

# Habits of the Heart



by *Monica Kim*

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How do small habits, such as obsessive house-cleaning, point to deeper struggles in the human heart?

Of course, cleaning house—doing dishes, sweeping and mopping the floor, dusting, straightening a room, removing clutter, and so forth—in itself is not sinful. It is a necessary part of living. But it was in exactly this area that I realized I needed the grace of God to help me understand things about myself. I saw that I cleaned obsessively in response to frustrating situations, situations that I felt to be unbearable and out of my control.

## *The Game*

It was 11:30 p.m. on Monday night. My husband, my brother, my husband's cousin, and I were playing our weekly card game, Euchre. My husband and I paired up against my brother and cousin. I usually thought of this game as fun and not seriously competitive. My husband, on the other hand, liked the competitive edge. It added interest to the game and made it more challenging for him.

On this particular night, we played a close game, and, at a crucial point, I made an error—of course unknowingly and with justification, or so I thought. My husband got upset and taunted me about the error throughout the rest of the game. I responded to this taunting by defending and justifying myself.

As the game continued and the taunting continued, I continued to be defensive, trying to justify my mistake. Each time my husband said, "I can't believe you put down that card. I can't believe you put down that card," while shaking his head, my anger towards him intensified. My heart started to race. My face turned red. I could feel the hot fumes of anger rise to my head, and I became silent. Finally, as my husband repeated his criticism for the tenth time, I curtly retorted, "I'm never playing this game with you again!"

With this response, we finished the game in awkward silence. My husband and I lost. By this time, it was around 1:00 a.m., and instead of going to bed with my husband, I began cleaning the house: washing the few snack dishes and mopping the irritating dust and particles off the floor. I seethed in anger. Several thoughts raced repeatedly through my mind: "How could he continually taunt me and make me look foolish in front of everyone? Everyone else made that same mistake at one point or another during our game, yet we overlooked those mistakes. I have been treated unjustly. I have been mistreated and oppressed."

When I finished cleaning, my anger still had not subsided. It grew stronger and harder. I finally went to bed. Although the Holy Spirit led me to remember the passage, "'In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Eph. 4:26-27), I still went to

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\**Monica Kim is a counselor at CCEF.*

bed angry, faced away from my husband, and fell asleep with guilt, self-pity, pride, self-righteousness, anger, and vengeance as my bedmates.

### *The Larger Pattern*

You know those people who always root for the underdog—the weakest team, the team that never wins, the team that appears hopeless? Well, I belonged to that group of people. As a young girl, I cheered for the weaker teams, the teams most likely to fail. And I befriended people in school that didn't have many friends, the marginalized, those no one wanted to be friends with. Sure, this may sound noble, but the truth is I aligned myself

as a young girl continued into my marriage—even as we played “The Game”.

In this card game incident, I thought I was a victim of injustice—a critical, selfish bully had ridiculed, taunted, and embarrassed me in front of two other people. I thought, “How dare he do that to me? I deserve to be treated fairly, especially in front of other people.”

This felt like familiar territory, and I reacted in my old patterns. First, I defended myself by saying, “Others have made the same mistake. Even you have made it. Why do you highlight my mistake and not even see your own.” Each time he shook his head, I pointed the finger right back and told him that he did

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with them because I was one of them—the marginalized, weak, poor, meek, oppressed, the ones in need of an advocate. I was female, a minority, and the lost, frumpy middle-child overshadowed by her beautiful, perfect older sister and precious younger brother. I was neither male nor white; neither first child nor the precious last. In other words, in my thinking, I was a victim of injustice and unfair treatment everywhere. Whenever there was an injustice done against me, I sought to remedy it in one of two ways: I either withdrew from people in self-pity and self-protection or I became defensive, bitter, angry, and vengeful.

As I grew up, I vacillated between those two reactions. Fortunately, God did not allow either solution to work. These reactions became the occasion for me to seek to know the Lord's mercy and help. Often, I cried out to Him to speak into my sinful ways. As He did speak into my life, I repented and worked towards forgiving people who had hurt me. The Lord began His good work in me as this young believer of Christ. Like Paul and Timothy, I was “confident of this, that He who began a good work in [me would] carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). Faithfully, the work the Lord began in me

the same thing. When this first strategy didn't work, I reverted to another old pattern—self-pity. I became silent. This strategy didn't work either, so I went on to bitterness, inner anger, and vengeful withdrawal: “I will never play with you again.” Then I turned away and gave him the silent treatment. Soon after our guests left, my husband went to bed, and I started my cleaning ritual.

### *My Ruling Desires*

The card game proved to be a pivotal event that brought clarity to my struggles on the issue of cleaning. The next morning, I sat down before the Lord and prayed,

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Ps. 139:23-24).

The Lord answered this prayer by revealing my offensive ways. He gave a “lights on” moment. I realized with crisp clarity that my obsessive cleaning was a sinful response to the unrequited desires of my sinful heart.

