you're knit towards people, it seems like just getting to be with people or celebrating in community is in part. So I haven't spent a lot of time teasing out habit development at that level. But I definitely do agree that people in their natural tendencies and God giftedness, they are motivated differently, and they're naturally drawn to habit development in different ways.

[00:20:20] Darryl Dash: So JT English, in his book *Deep Discipleship*, outlines a plan for making disciples in the context of a local church. And he talks about the importance of helping people understand Scripture, understanding the storyline. He also speaks about the importance of basically understanding theology, truth about God. And then he says the third bucket that he wants churches to develop is that of habits, of practicing key habits in the Christian life. So based on that, if that really is true, that the local church should be a place where we're helping disciples develop Godly habits, what advice would you give to pastors about how they can help their people develop habits that are going to help them grow spiritually?

[00:21:01] Greg Gifford: That's such a profound question, and pastors do that to a certain degree, whether they're thinking about why they're doing that or not. And so I want to commend many pastors for hosting regular Bible studies or prayer meetings or maintaining a weekly service of some type. Typically, it's a Sunday morning service, and you're helping your people cultivate the habit of fellowship, Bible engagement and the habit of prayer. And you may not see it as habit development, but you are, and that's what it is, and that's what it should be. But I think too, even the service itself can be oriented in such a way that formation is occurring. And you have ecumenical churches that are more credal and they'll even read historic creeds. You have those that have extensive prayer times in their services, or you have services with extensive time of teaching and scripture reading. On those occasions, you're helping cultivate Godly habits with your congregants, and those are right and good.

[00:22:12]: So the advice that I would have is that you're primarily focusing on at least the spiritual sphere is what I have called it in the book, it's the relationship you have with the Lord. But there's also the personal sphere, and I don't mean this in a weird way, but your relationship with yourself, how you think about yourself, viewing yourself in light of the Bible and then family habits. Pastors are modeling good communication habits. They're modeling good conflict resolution habits. They're modeling good time management habits by prioritizing their family personally and not letting ministry eclipse their own personal life. So

practically speaking, pastors are going to create spaces to help people be better family members. They're going to create spaces to help them learn communication habits, conflict resolution skills. They're going to create spaces to teach people how to do devotions and personal devotions, how to do Bible study and Bible reading. So if the pastor is, I think, being intentional, they're doing a good majority of this already, but maybe reminding themselves of why and the importance of such spiritual disciplines or habits for the well-being of their congregants. Because the Bible study is not just an event to attend, it's something that we're wanting them to engage in on a daily level. The good communication with their family is not just principles we're wanting them to read about, but we want those communication habits to go home and bless their spouse or their children, however that works. So the Church is very much central to habit formation because it's central to spiritual formation.

[00:24:01] Darryl Dash: I'm actually curious, I wanted to ask you this earlier, but how did you get so interested in the subject of habits? Is it through your counseling?

[00:24:12] Greg Gifford: I think it's a lot of my own personal tendencies Darryl, just to be honest, I found a void of information, kind of this cliff of theological information. I was having to patch together certain secular resources to think about habit development and its role. That and I was an officer in the United States Army, and we had to learn habits through repetition and training. Everything from our calendars, how our days were structured to particular trainings. So I think both of those and my personal inclinations, the void of theological literature and then my military experience, I think it just started to cultivate this interest. And it culminates in counseling, where I found that the people that would invest themselves into the process of developing Godly habits were those that often grew the fastest. But those that were unwilling to make practical, everyday changes were those that got stuck in their spiritual walk. And I was like man, what is the connect here? I know obedience, but what is the why of this? And so it started to lead me to the theology of habits. And that was in 2014 when I started to ask those questions.

[00:25:35] Darryl Dash: I was so excited to come across your book. I really agree there is a dearth of theological reflection on habits. I think there's a lot of practical stuff. And your book manages to be not only biblical, but historical, theological, and then practical. You're able to deal with it at all those levels really well. So I'm very excited about your book, I would commend it to anybody who's interested in this, and I think that should be actually a lot of us. Especially if we see our role as not only growing but helping others grow. I think this is a very important book and topic to be thinking about, so thank you for writing it.

