

# Before and After

## Week Six - Transformation That Travels

A GFC Lifelong Learning Study  
with Allen Hilton

### Open

We began our time together by noticing together how flimsy New Year's resolutions usually are. We asked questions like, "How long did your last New Year's Resolution last?" And "have you stopped making them long ago because they're stupid/meaningless/unproductive?" (i.e., you kept failing at them) That helped us recognize that [it is hard to change a habit](#). The brain likes its shortcuts a lot, so it locks into them and doesn't easily let them go. Making new habits takes time!

Our journey through transformation as a topic began and ends with the Apostle Paul's vivid call in Romans 12.1-2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed!" What we didn't emphasize in our first session becomes vital now: the tense of the Greek verbs tells us that these acts of separation from worldly ways and change to God's ways are not once-for-all-time experiences. The present tense of these two commands tells us that resisting conformity and opening ourselves to God's transforming work is a day-after-day-after day calling. Rome wasn't built in a day, and most lives are not changed in a day. The changeling persists.

### Part One - A Long Obedience in the Same Direction

When the faithful Christian author, Eugene Peterson, needed a title for one of his books about faithful discipleship, he chose a beauty: "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction." That's what we're after together. It's always seemed so to me. Here are some examples of biblical people whose habits of faithfulness kept them around for the long haul.

The aging Psalmist reflects on decades with God and writes:

*For you, O Lord, are my hope,  
my trust, O LORD, from my youth.  
Upon you I have leaned from my birth;  
it was you who took me from my mother's womb.  
My praise is continually of you.*

I imagine years and years of keeping all the habits of devout Judaism: family prayers spoken, Sabbaths kept, feasts and holidays observed, and synagogue attended.

The aging Paul could look back on an apostolic age full of faithful ministry and wax poetic and athletic:

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. \*From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Timothy 4.7-8)*

Imagine all those years of praying for his flocks, meditating on God's ways, communing with Christ, and otherwise carrying out the routines of the righteous.

In your Christian life, who have been your models of "a long obedience in the same direction"?

What patterns and habits have you observed in them that makes their life inspiring or compelling to you?

### **Change Takes Time**

A few years ago, [a British study](#) brought back bleak returns for the hats-and-horns habit-launchers of the New Year. Their ComRes poll found that...

- 63% of New Year's Resolvers fall by the wayside within a month.
- 80 percent stop within 3 months.
- 86 percent within a year

These numbers seem pretty bad, don't they?!

Check the numbers again, though. At the four-week mark, 3 out of 5 Resolvers have fallen (63%). Sixty days later, another 5<sup>th</sup> has gone down (80%). So after a mere 90 days only 1 of 5 remain.

Now look at that final number - the 86% who lose the trail by the end of the year. Let's imagine 1000 people making resolutions, 630 are gone by Feb 1 and 800 of them are gone by April Fool's Day (almost 3 per day through - a mere 90 days in!

- On average, nearly 20 of our 1000 fall of the wagon EACH DAY in January.
- Nearly 3 fall out PER DAY over the next 59 days.

This may not seem surprising.

But here's the good news: in the next 275 days, from April Fool's Day to the next New Year's Day, only 60 more of that 1,000 trail off - a mere 1 every 4.5 days or 7 per month!

What does that tell us about the incubation period of a habit? If we can make it to the three-month mark, we're on our way!

But let's view these bleak ComRes poll numbers through the lens of Jesus' Parable of the Sower. Jesus tells a vivid tale about an extravagant Sower, who showers seeds here there and everywhere, and how the seeds he tosses fare in the different places where they land...

*As he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. <sup>5</sup>Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup>But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup>Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup>Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. (Matthew 13.4-8)*

It strikes me that every seed fortunate enough not to land on the footpath sprang up and looked promising...at first. After two weeks, they all looked like they were going to flourish. But then came the hard part, when initial enthusiasm waned and old ways beckoned. In the end, only the "good soil" lasted through scorching heat and choking thorns. In the context of Jesus' ministry, the parable helped his disciples understand why the huge crowds that flocked to Jesus during his ministry faded so

fast when the heat came on. In our context, it may help us understand how we can focus long enough to keep a habit.

[Scientists at University College London](#) have confirmed the congruence of the Brits' poll and the Galileans parable. They measured how long it took people to reach what they call "automaticity" - the internalization of a habit that makes it second nature. They found, of course, that people vary. In fact, their 96 study subjects varied in their quickness to habit, from lightning (18 days!) to molasses (254 days!). Some are quicker than others. In the end, though, 66 Days popped up as the average time it takes to build a new habit.

What are you up to in the next 66 days?

What specific work would make it possible for you to install one new daily practice?

In this class, we've focused on two large changes - deeper love for God (Session 3) and an outward lean toward the world (Session 4).

What single component of "love for God" (e.g., daily prayer or Bible reading or setting aside of tithe or...) or "love for other/world" (e.g., parking away from the entry door or responding to the other driver on the road as a person or connecting with a person of need in another country) can you isolate and make into a habit?

## **Part Two - Finding Our Change Team**

It is possible to make a change alone. But in our journey through Makin' Change, we have noticed these last two weeks two different ways that working with a community helps transformation get traction in us:

1. A team helps my habit change.
2. A group can change the world.

This week, we isolate the factor that community becomes for helping us stay at a habit change long enough for it to stick. Teams make new habits more sustainable.