*Anger.* When I cleaned, I sinned. Instead of using cleaning as a tool or “therapy” to help

me calm down, I used it as a weapon to take vengeance upon my husband. Cleaning was a way to hurt him and tell him that he did not exist in my world at that moment. I turned my back on him. When I cleaned, my anger intensified as I thought through the events over and over trying to justify myself. I desired to repay evil for evil. But doing this, I not only sinned against my husband, but I turned my back against God. In the moment, I lived in unbelief. His call for me to love my husband was not even a thought. But in this anger, I was not just sinned against—I was the sinner!

*Justice and Fairness.* Through making Psalm 139:23-24 my prayer, I had several insights about the ruling desires of my heart. First, I struggle with the desire to have justice and fairness—I want my way. I want to be both advocate and judge. Although God said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay” (Deut. 32:35), in the moment I didn’t remember or trust God as judge. Instead I took His place by giving my own verdict and punishment to my husband.

“You can’t do this to me! I need to protect, defend, and vindicate myself. Since you unfairly attacked poor little me, I will do everything to defend myself, to be my own advocate, and then I will be the judge who gives you a final sentence.”

“Would the defendant stand up?”

“Mr. Kwon, you are guilty of unfairly attacking, poor, weak, innocent Monica. I hereby sentence you to a night’s duration of silent treatment, anger, bitterness, and looking at Monica’s back!”

And the gavel hits the judge’s bench with a loud thump!

This was the sinful nature of my victim mentality.

*Fear of Man.* Many years ago, I read Ed Welch’s book *When People are Big and God is Small* and understood how I made other people into my god. I acted in ways I thought other people expected. I wanted to please them and to look good in their eyes. I had not thought for how God wanted me to act. Since then, I had repented of that sin many times. But during that card game, I found myself once again

living in the moment and making people bigger than God. I was concerned about what my husband’s cousin and my brother thought. I couldn’t possibly let this situation pass and allow them to think that I was inept and stupid. They made the same mistakes. I was hoping that in publicly saying that everyone made the same mistake, they would think better of me. When my husband was not convinced, it was possible that others would not be also. This upset me even more.

*Self-Righteousness and Pride.* Finally, I struggled with self-righteousness and pride. Even though Christ who had no sin endured the ultimate unfair treatment on the cross so that we might become the righteousness of God, I still believed I was beyond unfair treatment, especially when I thought I had done no wrong. How flagrantly mistaken I was. I held tightly onto the belief that I did no wrong until the Lord, by His grace and mercy, revealed in me the many places I sinned during the whole course of the card game. Amazing! Left to my own sinful nature, I would continue believing that I was the perfect one against whom everyone sinned.

Through my sinful desires, everyone around me became victim of the consequences. Our guests quickly and quietly left our house in order to escape the awkwardness. My husband went to bed. Can you see the picture of the consequences of my sin? I couldn’t see it then, but I can see it now. I created an atmosphere, not of a body of Christ embracing one another, but one in which we all moved away from each other.

### *The Mercy of the Cross*

Several passages spoke into my ruling desires. Second Corinthians 5:21 spoke into my desire for justice and fairness: “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

I was so focused on being sinned against that I failed to realize how I was a sinner. I was unrighteous, and Christ, who had no sin, became sin so I could become the righteousness of God. Christ died on the cross and endured the worst possible unfair

treatment in my place. Through His unfair treatment, I was given the ultimate “unfair” and undeserved consequence. I was a sinner who deserved eternal death as an enemy of God. Instead, because of Christ and His sacrifice, I had been made righteous and given eternal life. I, who sought justice and fairness, instead got far better treatment than I deserved. Christ redeemed my desire for justice and fairness by crushing my own definition of it. How can I ask for justice and fairness when, because of my sin, injustice and unfairness is what I ultimately need? After that pivotal event, each time my desires began to grow into ruling desires, instead of instinctively responding with sin, I looked to this passage to be reminded of God’s grace for a sinner like me. Living a victim mentality meant that I had dwelt on being sinned against, but through Christ, when I seek first His kingdom and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33), I am a victor who has been given everything to live a victor’s reality: a life of righteousness.

guests to agree with me. I feared that they, too, saw me as a person who made mistakes. Yet my responses to the situation put them in an awkward situation, and they became eager to leave. My heart response did not reflect well on Christ and His sacrifice for me.

Finally, Romans 12:3 spoke into my life of pride and self-righteousness. I am called not to think more highly of myself than I ought to think. My own desire to be right took control, and I behaved inappropriately. But in sounder judgment, I can recognize that my strength comes from God, not from myself.

### *A Victor’s Reality*

During prayer the morning after the game, as Christ redefined my perspective on justice and fairness, I repented, praised God, and was thankful for the reality that I was living now only by His mercy and grace.

