

New year, New you

I'm going to be healthier  
I'm going to be nicer  
I'm going to do devotions more

It's that time of year again. The time when people contemplate the person they want to become and try to set goals and make changes to become that person. When the calendar flips to February, how many people are still holding to their resolutions? The gyms are empty, the cupboards are filled with sweets and the Bible is getting dusty. That's the joke. That's why people don't make resolutions.

Why is it so difficult to stick to these changes? Do we not really want to become a better person? Not likely. Change is difficult. We create habits and replacing them requires work. So many things are working against us.

Did you know that changing a habit means changing your brain? Imagine walking through a heavily wooded forest. You have a path worn that you have used for a long time. It is clear, flattened, almost groomed for you to pass through. Now picture yourself trying to forge a new path in the same forest. Passing through is difficult. It may even require tools to cut a new path. This is what is happening in your brain when you decide to change a behavior that has been a habit. You are undergoing the task of making a new path in your brain by rewiring the neural pathways. The more you are able to walk down the new path, the easier it becomes. At the same time, the old path is becoming neglected and grown over so less likely to be travelled.

We also have difficulty changing behavior because of the unseen warfare taking place around us at all times. Consider Paul in Romans 7:15-25 when he wrote, "15 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. 16 And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. 17 As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. 18 For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature.[c] For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. 21 So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? 25 Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

We fight a constant battle against sin, but the good news is God can give us the strength to overcome our sinful habits.

One other difficulty in making change is in the actual goals that we set. Often our goals are unrealistic or they are not specific enough. If I want to be more healthy, how will I know when that has happened? How am I supposed to become more healthy?

To set goals and achieve success, goals must be "SMART". In 1981, George T. Doran, a business consultant published a paper about a SMART way to write goals in management. Since then we see this format being used in business, education and counseling. SMART is an acronym that provides criteria for creating goals.

**S** stands for specific - Be clear and detailed about what you want. I want to lose 5 pounds in the next month. I will go to the gym 3 times a week and I will eat a low calorie diet.

**M** stands for measurable - A measurable goal has a clear point where you can measure progress.

**A** stands for achievable - Goals are attainable. They stretch you a bit but you can still accomplish them with some commitment.

**R** stands for realistic - Goals that are realistic will be possible for you to reach and are achievable by you. Make sure your goals are something that involve change by you and not others.

**T** stands for time frame - Put a date on your goal. Giving the goal an end date gives a target to work toward.

So go ahead. Set some goals. Make some changes. You will be doing amazing work of changing your brain. God will be your strength and applying SMART criteria to your resolutions can increase the chances for you to still be working hard beyond the first few weeks of the year!