### ***Change in Me***

When I (Allen) first started to do professional ministry in New Canaan, CT, my family lived in a parsonage next door to the church. I'm not sure what you picture for the word "parsonage", but this wasn't the standard-issue clergy house. It was a beautiful seven-bedroom, three-story, 1890s Victorian a block's walk from the quaint village center. And it had a huge and hospitable wraparound front porch.

When my son Sam was born, he and I developed the good habit of sitting on the porch swing most mornings - a habit we kept for the better part of his first two years of life. And every morning, as we sat out looking over the village, we had company. Sixty to eighty Alcoholics Anonymous people showed up each morning at 7 for their meeting in the church hall. They became baby Sam's most constant friends.

Now, I had for many years attended and taught Bible studies, led Sunday worship, and otherwise been a part of the weekly habits of some people in a congregation. But I had never seen this kind of urgency about changing lives, and I hadn't seen this kind of daily commitment to habit change since I played sports in high school and college. These men and women wanted change! They were desperate for change. And they knew they couldn't make that change alone. So they came, every day, to get each other's help.

That striking AA dynamic has stuck with me. In a world of isolated striving, these people were wise enough to know that they needed one another.

Who is on your team?

If you have no answer to that question, why? What would you need to do to get a team?

When AA members “admit that we are powerless over alcohol...” they do it in a group. What would it take for you to admit that kind of thing about the habit you want to change?

Are you ready to ask for help from someone else? (The longevity of your habit may depend on it!)

### ***Change in Us and Our Group***

Almost all that we know about Jesus and the earliest Christian groups comes from their own writings: the books and letters of the New Testament and the smattering of other first- and second-century Christian writings that did not make the canon cut. So in our curiosity to know more, we are mostly beholden to Christians who describe Jesus or other Christians.

There are exceptions. As we saw last session in class time, our very earliest “outsider” report on early Christianity was written around 112 CE and comes from a Roman governor from present-day Turkey, named Pliny. The governor has observed an upswing in the number of Christians inhabiting his domain, and he wonders what he ought to do about it, so he writes to the Emperor Trajan (yes, THE Roman Emperor who rules most of the known world). That little letter give us a privileged window to early Christian practices...and habits.

*That they were wont (SOLITI), on a stated day, to meet together before it was light, and to sing a hymn to Christ, as to a god, alternately; and to oblige themselves by a sacrament [or oath], not to do anything that was ill: but that they would commit no theft, or pilfering, or adultery; that they would not break their promises, or deny what was deposited with them, when it was required back again; after which it was their custom to depart, and to meet again at a common but innocent meal... (Pliny, Letter to Trajan)*

That term *soliti* is money for us change-makers. It means “accustomed” or “habituated”. These earliest Christians in churches had the habit of gathering on a set day at a set time to sing hymns to Christ, to pledge allegiance to a way of living, etc. The group had a habit.

Group habits can be difficult to identify and describe. But think of it this way:

I go to church on Sunday.	The church gathers its members.
I show up to choir practice.	The choir sets the time and place.
I enjoy greeting strangers	The church is welcoming

What you and I might experience as an individual act or habit takes place and participates in a larger group that has a collective way of being that becomes a church’s culture. In tis way, churches join sports teams, corporate teams, White House administrations, and a whole lot of other groups as “collectives with habits”.

Reflect on a group or team you’ve been in that has changed a habit enduringly. It could be anything from a book group that started reading better books to a sports team that

How do the attitudes and behaviors of your group impact your own life?

How do your attitude and behavior matter for the way your group’s life goes?

These two insights matter for our issue of sustainability, too. If our changes are to have staying power, if God’s transformation is going to find an enduring home in us, it will likely require a community of people who are committed to that change with us. I nominate the church.

## ***A Final Word***

These have been six good weeks together. They've spanned 36 days of our lives, from early January to mid-February in the Year of Our Lord 2021. Think of our six sessions and the reading or thinking we've done between them as the Sower's seed - possibilities planted in us to catalyze a Romans 12.1-2 change in our lives. As we've searched the scriptures, we have also consulted method actors and athletes, social psychologists and neuroscientists. We've had a passel of partners on the screen each week and a leader whose main hope is our move forward into God's future.

Those are great assets for anyone who aspires to change. Now it's time to continue on the path. So what steps will make lifelong transformation most likely? [One leadership coach](#) has boiled the process of successful life change into three crucial elements.

- Find a process or hope on which to focus your energy.
- Create a neighborhood around that process.
- Add experts who can give good advice to help you achieve your goals.

This guru may as well have been describing a church setting.

- We have specific shared hopes for our future as individuals and as a team;
- we simply ARE a weekly neighborhood of worshippers and learners and servers and community builders;
- and someone stands up in front of us week by week as we worship and learn to guide the vision and encourage the progress.

Churches can and should be veritable incubators of enduring habits.

How can you plug into your church in new ways that help you grow and change toward God's future?

What can you do to make your congregation an even more adept habit-sustaining team?

How can you and your brothers and sisters in Christ continue to remember and celebrate the God who empowers your change?

These are questions faithful folks can ask and answer together. And when we do, the "after" moves blessedly further and further beyond the "before".

Friends, to God be the glory, to you be the thriving, and to all the world be the splendid benefits of your increasingly lifelong transformation!