Love Is a Habit

Why love grows the way habits grow.

A Feeling or a Practice?

Most songs and movies treat love as something that happens to you. You fall into it, like a hole. It strikes, like lightning. And when the feeling fades, the story says, love is over.

Love Is a Habit tells a different story. Feelings matter, but love is more than a feeling. It's something you practice, the way you practice a sport or an instrument. You can get better at it. And it grows by being done, again and again.

THINK IT THROUGH

Where did you first learn what love is? Was it taught to you more as a feeling or as something people do?

How Long a Habit Takes

You may have heard that it takes 21 days to form a habit. That number doesn't come from any study. In 2010, researchers in London led by Phillippa Lally actually tracked people trying to build a new daily habit, like drinking water at lunch or going for a run.

On average, it took about 66 days before the new behavior felt automatic. But the range was huge, from 18 days to more than 250. Some habits came quickly. Others took most of a year. The point is not the number. It's that habits grow slowly, and they do grow.

THINK IT THROUGH

Does knowing it can take months make building a good habit feel more hopeful or more discouraging to you? Why?

Missing a Day

Here's the most encouraging part of that study. Missing a single day did not ruin the habit. People who slipped once and picked it back up the next day ended up just about as far along as everyone else.

That matters for love. You will have days when you're selfish, short-tempered or careless. Those days don't erase everything. What matters is coming back. A habit is not a perfect record. It's a direction you keep returning to.

THINK IT THROUGH

When you fail at something you're trying to do better, what do you usually tell yourself? What would you say to a friend instead?

Actions Before Feelings

C. S. Lewis gave some simple advice in *Mere Christianity*. Don't waste time worrying about whether you love your neighbor. Act as if you did. He noticed that when we do something kind for someone, we usually end up liking them more. The feeling follows the action.

The Bible says something similar: "let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:18). Love that waits for the right feeling may wait forever. Love that acts tends to find the feeling along the way.

THINK IT THROUGH

Have you ever done something kind for someone you didn't like much? How did you see them afterward?

What Love Practices

If love is a habit, what are the daily practices? Some are small enough to start today. Listening without checking your phone. Saying thank you out loud. Asking a follow-up question. Noticing when someone is left out. Saying sorry first.

None of these feel dramatic. That's the point. Big acts of love, like forgiving a deep hurt or giving something costly, are usually built on thousands of small ones. You train for the marathon by running around the block.

THINK IT THROUGH

Which small practice of love comes easily to you? Which one is hardest?

Fruit, Not Fireworks

Paul described love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control as fruit (Galatians 5:22–23). Fruit doesn't appear overnight. It grows through seasons, slowly, as long as the branch stays connected to the tree.

Fireworks are bright and loud and over in seconds. Fruit is quiet, and it feeds people. A love that is a habit looks more like an orchard than a fireworks show.

THINK IT THROUGH

Think of someone whose love feels steady, like fruit. What habits do you see in them?

We Love Because

There's one more piece. Habits need a source of energy. If love depends only on your own strength, you will run dry. The Bible says, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Love starts with receiving.

That changes the practice. It's not just trying harder to be nice. It's coming back, day after day, to the love that was there first, and letting it flow through you to others. A pipe doesn't make water. It carries it.

THINK IT THROUGH

Where do you go to be filled up when you're running low on love? What helps you receive?

Start Small, Start Today

Choose one practice of love. Make it small enough that you can't talk yourself out of it. Attach it to something you already do: after breakfast, text one person something kind; at dinner, ask someone about their day and really listen.

Then keep going. If you miss a day, start again the next. Give it a couple of months. See who you become.

THINK IT THROUGH

What is the one practice you will choose? What existing habit will you attach it to?

Look Back

Here's the path we walked. Love is more than a feeling; it's a practice. Lally's study found habits took about 66 days on average, with a wide range, and missing one day didn't ruin them. Lewis said act in love and the feeling tends to follow. Love's practices are small and daily. Its fruit grows slowly. We love because we were loved first. Start small, start today, and keep coming back.

Habits are easier with company. Ask a friend or family member to build a habit of love alongside you, and check in with each other once a week.

THINK IT THROUGH

Who could practice love alongside you? What would you ask them?

Sources

The title idea of Love Is a Habit (forthcoming), retold here in our own words.

Phillippa Lally, Cornelia H. M. van Jaarsveld, Henry W. W. Potts and Jane Wardle, “How Are Habits Formed: Modelling Habit Formation in the Real World,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 40, no. 6 (2010): 998–1009.

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952), Book 3, chapter 9, “Charity.” Lewis is under copyright; his idea is given here in our own words.

Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.