

Setting Spiritual Goals

by Staff

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If we were to walk into a local bookstore and head for the self-help shelves, we would discover many titles related to time-management and goal-setting. The authors of such fare know that if a person wants to achieve an objective, large or small, the best way to begin to do so is to set a goal. In setting a goal, an individual's purpose is to put the objective in the forefront of his thinking in order to continually be reminded of it.

Spiritually speaking, do we use the same approach to overcoming sin?

The idea of having to overcome sin runs through the entire Bible, and it is serious business. Hebrews 3:13 shows us that, if we are neglectful and not self-disciplined, we can be hardened and succumb to the deceitfulness of sin. This hardening is called rebellion. Historically, this led to unbelief on the part of the children of Israel.

As God's elect, we cannot underestimate the importance of overcoming and being transformed into the image of God.

Since we will soon observe the Passover, the annual rededication to our spiritual walk with God, we are painfully aware of the areas in our lives in which we miss the mark—let us call it what it is: the areas in which we still have sin.

But why have we grown in some areas and not in others? Most likely, it is because we do not set spiritual goals for overcoming in the areas in which we continually fall short and sin. As we rejoice in God's deliverance of our lives and celebrate our coming out of spiritual Egypt, now is the perfect time to commit ourselves to do better at overcoming than the previous year.

So, how do we set spiritual goals to become more successful in overcoming sin in this coming year?

Admit We Have a Problem—SIN!

The Bible clearly lays out for us the stark reality that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Sin is a reality that we must not only face, but one that we must struggle with our entire being to put out.

Proverbs 28:13 captures the reality of ignoring our sins: "He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy." Four words in this verse—"cover," "prosper," "confesses," and "forsakes"—highlight some valuable instruction for us. According to *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon*, these Hebrew words mean:

» **Cover** (*kacah*, #3680): "to cover, to conceal, to hide."

» **Prosper** (*tsalach*, #6743): "to advance, to prosper, to make progress, to succeed, to be profitable."

» **Confesses** (*yadah*, #3034): "to throw, to shoot, to cast" and by extension, "to confess" or even "to praise."

» **Forsakes** (*'azab*, #5800): "to leave, to loose, to forsake, to let go."

In other words, if we try to hide or ignore our faults, our chances for success in life are dim, but if we admit them and put them behind us, we will have favor. In *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck remarks that "it is easier for us to try and forget a problem that we know exists than to deal with it." He states a fundamental truth about our problems. If we do not deal with a problem—in our case, sin—it will never go away. It will fester, and it will always come up later or manifest itself in a different form.

Spiritually, then, if we are not honest with ourselves about our sins and shortcomings, we will not reach our full, God-given potential. God can show us our sins, but He cannot and will not force us to overcome—that decision is ours. We must see ourselves for what we are and have the desire to make the conscious choice to change. Thus, Paul instructs us in Philippians 2:12-13:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

Setting a Spiritual Goal

Personally, I have both heard and been taught many times in my education and career that, if a person wants to achieve a goal, he must write it down. The exact same principle applies to spiritual goals. Somewhere, we must jot down our spiritual goals on paper—in our Bibles, on a notepad, in a journal or datebook, or on a scrap of paper affixed by a magnet to the refrigerator. Writing our goals down makes them real, and we can refer to them from time to time to remind ourselves of where we are headed.

How do we set a spiritual goal? Maybe we have set spiritual goals before and maybe not. The following plan lays out a framework of five steps with each step being joined to the others. No single step stands alone, and no step can be skipped in an effort to speed up the process.

As a prerequisite, this endeavor *must* begin with God in prayer, fasting, and meditation, and we must set the process in motion with the end, the goal, in mind. If we want to overcome in a certain area, we have to envision what it is to be successful in it. For the purpose of illustration, our spiritual goal might be to become more Christ-like. We must clearly fix in our minds how a Christ-like person is and behaves.

Setting a spiritual goal may not always be as simple and straightforward as we would like. We must be clear about what, where, when, and how we will overcome this specific sin.

This plan needs to be easy to remember, so it will follow a useful and hopefully prophetic acronym: S.M.A.R.T.

S.m.a.r.t.

The *S* in S.M.A.R.T. stands for *Specific*. Breaking our goals into specific and smaller parts is vital because it is the foundation for the process of growth.

Our example of wanting to become more Christ-like, a common goal of everyone who is called, is too broad to accomplish in a single year, five years, or potentially, a lifetime. Therefore, we must be more specific by breaking it down into smaller, more achievable parts.

For instance, we can narrow our aim to Paul's admonition in Colossians 4:6: "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one." This in itself is a huge undertaking, if we consider it as "speaking as a Christian should." But perhaps we have a problem with negativity in our speech, a tendency to criticize or make unflattering remarks about others. Turning this trait around is a good place to start.

Our goal is now a bit more specific: to stop speaking negatively about others.

s.M.a.r.t.

