

Are New Year's resolutions helpful? by Ian Paul

A happy new year to all my readers! And welcome to the season of short-lived resolutions! I say that not out of cynicism but of realism. I once helped to run a squash league at a local gym, and discovered that only around one-fifth of those who paid their subscriptions actually used the gym on a regular basis, and that January was the busiest time for people signing up and using the gym—only to fall off and lapse back into old habits by February. The same is true devotionally: the most widely used Bible-in-a-year scheme has huge take-up in January, but similar huge fall-off by February. (This does mean that Genesis is the most read book of the Bible, which is probably no bad thing!) So why do resolutions fail, and can we do better in orienting our lives more fully to God?

First, we need to recognise that this is not a good time of year to change. Most people have not had a long break in which to reflect on their lives, unlike in the summer; it is cold and dark so we are not feeling energised; and many cultures have chosen a different point in the calendar at which to start each year. We need here to recognise the tension between times and dates as artificial human constructs, but which at the same time have some connection with natural rhythms and seasons. There is something that seems naturally to work in having one day off in seven—but it is not a rhythm that is discernible in nature. In the mediaeval West, the New Year was for centuries fixed at the end of March, and the loss of 11 days with the change from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar gave us our tax year starting on April 6th. This is a natural time of new beginnings, as winter gives way to Spring and we see signs of new growth in the natural world around us. But there is not usually a time away from the pressures of our occupation to allow reflection, so in contemporary culture this is not likely to work well.

An alternative is the end of summer, and in the northern hemisphere it is the demands of the harvest that has shaped our year; the long summer break from school was originally arranged to allow children to help with the harvest labour. September then marks the beginning of the new agricultural year, with the planting of winter and spring crops, and this is the beginning of the academic year, with the sowing of new ideas. In my experience, this is the time when people think about life change, and are actually most open to changes of habit and life. When involved in a growing church in Poole, Dorset, we always saw attendance numbers grow in September compared with June and July. The Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) fits with this, coming around the end of September or the beginning of October. (I realise that I don't know why the Christian liturgical year begins at the end of November; does anyone else know why, other than an accident of history?)

But we are rather obsessed with numbers in our culture, and so January to December is an easy thing to measure, so I don't think that we will easily make resolutions in September. If we are going to change, are there more positive ways to go about it?

Yes, if we make a second recognition: we mostly do not change by making abrupt resolutions that rely on will power alone. It is possible to make some changes by simple decision—for example, your body takes two to three weeks to adjust to basic physiological changes, so if you want to give up taking sugar in your coffee you can simply do this for a couple of weeks, and by that time you will have got used to the new taste of sugarless coffee. But we have a finite amount of will power, and it gets quickly exhausted! In the TV programme *The Truth about Getting Fit*, Michael Mosley did a fabulous experiment in which participants had to fill in a form with or without a plate of chocolate biscuits in front of them which they were not allowed to touch. Those who had had to exercise will power by resisting the temptation then performed worse on a simple 'wall sit' exercise—because they had already used up some of their will power!

We actually make effective changes by changing our goals, rather than our actions. Just as someone learning to cycle needs to focus on the place they are heading, rather than looking down at handlebars and pedals, so we will change when we focus on longer-term goals rather than short-term changes. It is not individual actions that will bring change so much as a reorientation of our natural habits, and if these can play to our strengths and personality, rather than fighting against them, then they are more likely to work. And for anyone of faith, this connects with a third recognition: we will change more in response to the call of God than as a result of our own determination. There are times in my life when I have made sudden changes, but these have always come in response to a very clear sense of God's call. I have for many years kept a 'rule of life', in which I set out the kinds of habits and patterns of living that will be spiritually, socially and physically healthy—and I conclude this statement by making clear: 'This is the pattern of life to which I believe God is calling me'. This means that I am depending as much on God's work within me as my own effort; change and discipline come about as a cooperative exercise between God and myself, so that I

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neither succumb to laziness (expecting God to do it all) nor to frantic 'will worship' (Richard Foster's phrase in Celebration of Discipline) where it all depends on me. This also means that we might need to stop doing things as much as start doing them; too often resolutions fail because we are simply trying to pack more things into an already busy life. If God is calling us to take up something new, what old thing is God calling us to lay down?

So what is God calling us to in this new calendar year? There are four areas of life that I am reflecting on at the moment.

First, my reading and study, especially of the Scriptures. What is my pattern of Scripture reading, and in particular how am I strengthening my use of biblical languages? Do I need to change my habits of other reading and study as well?

Secondly, my pattern of praying for others. I have never found lists particularly helpful, but instead have found myself praying within other patterns of activity—praying for neighbours as I pass their houses whilst walking the dog, praying for those I am in conversation with face to face, by email or on social media, and so on. Are there new ways of praying to which God is calling me?

Thirdly, my engagement with the world around. Part of my rule of life is to watch or listen to the news every day, so that my thinking and preaching are rooted in the questions of the world around as well as being rooted in Scripture. Do I need to revise those patterns? How should I manage my use of social media? Do I need to find new contexts in which to relate to those a long way from church? And how am I enabling others to find faith for the first time?

Fourthly, my stewardship of my physical health. What health goals should I have for this year? For most men, weight added in their twenties is muscle, but weight added since 30 is fat and needs to go! What is my weight goal for the end of the year? Do I need to reconsider patterns of fasting in order to help that, as well as being a spiritual discipline? How can I maintain my strengthened aerobic fitness as the year progresses?

I conclude with a prayer which is always helpful at any time of review. It is associated with Francis Drake, but in fact has no connection with him, and was apparently written in 1962, the year I was born:

Disturb us, Lord
Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.
Disturb us, Lord, when
With the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life,
We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new Heaven to dim.
Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas
Where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.
We ask You to push back
The horizons of our hopes;
And to push into the future
In strength, courage, hope, and love.