Romans 12:17-21 guided me into taking concrete steps towards living a life honoring God. Honoring God meant knowing God as

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Romans 12:17-21 spoke into my desire for vengeance and gave me concrete, practical steps towards loving my “enemy.” Christ calls me to “not repay anyone evil for evil. Do not take revenge. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Christ reminds me in this passage that judgment belongs only to God. Instead of being angered in the card game, I simply needed to let the situation pass, then talk about it later with my husband. Doing good instead of trying to take revenge often brings repentance on the part of the wrong-doer. It allows God to work in the heart of the wrong-doer. When I respond inappropriately, I interfere with God’s purposes in the other person’s life.

First Thessalonians 2:4 spoke into my fear of man as I was reminded of the apostle Paul who stated, “We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.” I was convinced that I was right, and I wanted my

the judge and not taking revenge on my husband who was in this situation, my enemy.

Honoring God meant doing what was contrary to what I wanted to do. “If your enemy is hungry, feed him.” As I asked the Lord for wisdom, this meant knowing what my husband needed and actively giving it to him. That meant humbly seeking forgiveness from him for the specific sins I had done against him. From this passage, I was also called to overcome evil with good. It was certainly not loving of him to taunt me, nor was it loving of him to ridicule me in front of others. How could I overcome this evil with good? For me, this meant opening up the lines of communication and sharing with my husband my struggles with justice-seeking, fear of man, and pride. The most amazing thing happened next. He repented of his sinfulness before the Lord and myself, then asked me to forgive him. I did. This was what the Lord meant when he

said, "In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." He was compelled by mercy and humility to repent. Afterward, he shared with me his struggles, but also proclaimed the victories that he had come to experience through Jesus. We were no longer "enemies," but a team in Christ who found much grace and hope in remembering Christ and His mercies towards us.

It is truly amazing to see that after this enlightening experience, many of the negative situations that would have normally caused me to react by cleaning now reminded me of the passages I came to reflect on. These truths of God would become my guide and guard.

As I studied these passages, my sinful desires became clear. As months have passed, I've been able to clearly distinguish between cleaning as a part of my responsibilities versus cleaning as a weapon for vengeance. Not only did I consequently clean less, I also found that those bad roots that were linked to my cleaning habits were lingering tendencies of mine in general.

### ***The Consequences: Changed Perspective***

Living a more God-honoring life has brought reconciliation and peace with my husband. My husband also repented of his behavior and shared some of his own struggles. Being faithful in the midst of suffering and hardship has brought a changed perspective for both of us.

Ever since my high school days, one favorite passage has frequently given me comfort:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Heb. 12:1-3)

Prior to this season of growth, I had a one-

dimensional view of this passage. I was comforted in the knowledge that when I fix my eyes on Jesus, as a sufferer, I can share in the joy of Christ in the midst of suffering injustice and unfairness. As time has passed, through the work of the Holy Spirit, I have been able to see this passage in a four dimensional way, in a changed perspective:

1. I am not just a sufferer. I am a sinner who gets easily entangled in my sins of desiring justice, fearing man, self-righteousness, and pride. I am a sinner called to repent of these sins and I am in need of Christ who is not only the author but also the perfecter of my faith.
2. I was convicted of the reality that I was not fixing my eyes on Jesus. Fixing my eyes on Jesus did not mean fixing my eyes on myself or other people. I had been fixing my eyes on myself, doing things to defend myself, protect myself, and vindicate myself. And I had been fixing my eyes on other people, doing things to please them and to win their favor.
3. I not only share in Christ's suffering, but I share in His victory. And soon, I will share in His glory as He sits at the right hand of the throne of God.
4. I am surrounded by a community of believers that extends beyond this present age. I am surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who from ages past will be made perfect together with the community of believers from this present age and the age to come. Why would I want to protect myself and withdraw from other people when the Lord has placed me in a community of believers to embrace and run this race with me?

It's amazing to be living now in this four dimensional nature of a victor's reality rather than the one dimensional victim mentality. The work that Christ began in me as a young girl had undoubtedly continued and I am all the more convinced of the need for the continuing nature of Christ's work since "sin can be like trick birthday candles: you blow them out and smile, thinking you have your wish; then your jaw drops as they burst into flames."

Through this entire struggle though, I

cannot deny the power of God's truth and work in the transformation of His children. No other counseling method is as authoritative, riveting, and effective in transforming the heart of sinners who are slaves to sin than biblical counseling. We live in a culture that wants instant answers and superficial results, so to many people, biblical counseling appears to be impractical. But biblical counseling is practical, effective, and mysterious. It is mysterious in that we experience God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit that comes from the love of God "who works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

What we can assuredly experience, as I've experienced through this self-counseling project is hope in the midst of anguish and peace in the midst of struggles—how much more practical can you get than that?

Although my struggles are not yet over, I can only end with praise to my Lord whose power is beyond all measure. How could I have expected any less from God, who is my Creator; from Jesus, who is my Savior; and from the Holy Spirit, who is my Counselor?

Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations for ever and ever! Amen. (Eph. 3:20-21)

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<sup>1</sup> Kris Lundgard, *The Enemy Within: Straight Talk about the Power and Defeat of Sin* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998), 39.