



Creating a More Perfect Union

James 2:1-10

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

September 5, 2021

Well, this is different.

In 2009, a study was published in the European Journal of Social Psychology that indicated it takes anywhere between 18 and 254 days for a person to form a new habit, and that, on average, it takes about 66 days for a new behavior to become automatic.¹ The study continued, indicating it takes longer to form some habits than others. For example, it's easier to get in the habit of drinking water at breakfast than doing 50 situps before work in the morning. We have more resistance to some habits than others.

In a correlated consideration, it has been 547 days since we last gathered for a live in-person worship service here in the Sanctuary. For a while last year, Kyle and I would gather and lead worship here in the sanctuary live on Sunday mornings, broadcasting the video in real time. However, Kyle and I haven't been in the sanctuary leading worship in real time for 372 days. Every worship service for the past twelve months has been pre-recorded.

We've all formed some new habits in the past year and a half. And, just as we've formed new habits, we've all broken old habits. For example, I have become accustomed to preaching to the green light in the back of the room. Knowing that everyone who hears or watches the sermon will be at home, I've had no need to look around at those sitting in the room because, well there was no one in the room. Having others in the room, while perhaps a bit like riding a bike and something of a natural experience, is different.

Kyle and I have also gotten in the habit of stopping and rerecording should there be something that interrupts a song, a prayer, or an anthem. I've learned a lot about the ambient noises in Old Town over the past year. On Friday mornings, pretty much right at 10:30am, the trash men come to empty the dumpsters from behind Nandos next door. Nandos has not one, but two, large trash bins on wheels. Because the garbage truck can't fit in the alley, the trash men have to roll the garbage bins out to Washington Street where the truck can lift them up to dump them, and then they have roll the bins back behind the restaurant. On a good Friday, this process takes 15 minutes, and the noise of the trash bins rolling back and forth is so loud, that I just sit down in the chair and twiddle my thumbs. I can't promise that this reaction to obnoxious ambient noises has not yet become automatic; remember, it takes only 66 days for a behavior to become automatic. So, fear not, if Kyle or I slumps into a quiescent state, motionless and seemingly zoned out, it's likely because we have made a mistake and need to reset before starting again, or because we can hear some external noise that we are waiting to pass before continuing on.

It is different, but it is good to be gathered in this space with so many of you. And I look forward and pray for the day when we need not be concerned with the rapid spread of COVID or any viral disease. I don't know how far in the future such a day exists, but I yearn for the day when we can all gather without need for social distancing or masks and share without reserve in the joyous company of God and one another. In the meantime, I'm grateful for those who are presently abiding by the guidelines our Board has set to provide as safe an environment as we can to gather with one another, and for the Board's dedication of resources to allow us to maintain our live worship presence for those who are gathered in worship at home.

Let's talk some more about habits. The problem with many habits is that we don't even know they exist. TheFreeDictionary.com defines *habit* as "a recurrent, often unconscious pattern of behavior that is acquired through frequent repetition."ⁱⁱ Like slouching in one's office chair, biting one's nails, or perhaps hitting up the same Starbucks for coffee each morning, that which has become habitual is often the result of an unconscious thought. If you asked us why we do it, or what is the trigger for it to happen, we would likely not be able to answer. We've just been doing it with such regularity for a long enough period of time that the behavior has become normalized.

When we are asked about habits that we can't fully explain, we often try to defend ourselves, as if the habit doesn't really exist. We become quite defensive when someone calls us out for a habit that is unbecoming or unfaithful. It can be quite hard to have someone else draw attention to a habit that you aren't proud to claim.

In similar fashion, it can be disorienting to have someone draw attention to a habit you weren't even fully aware existed.

At a previous church, I passed a specific Starbucks on my way to work every morning. I stopped there with some regularity – a couple times a week at least. I remember one morning, as I ordered my grande low-fat three-shot with whip mocha the barista stared blankly back at me. We knew each other by name – she was there every morning. I was in there enough that my order has become something of a habit for her to make. After a moment of looking at me with this puzzled face, she asked, "where's your cup? You always bring your own cup." ... my cup? ... I clearly needed my coffee that morning.

I always brought in my own travel mug; I never used a Starbucks cup. It doesn't keep the coffee hot long enough. Yet, that morning, I had forgotten my cup, and this barista, who had become so accustomed to me bringing in my cup, was thrown off by the disruption. And I, having not thought about my travel mug that morning, was disoriented by the fact that someone else had called me out on a habit I hadn't fully comprehended to be a habit!

As we turn to the text in James this morning, I envision this text offered a similar disruption to the community as the barista's question did to my coffee routine. "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?"

Woah. What? ... Our acts of favoritism? What is James talking about? We don't show favoritism to anyone, do we? ... I can imagine the community reading this letter taking a pause and turning to one

another and asking, *have you been showing favoritism to anyone? I know I haven't. Who is he talking about? ... I bet he's talking about Phil. Phil always shows favoritism. I really don't like Phil that much.*

It's generally accepted that in the epistle letters, whether written by James, Paul, Timothy, or John, they are written to address specific communities facing specific problems. We've talked about this in recent weeks – the epistle letters aren't written to individuals (not even to Phil, who evidently shows a lot of favoritism). These letters are written to the community at large.

This letter, written by James, is addressing Jewish Christian living outside of Israel. It's clear that James has either heard of or witnessed these Jewish Christians showing favoritism, and he's not about to let it go without calling it out. For James, favoritism is not in line with faithful living, and it must be addressed.

