

RESOLUTIONS AND GOD'S GRACE

It's that time of year again. From New Years Day to roughly the end of January many of us make promises that we suspect will not be easy to keep. Still, we make them. Why? There are lots of reasons. Maybe our doctor convinced us to lose weight, exercise more, relax or develop a hobby. We may have decided to be free from an addiction, a dysfunctional relationship or some other burden.

How do we know that we won't have an easy time of it? Well, some of us have been down this road before. We make promises to God, to our spouse, our doctor and to whomever else we trust to hold us accountable for our promises or resolutions. Some of us, however, don't ask God what God wants from us. As a result we may demand much of ourselves in places where God is not asking us to change. We're at high risk of failing. Here are a few examples.

1. I will lose 35 pounds by the beginning of summer. My older son, who runs a counseling center, suggests setting a goal of 5-10 pounds at a time. We can always sign up for the next 5-10 pounds after we reach each our first goal.

2. I will give up: _____
(fill in the blank). This can be an important means of spiritual growth for Christians. However, it should be part of an overall plan to let go of material attachments gradually so that we can focus on God's love and God's will for us. Otherwise, we are likely to get angry and fail.



3. I will go to Sunday worship every week. That's a good decision. However, if we do this by making ourselves feel guilty for missing a Sunday, that's not going to work for very long—at least not without feeling angry with God, the Church, our mothers or whoever taught us that we "had to go" to church.

We could, as a group, probably fill a book with stories of how we've made and soon given up on our New Year's Resolutions. Why does that happen? In northern New England, where Jane and I originated, the major spiritual obstacle to making the right resolution was that so many of us don't like to ask for help. So much of that culture was/is very much an "I'll decide what to do and when to do it" (i.e. change) culture! The discussion often ends with, "I'm not asking for any help either!" Yet, none of us grows spiritually without God's help.

Clearly, if our resolutions involve changes that will affect our bodies or our minds then we need to check with our healthcare advisors so that we avoid preventable harm. It really is no different with resolutions to improve our spiritual health. We may imagine that we are isolated or even unworthy of spiritual care. But there are people who can help at different points along our spiritual journey. Most ordained pastors have some training in pastoral care. Some may have gone on for additional training in pastoral counseling, spiritual direction or Clinical

Pastoral Education. We may not ask for their help for a variety of reasons. However, we are also uncomfortable with asking friends to pray for the gift of discernment for us. We need God's help to know what changes God knows are best for us.

What, then, are we to do? Do we give up making commitments to God and just suffer with resolutions that don't deal with what really needs top change? No, we learn to approach them with the help of people who are on their own spiritual journeys—people who have experienced at least some of the struggles we have.

Here are some steps to consider before deciding to change anything:

1. Take time to ask, "Why am I promising to make this change. Is it for me or to satisfy someone else? How is it a response to God's will?"
2. How will I make this change? Who and what do I need to make it happen?
3. If I make the changes that are the basis of my resolutions, what are the likely consequences to me? What about those closest to me?
4. Who is available to help me make the changes? Who can I turn to who will understand and guide me on my Christian spiritual path? (What about a pastor whom we trust? Also, have we consulted the Bible with the support and guidance of someone knowledgeable about the Bible?)
5. Have I asked God for wisdom? How explicitly and how often? This was the one blessing David's son Solomon sought when God asked him what God could do for him now that he was the King. (1 Kings 3:1-15).
6. Have I listened for God's answer? Specifically, have I listened as God speaks through the Bible, the wisdom the church has preserved as well as modern writers on spirituality? (See suggested list below) Have I faced my questions about why God allows so much suffering among many issues of faith? Have I listened to the questions others ask about believing in God? How have they helped or hindered my growth as one who trusts God? If I am constantly listening for the voice of God why don't I hear it?
7. Have I realized that God may speak in unexpected situations and through unexpected people? The ultimate reality, of course, is that we all-too-often listen for God to confirm what we've already decided is the "Right thing to do." With all the resolve that we can summon, with the firmest of intent to do good, we still need help in clarifying what God expects of us.

It is always good to love our neighbors. God may, however, ask a great deal more from us. God may ask us to sacrifice our plans for God's plans which may involve risk, loss or some other type of suffering. What will we do then?

Rev. Larry LaPierre 01/03/17

Suggested spiritual writers include, but are not limited to the following:

St. Augustine (5th century bishop), St. Benedict, Theresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, Simone Weil, Richard Foster, Madeleine L'Engle, Howard Thurman, Evelyn Underhill, Macrina Wiederkehr, Flora Slosson Wuellner, C. S. Lewis, Hans Kung, Joyce Rupp, Joan Chittister, and Mother Teresa.