

SO YOU WANT TO KICK THE HABIT

A few years ago, whenever I dined alone, I read books. But gradually eating while reading became a habit. I started to eat whenever I picked up a book or magazine.

When I began to put on weight, I knew I had to deal with this bad habit. But it wasn't easy. Fortunately, the Bible offers some clear basic principles for dealing with bad habits.

Seek Proper Motivation

To have victory over a habit, one must admit he has the habit and accept responsibility for it. For example, the smoker who insists he can quit anytime has not admitted his habit. And if he insists on blaming others for his habit, he has not accepted responsibility for it. With this two-part realization he can begin to deal with his habit.

There are both natural and spiritual motivations for breaking habits. In my case, I recognized the bad habit and my responsibility for it. I sought to break the habit for the sake of my appearance and health - natural motivation.

For natural motivation to work, the benefits of breaking the habit must clearly outweigh the pleasures of the habit. We often recognize the benefits, but fail to understand why we don't succeed. This is because we don't realize the real need a habit is meeting. A man may think his adulterous affair meets his sexual or emotional needs, when, in fact, it meets his self-image needs.

But even if a person accurately determines which needs are being met, natural motivation may not be strong enough to defeat the habit. Diet and smokers' clinics play upon the natural motivation of fear or the desire to be attractive. Sometimes, however this yields only temporary success.

While everyone has natural motivations, Christians also have spiritual motivation. After I was saved, I retained many bad habits, one of which was speeding. Fear of a traffic ticket motivated me to obey the speed limit, but only when the police were in sight. I rationalized, "Everybody does it; it's good stewardship of my time."

As I matured, God convicted me of my driving habits. When I drive over the speed limit, I felt guilty.

Guilt is not a spiritual motivation. Even non-Christians experience guilt. But guilt can lead to spiritual motivation. That is its God-given purpose.

Sometimes when we want victory over a habit, we pray repeatedly, but nothing happens. James explains why: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives" (James 4:3).

We do want victory over our habits, but we want it on our terms and for our purposes. We want victory for our health, for our appearance, or to rid us of guilt. But bad habits are sin, and they

keep us from spiritual maturity. Only when we are ready to allow God to control our lives will we have spiritual motivation.

This motivation concerns God's purposes, not our benefits. When we concern ourselves with His purposes, we will benefit as a result. But personal gain should not be our motive.

Avoid Tempting Stimuli

When I started to eat every time I read, my problems began. I enjoy both reading and eating so when I inadvertently paired the activities, they reinforced each other.

Many of our habits are triggered by certain stimuli. Paul wrote to Timothy "Now flee from youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22). The word *lusts* means forbidden desires of any kind. The idea is to avoid those things that tempt us to fall into our bad habits. These things may not be wrong in and of themselves, but they become wrong for us because of their effect on our behavior

Replace Tempting Thoughts

Think of a big, red, delicious apple. When you can almost taste it, try to stop thinking of that apple. If you are like most people, the more you try to push it out of your mind, the more you think of it.

Now think of a piece of chocolate cream pie - rich, creamy chocolate swirls of whipped cream with a nice flaky crust. What happened to the apple?

When you started to think of the pie, the apple disappeared. That is the key to the principle of replacement.

Do not fight habitual thoughts; replace them. Paul wrote to the Philippians: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things" (Phil. 4:8)

Replacement also works for behavior. Matthew 5: 43,44 teaches we should replace hate with love. Paul wrote in Ephesians 4: 28 that the thief should replace robbing with honest labor. A woman who struggles with overeating might trade household tasks with her husband, letting him shop for groceries while she mows the lawn and gets exercise.

Seek Christian Support

One way God helps us is through other believers. While it is the miracles in Scripture that impress us, a careful reading of God's Word shows that God usually uses human means to help His people. Paul instructs us to "bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2). He also says, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you; with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another" (Col. 3:16).

Our American culture has made us so self-sufficient that we do not know how to ask others for support. We need to develop the humility that allows us to admit our weaknesses so others can help us.

Take One Day at a Time

We make the mistake of looking at our habit and then looking at the future with this conclusion: “I can’t do it.” We are defeated before we even get started. But God gives us grace and strength only for this day.

Jesus tells us, “Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow, for tomorrow will care for itself” (Matt. 6:34). You do not have to defeat your habit forever. All you have to do is defeat it next time.

Know that Lapses Aren’t Fatal

Psychologists claim that the way a person handles a lapse will determine whether he will ultimately break his habit.

If I find myself starting in on a box of cookies as I sit down with a book, I can react by saying to myself, “I’ve blown it; I ate a couple of cookies. I might as well finish the box and start over tomorrow.” Or I can say, “I shouldn’t have started these; I’ll put them away right now.” The first reaction leads to defeat, the second to victory.

John wrote to the church, “My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous” (1 John 2:1). When we lapse, God forgives and gives us another chance.

Just recently I tightened my belt another notch.

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