

# The Last Word

by Jamie

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## *“But We’ve Always Done It This Way!”*

Like 200 million 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.

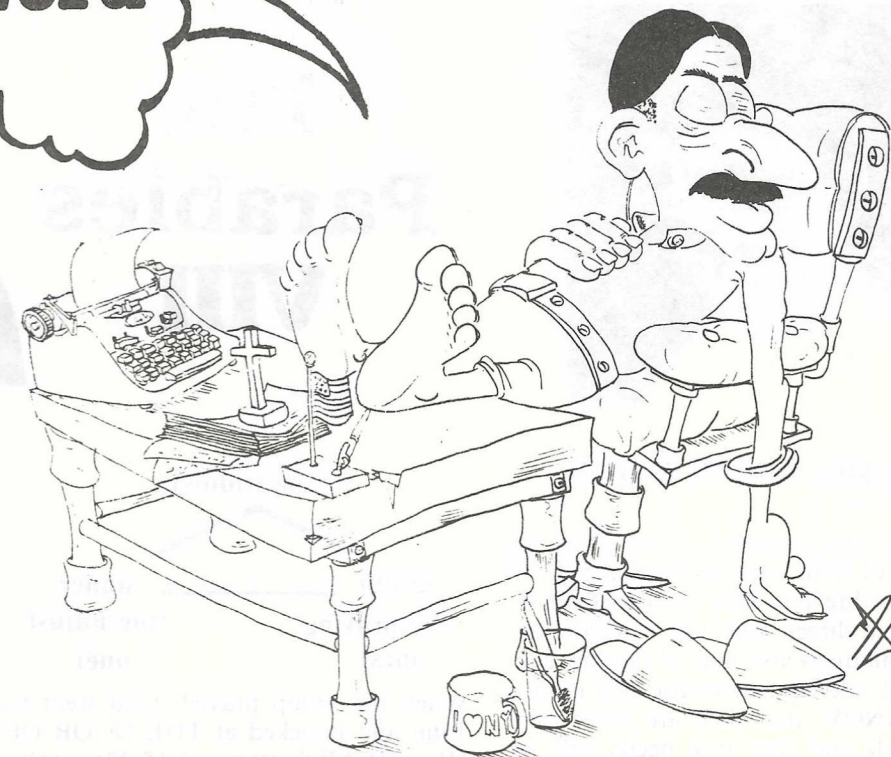
There are hundreds of other routines. I take my shoes off when I sit down at the typewriter. I resist Saturday night invitations, preferring to spend a quiet evening at home with the family – or by myself. I answer the telephone only if there is no one else in the house – and sometimes not then. Our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

But there is a problem. Routines become habits. 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 from my left arm first when I step in the 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 certainly, I am hardening into an old wineskin – unable to contain the new wine of change which is the freshness and spontaneity of the Holy Spirit.

So, I have made one of my infamous lists. 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



Cartoon: Damian Muscat

determined to change. But it doesn’t come easy.

Recently we had Sunday afternoon visitors. They came for lunch and stayed until time for the evening service. In the car on the way to the 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.”

“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 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 was sitting between her mother and me in the front seat. She was caught in the crossfire of silent tension and finally 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 exposé that I was more like a rock than clay in the Potter’s hands.

Psychologists talk about “adjusting” to unpleasant situations – like having to sit in the smoking section when it burns your eyes and stinks up your clothes, not getting your morning cup of coffee, or having to sleep on a lumpy mattress at the motel – without screaming about your rights being violated.

“Adjust” is a good word, but I prefer the biblican 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 moustache – just for the change. And will probably shave it off when I (and others) get used to it. And I’m waiting until after I shave to brush my teeth in the morning. I’ve even started sitting in a new place in church.

A young man wrote me recently saying, “I want to develop a doctrine so pure it won’t have to be amended ten years from now.”

Ohhhh! He’s in real trouble. 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. © Jamie Buckingham Reprinted from “The Last Word” with kind permission.