

Spiritual Habits to Form in the New Year

Habits, now there's a word that elicits a spectrum of feelings—conviction, consternation, embarrassment, satisfaction—depending on the spiritual condition of your many ingrained behaviors. A close look at your habits is a picture window into your soul.

We equate habits as being either good or bad. I believe they have much more profound implications for our spiritual life than merely good or bad. Our habits can create a direct pipeline for the Holy Spirit, or they can be a destructive force, repressing every invitation from the Lord for a deeper relationship.

I've never heard anyone talk about Jesus' habits, but obviously, He had many. He stopped and ministered to those that others would pass by, from blind men to little children. And as Luke was interviewing eyewitnesses of Jesus' life—with the intent to write an accurate account—he made this observation from what many others must have confirmed, "But Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray" (Luke 5:16, NASB).

The short, Jesus had a habit of getting away in seclusion to pray. Jesus' habits can be a yardstick for us in taking a snapshot of our habits as we start the New Year. As an aside, apply the yardstick of Jesus' habit of prayer to your practice. How do you measure up?

The beginning of a new year is the most common time to attack unproductive habits and set a new course in our lives. And, oh, the habits we attack: lose weight, exercise, quit smoking, get out of debt, eat healthier, learn a language and on ad infinitum. One thing that contributes to our lack of success

in these ventures is that those habits just listed are usually decades in the making and require significant external support to make an inroad in their stranglehold. Here are some suggestions of habits to target this New Year that will profoundly impact your spiritual life:

- Spend more time with family
- Be more polite
- Get a journal and write in it once a week
- Say an encouraging word to someone every day
- Don't answer texts or emails after 6:00 p.m.

But, let me suggest breaking one lousy habit most of us have that will make a massive dent in your anxiety level and susceptibility to depression. Here is my challenge to anyone who is making a New Year's goal.

Stop Complaining

Listen carefully to yourself for the next few days. What do you complain about? Is it the president, Congress, your neighbor, the pastor's sermon, the volume of the worship music and on ad nauseam? Consider this: Every time you complain you are sending a direct message to God that you don't trust Him; you don't believe He has things under control or you doubt that He is good. These are all the wrong messages to send to God.

I believe complaining disconnects our line of communication to the Lord. It's akin to taking a pair of snips and cutting a telephone cable cleanly into two pieces. No signal can transmit to the Lord. He doesn't hear our prayers. Furthermore, that disconnect works in two ways—not only does the Lord not hear our prayers, but the person who complains can't hear the Lord.

When we complain we blind ourselves to the all the good things the Lord has accomplished in us and for us. By complaining, we disavow all of God's previous provision and His hopes and

promises for the future.

Donald Hebb, the father of neuropsychology, believed that neurons that fire together, wire together. The brain learns to connect like neurons with recurring thoughts. He was saying that if you center your mind around worrying and complaining, your mind will create neural pathways that make it natural to bring up those same patterns for any similar situation that comes along. The result is devastating—anxiety and depression.

So, how do you overcome complaining? Focus on the many good things our Lord has provided for you. Our message is to be that of the psalmist: “I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise will continually be in my mouth” (Ps. 34:1). Instead of grumbling and complaining, we are to praise God for His goodness to us. Praise to God—acclamation, appreciation, adoration and applause—should be the very words continually on our lips.

Practice this habit this New Year, and you will free yourself from anxiety and depression. Now, that is a worthwhile spiritual habit that will entirely change the way you live.
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