The *M* in S.M.A.R.T. stands for *Measurable*. What standard can we employ to measure our progress? The most important thing to remember is that God Himself is our standard in the Person of Jesus Christ. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:13 of our overall goal and standard: ". . . till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

Growing to the measure of the stature of Christ is a tall order. This requires complete and total devotion—seeking God with all our hearts and praying often about the specific sins we are trying to overcome. It takes hard work and dedication, and it will not happen overnight, which means we also need staying power—endurance or perseverance.

It is important that the spiritual goal be measurable, if it is not, then:

- a. It is hard to know when we have achieved it, and
- b. it makes it too easy to give up and become discouraged.

In our example goal, we might set our standard based on Matthew 7:12: "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." We certainly do not want others to speak negatively about us, so we should not speak negatively about them. Thus, if we want others to say nice things about us, then we have to begin being positive in our speech about others. We can then measure—count—how often we fulfill this standard of Christ.

Another measure may be that we will see improvements in our relationship with others. This is a longer-term standard because improvements will take weeks, months, or years to become noticeable. However, if we are patient, we will begin to see marked improvements in time.

Ensuring the goal is measurable will enable us to recognize and to build confidence in the progress that is being made.

s.m.A.r.t.

The *A* in S.M.A.R.T. stands for *Action*. Nothing will ever be accomplished on our goal if we never do anything about it. And not just any kind of action will do. It has been said, "If you fail to plan, then you plan to fail." So we must ask ourselves, "How can we make an effective plan of action to overcome?"

Solomon understood this and captured it for our learning in Proverbs 20:18: "Plans are established by counsel; by wise counsel wage war." This verse drives home the need for us to make a plan. We should never let it escape our minds that we are engaged in a war, a spiritual war for our eternal lives—a war against sin and the myriad influences in the world to forsake God. Satan would love nothing more than to destroy us.

An obvious action item in our plan would be to replace negative talk with positive, uplifting words. We can resolve to say something complimentary—but true—to everyone with whom we converse on a given day or in a certain week: "That sure is a nice tie" or "I've always admired your handwriting." It does not have to be anything deep or complex, just sincere and true.

Our plan for overcoming negative speech about others might also include writing down specific situations and people that we struggle with. We should be honest about why we respond to them as we do, and consider if our response is truly justified. Then, we need to strategize about how we will react differently the next time we encounter such an instance or person.

Solomon tells us in Proverbs 27:17, "As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend." If we take action by planning to respond more positively, our character will eventually be "sharpened" by our friends and acquaintances, and we will make progress toward our goal.

s.m.a.R.t.

The *R* in S.M.A.R.T. stands for *Review*. Notice Proverbs 29:19 in *The Bible in Basic English*: "A servant will not be trained by words; for though the sense of the words is clear to him, he will not give attention." Giving instruction just once is not enough; repetition is the best form of emphasis. A student or an employee may not understand a concept or process after the first time he hears it, but he will probably grasp it more fully after a review or two.

In the context of setting and working toward a spiritual goal, even though we have put our goal into words and have written it down, we must review our plan often, or we will forget it. "Out of sight, out of mind," the saying goes.

In our example, because we have recorded specific incidents of speaking negatively of others, it should be easy to review our plan and make any necessary adjustments. We should also be able to recognize increased incidents of more positive speech and resulting better relationships. A journal or diary in which we write about our successes and failures in attaining our goals could prove to be an invaluable resource in reviewing progress.

Depending on the goal and the degree of struggle we have, we may want to review our goals biweekly, weekly, or even daily. We should set some time aside on a regular basis to review our spiritual goals prayerfully. This will keep them at the forefront of our minds.

s.m.a.r.T.

The *T* in S.M.A.R.T. stands for *Time*. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Procrastination will always be the thief of time." What a very true statement! We are all guilty of putting things off and wasting time. Because human nature will tempt us to procrastinate, we should never leave a goal open-ended.

The apostle Paul warns us against this in Ephesians 5:15-16: "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil." *Circumspectly* means "carefully considering all circumstances and possible consequences," which applies directly to overcoming. Since we are living in spiritually treacherous times, and our days are limited, it is best to begin to work on our goals promptly and persistently.

As we go through this life, one of the hardest things we have to do is be patient with ourselves. It would be nice to overcome a sin like flicking off a light switch, but that is unrealistic. It is going to take time, especially when we delve into the areas we constantly struggle in.

The spiritual goal, then, must not only be time-bound, but the time period must also be realistic. If not, we will end up dragging our feet or giving up all together. So, we need to give ourselves a reasonable amount of time to accomplish each goal we set. In our example, we could say, "*In thirty days* I want my speech to be filled with positive and uplifting comments about others." There is nothing like a deadline to get a person motivated!

We Are Not Alone

Setting spiritual goals offers an invaluable means to chart our efforts to overcome. Thoughtfully applying the acronym S.M.A.R.T. to spiritual goals can provide a simple and effective way to measure our spiritual growth as we approach the Passover—and throughout the entire year.

God the Father and Jesus Christ have promised to ensure our achievement of our spiritual goals. Paul assures us in Philippians 1:6, ". . . being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." We are not alone in this process. We have access to the help and guidance of the greatest power in the universe to accomplish our spiritual goals. We would be smart to take advantage of it.