

# The Chains of Habit

By Daryl Wingerd



*The chains of habit are often too light to be felt until they are too heavy to be broken.*

This old saying has been quoted and adapted by many writers and speakers over the years. No one is completely sure who should get original credit for it, but regardless of who that might be, it is well worth considering.

I'm sure you see the point: The things you do that eventually turn into habits you wish you could break didn't seem like habits when you first began doing them. You did something once and it brought you satisfaction in some way. Then, because you enjoyed it, you repeated it. Then you repeated it again, and again, and again. Over time you developed a strong attraction—perhaps even what you would describe as a physical or emotional need for the satisfaction it brought you. It became a habit.

In the early stages, you felt no “chains” at all. In fact, you probably denied that it was a habit. OK, so maybe the things you were doing were unhealthy or unwise or unprofitable, perhaps even ungodly. Even so, whether your conscience bothered you or not, whether other people warned you against it or not, you convinced yourself that it would be easy to quit “if it ever became a problem.”

That was how it started. Now you've tried to quit—several times—but found you couldn't. What you had been doing freely and voluntarily is now making you feel and act like a slave. Furthermore, the consequences of your repetitive actions are now becoming evident in your declining physical health, your dwindling finances, your relationships, your disturbed conscience, or some combination of all of these. You now feel the chains, and they are heavy—too heavy to break, or so it seems.

The writer of Hebrews warns us about this predictable pattern and its outcome, exhorting us to “lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us” (Hebrews 12:1). The world is filled with opportunities for “entanglement”—voluntary actions that easily turn into compulsory servitude. Most of us—probably all of us—have stumbled in this way at one point or another. Reading the list below, which can you identify with? What other “chains of habit” would you add?

- Harmless forms of occasional entertainment like playing video games or watching TV have gradually become unprofitable time-wasting habits you can't seem to resist.
- Social media use to keep up with friends and relatives has subtly morphed into an obsessive connection with your cell phone or an unhealthy pursuit of affirmation from others.
- Moderate, occasional, strictly limited alcohol consumption has drifted into regular casual drinking without any “legalistic” limits, plus a self-serving adjustment in how you define “drunkenness.”
- Mild occasional tobacco use (which you justify in your mind by the absence of any explicit prohibition in the Bible) has become a strong addiction with potentially catastrophic health results.
- Buying an occasional lottery ticket or placing an occasional online sports bet has become a gambling compulsion that is wasting your money and exposing unholy desires in your heart.
- Subtle, lustful glances at women, watching movies with seductive scenes in them, or other “minor” expressions of sexual lust have led to or strengthened an enslaving addiction to pornography or other sexual sins.

Are you feeling bound by any of these “chains”? If so, how heavy have they become? You can know that your chains of habit have grown dangerously heavy when you realize you should quit and have tried to quit, but can't—or worse, when you don't want to quit. You should also be concerned if you know that what you are doing is unhealthy, unwise, unprofitable, or ungodly, but you find yourself defending your “freedom” to continue when other believers express concern or offer to help you.

In Christ, breaking chains is not impossible. “What is impossible with men is possible with God” (Luke 18:27). But what is better is to heed your conscience and warnings from others, and thus avoid becoming entangled in the first place. Work hard to live a principled life. Make decisions based on biblical principles and wisdom. Set limits for yourself, and keep your commitments. Consider my own re-write of the old saying:

*The chains of habit, if avoided when small,  
will never need to be broken at all.*

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