

The Power of Godly Habits

I am currently reading Drew Dyck's intriguing book, *Your Future Self Will Thank You: Secrets to Self-Control from the Bible and Brain Science*. In his book, the author links scripture's challenge to discipline ourselves with fascinating scientific research.

He wrote about a group of Washington students in the 1990s who participated in an eight-year anti-smoking program. The students learned how dramatically smoking would increase their chances of serious health issues like: COPD, cancer, and heart disease. At the time, 25.7% of young people smoked regularly. The anti-smoking program reduced the number of smokers, but the decline was tiny. After nearly a decade of learning about the dangers of lighting up, the smoking rate went down only .03%.

The study illustrates how it takes more than mere information to dramatically change behavior. Pastor Todd Hunter observed, "*Information alone does not produce change because it does not touch the will, the emotions, the heart, the spirit or our social environment.*"

In contrast, scientists have noted that when good changes are practiced regularly, they become habits. In a process called "*chunking*," the brain takes over habitual behaviors and turns them into automatic routines. Neuroscientists have learned these habits require minimal mental energy and it takes much less emotional effort to continue practicing a good habit than it does to change a bad one.

Theologian N. T. Wright had this in mind when he wrote, "*Virtue is what happens when wise and courageous choices become second nature.*" After Billy Graham died, author, Jerry Jenkins, who had helped Graham write his memoirs recalled a conversation with the famous preacher. Graham was uncomfortable with people seeing him as the ideal spiritual leader. He did not want anyone to think he was perfect.

However, when Jenkins asked how he maintained spiritual discipline in prayer and Bible reading he eagerly shared his experience. Graham said, "*The Bible tells us to pray without ceasing and to search the scriptures and I do that.*" He related how he made prayer a regular part of every day. He left his Bible open and each time he saw it would read a few verses or even chapters.

When Jenkins asked how Graham got back on track when he missed a day or two, he was surprised and said, "*I don't think I've ever done that.*" Making God a consistent part of his daily routine became such a habit that it was natural to him.

The Apostle Paul practiced similar spiritual disciplines. He once wrote, "*I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.*" (Philippians 3:12, NLT) The more we make God a consistent part of our daily lives, the more natural it becomes to live a life that honors Him and helps others.