

The Last Word

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Like other lazy Americans, I am a creature of routine.

Most of these are good routines. I like to brush my teeth as soon as I crawl out of bed in the morning. I simply cannot tolerate "tooth film" and "tongue fuzz."

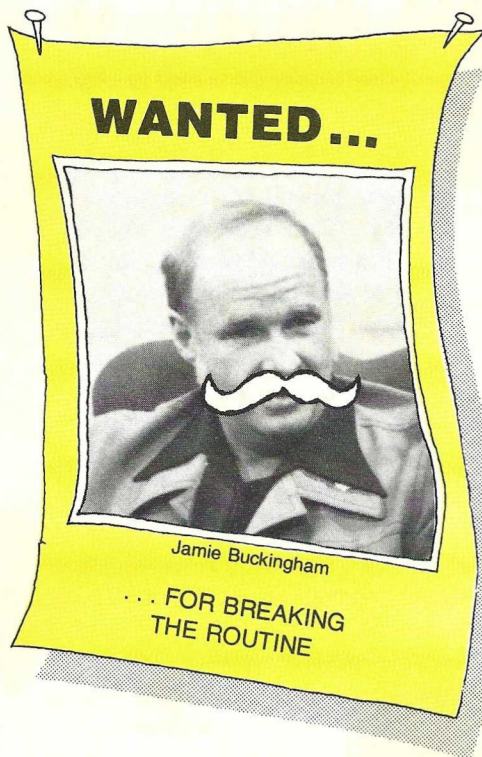
A Sunday afternoon nap is so much of a "must" that I invariably get sleepy as soon as we finish the Sunday noon meal, even if I am at someone else's house.

There are hundreds of other routines. I take my shoes off when I sit down at the typewriter. I resist Saturday night invitations, preferring to spend a quiet evening at home with the family—or by myself. I answer the telephone only if there is no one else in the house, and sometimes not then. Our listed number rings at my secretary's home. When the phone does ring at my home (thousands of people, it seems, have my unlisted number) I step aside to let Jackie answer, even if I am huddled over the receiver. It's just one of my routines.

And there is the problem. Routines become habits, and habits are but one step removed from ruts. And everyone knows a rut is nothing but a grave with both ends knocked out.

Lately, I've been looking at these routines in my life. I always lather my left arm first when I shower. When I raise my arms in worship, I always turn my palms in. Never out. I always sit in the same chair at church on Sunday morning. In fact, when I came in several Sundays ago and someone had taken "my chair," I lost my joy and had a hard time worshipping, even with my palms turned in.

There's something wrong with all this. Slowly, yet surely, I am hardening into an old wineskin, unable to con-



tain the new wine of change which is the freshness and spontaneity of the Holy Spirit.

So, as I begin this new year, I have made a list. Some of my routines do not need changing—like praying with my kids every night before they go to bed. But the vast majority are simply ruts into which I've fallen. In an effort to put new elasticity into my aging wineskin, I've determined to change. But it doesn't come easy.

We recently had Sunday guests who came for lunch and stayed until time for the evening service. In the car on the way to church that night, Jackie chided me.

"Why didn't you just excuse yourself and go on to bed?"

"But I was breaking the routine of having to take a nap," I answered.

"Well, you took one anyway. Right in your chair. I was so embarrassed. All that snoring. . . ."

I cannot understand it. I never get sleepy on Tuesday afternoon.

Last Saturday night Jackie insisted that I take her out for Chinese food. "You've been out of town all week and all I've done is cook for these children. I've been dreaming of Chinese food for two days."

I agreed, but I wasn't happy about it. Saturday nights are my nights to stay home.

On the way to the Dragon Lady Restaurant our fourteen-year-old, Sandy, who was sitting between her mother and me in the front seat, said, "Daddy, you sure are grumpy. You're going to spoil our whole evening. I need to pray for you."

She put her hand on my leg and prayed out loud as I mumbled about the traffic and expense of eating out. But the prayer helped. And so did her painful reminder that I was more like a rock than clay in the Potter's hands.

For some reason my mind turned to psychologists, who talk about "adjusting" to unpleasant situations without screaming about rights being violated; like having to sit in the smokers' section even though the smoke burns your eyes and stinks up your clothes. "Adjust" is a good word, but I prefer the biblical concept of being "transformed."

There is a problem with transformation, however. It means I can't complain any more if my routine is broken. It means I've been bought with a price and don't belong to myself. It means I can't gripe if things don't go my way.

Christians may get old, but that's no reason we have to get stiff. So I've grown a mustache, just for the change. And I'm waiting until after I shave in the morning before I brush my teeth. I've even started sitting in a new place in church.

Flexibility of the spirit is one of the keys to happiness, health, and power. Some few will stay elastic. Most will become rutted, and die, probably blaming it on the new preacher who changed the order of worship and insisted the congregation stand on the first hymn rather than the second. ∞

Dad - mustache