[00:26:10] Greg Gifford: Thank you for the kind words about it by the way.

[00:26:13] Darryl Dash: Yeah, it's good. Greg, I wanted to ask you a couple personal questions, if I could, what are you learning lately in your life?

[00:26:19] Greg Gifford: Learning about focus and prioritizing God's priorities for me. You know how it is in ministry, there's a dozen good opportunities, but trying to be sensitive to what is it that God has called me to do and how can I do it well, and so that's been the biggest thing. There are so many good opportunities in biblical counseling or writing or teaching. And so just wanting to make sure that God's priorities are my priorities and I keep His task, His goals, maybe slowing down at times or speeding up at times. So that's the challenge, I have three kids, and you know how Ministry is. So that's where I'm at, to be honest with you.

[00:27:04] Darryl Dash: And this has been a hard couple of years. Most people I talk to are at least tired, if not maybe struggling a little bit. What's been encouraging you lately?

[00:27:13] Greg Gifford: I have been very encouraged by steadfast congregants and the people in my church maybe don't know this, I hope I do a good job at communicating this to them. I do my best to just give thanks not for what they do, but for who they are. And I see so many steadfast people. I know COVID was a difficult time health-wise, economically on certain individuals, just interpersonally. But in that I've seen so many faithful individuals that are just steadfast and loving the Lord and serving Him. And it really is life-giving to be surrounded by solid believers who are steadfast on the Lord. And so the testimonies and the cloud of witnesses that I sit in at my local church, it really is encouraging to me, and I am strengthened by the faith of others in that particular way.

[00:28:05] Darryl Dash: I'm really struck by how often Paul gave thanks for the people that he was writing to you in the epistles. And I know in a way that could be seen as being formulaic, the way you open a letter. But I think there was a real genuine appreciation, and that's very powerful. I'm just thinking to myself, I don't know if a pastor can ever be too thankful for the people we get to lead. And yeah, I think it does something for the people to know how grateful we are for them too.

[00:28:28] Greg Gifford: Yeah, because sometimes I think it can feel like this needs to be a one way street where the pastor is investing and the pastor is shepherding. But when I see just a faithful dad who's serving the Lord well, leading his family well, making an impact in his spheres, I'm challenged by that

to stay faithful, to continue to be faithful. And so I think it's not a one way street, that's the one and others in the body of Christ that we as pastors are also mutually encouraged by the faith of our people.

[00:29:02] Yes, amen to that. And where can people find out more about you and your books?

[00:29:12] Greg Gifford: Well to answer the question directly, you could go to heartandhabits.com and you could see just a couple of endorsements and a link. I've started to do podcasts like this. Reagan Rose has been very gracious to interview me as well. The association of Certified Biblical Counselors has interviewed me on different aspects of this. So you could just Google my name, Heart & Habits, and you'll not only see the book, but see different podcasts that come up. And you can also go to Amazon, it is hosting the book right now and distributing it. So those are the primary ways, and I'm expecting those just to continue to grow with different teaching opportunities.

So the shortest answer is Google it. Google my name and Heart and Habits and you'll start to see all the literature that pops up.

[00:29:59] Darryl Dash: I would echo it, but anyone who's listening to this podcast should probably be familiar with Regan Rose. Anyway, if you don't know him, look him up, and that would be a good podcast interview to start with for sure. Well Greg, thank you for your ministry. I really appreciate the book and I really look forward to reading more of your books in the future.

[00:30:18] Greg Gifford: Thank you Darryl, thank you for having me.

[00:30:21] [Outro] Hey, thanks for listening to the Gospel for Life podcast. If you're interested in growing and helping others grow, please check out our monthly newsletter. Go to gospelforlife.com/newsletter and please don't forget to leave a review of this podcast on your favorite podcast platform.