It may be easy for the community reading this letter to scoff at James at first, to rebut his accusation. Only, James doesn't make this accusation without evidence. He explains his concern by giving a concrete example of how this unfaithful posture of favoritism has been on display within the life of the Christian community. Let's pick up in verse 2:

“For is a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please’, while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there’, or ‘Sit at my feet’, have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?”

Now imagine again the community who is hearing this text. Like me, when I forgot my coffee mug, sometimes having someone else point out the habits in your life is disorienting. We often don't even fully grasp the behavioral habits we exhibit until someone else calls them to our attention. It is this calling to our attention that the apostle makes clear in this text. We are invited to see our habit of favoritism for the sin that it is. And to be sure, the apostle does call it a sin in verse 9, stating, “If you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.”

Dr. Casey Thornburgh Simon offers that James is setting up two competing options, a dichotomy of habits, asking, “Are you a friend of the world or a friend of God?” She goes on to say, “Friends of the world show a preference for the powerful and wealthy, neglecting those struggling to make a living. Friends of God suffer with those who suffer and seek an end to the causes of their suffering.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The reality is, in the history and life of the Christian church, we have long been aligned with the habit of favoritism, choosing – whether consciously or unconsciously – to be friends of the world over being a friend of God. Consider how, in the Christian church, there was a time when you could rent specific pews in the Sanctuary. Those with wealth, through their own financial giving, were seated at the front of the sanctuary in pews affixed with their family names. You can see the remnants of this practice in some churches here in Old Town. We also have churches who built balconies, or opened up rafters above the sanctuary, so that the black community had a dedicatedly separate space to be present in worship. Again, the remnants of which can be seen in some of our churches here in Old Town.

Pastor Doug Bratt, in highlighting this tendency of the church, writes, “Studies suggest North American churches are becoming not just racially and politically, but also socio-economically monolithic.”^{iv} In a world and a nation that has become more polarizing, instead of pushing against the polarization, the church has adopted this practice of polarization, embedding ourselves further and further into secured rooms, refusing to not just let other *people* in, but even their opinions, experiences, and differing beliefs.

We have, to our own detriment, and to the detriment of God’s will for humanity, become in the habit of placing preference over conference, exclusion over expansion, unity of thought over community of believers, partiality toward some over welcoming of all.

And what’s worse, if it weren’t for the invitation of the apostle, we wouldn’t even think twice about our habitual favoritism. We’ve excluded certain groups for so long, it doesn’t even feel like a habit anymore; we just call it our reality and act like it can’t be changed.

But James won’t have it. James won’t be quieted by the lie that we are too embedded with sin to find a new practice or to form a new habit. After all, it only takes 18 to 254 days to shape a new habit. You could have this down before the end of September. And James is quite convinced of the need for such a new habit, saying, “If one keeps the whole law, but fails in one point – showing favoritism – the whole weight of the law falls upon that person.”^v Our invitation to faithfulness, just as our membership vows invite, calls us to reject evil in all forms. As the *Testament of Asher* states, a written testament from one of the 12 Jewish Patriarchs, our single-minded devotion to God requires the rejection of all forms of evil, including those created by an individual’s desires.^{vi}

We’ve come a long way in the past 18 months – and in that time, we’ve learned some new habits. We’ve gotten out of the practice of gathering in a communal space, and being intentional about offering hospitality to each and every person who sets foot in the doors of God’s house – physically or virtually. But our mission as a church has not changed. Our mission, here at Washington Street UMC is still the same – *Making a Place for Everyone to Know God’s Love*.

And that mission aligns with the Biblical invitation. Even James summarizes his rebuttal against favoritism by offering in verse 8, “You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

This expansive love is the invitation of the text. And though it will take some practice to form new habits, it means we have to be just as cognizant of who is worshipping online as those who are here in person. We have to be just as mindful of who is worshipping upstairs as those worshipping downstairs. We have to be intentional about offering grace and peace to those who look like us, who think like us, who have the same opinions on vaccines as us, and who have the same wealth as us ... as we do those who may look, dress, think, and live quite different than us. For God’s love does not relegate some to be of greater worth than others, but endows us all with the image of the Creator, the love of the Savior, and the gifts of the Spirit, that we might, as one body, share in the work of God in the world.

And today ... today as we gather back in person for the first time in a long time, this does not mark the end. We have not suddenly arrived. Our journey is not over. If anything, we have just turned the page and begun a new chapter in the storied history of this congregation. May we be open to hear the apostle call out our habitual mistakes, may we find new life in embracing the community without partiality, that in this next chapter, as we write the coming pages in our shared life together, we might be led by the Spirit to form a deeper habit of making a place for everyone to know God's love. Amen, and amen.

ⁱ Scott Frothingham. "How Long Does it Really Take to Form a Habit?" October 24, 2019. <https://healthline.com>. Retrieved September 2, 2021.

ⁱⁱ "Habit." <http://thefreedictionary.com>. Retrieved September 2, 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Casey Thornburgh Simon. "Commentary on James 2:1-10 [11-13] 14-17." September 5, 2021. <https://workingpreacher.org>.

^{iv} Doug Bratt. "James 2:1-10 [11-13] 14-17." August 30, 2021. <https://cep.calvinseminary.edu>. Retrieved September 2, 2021.

^v Aaron L. Uitti. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

^{vi} Pheme Perkins. *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary on Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.