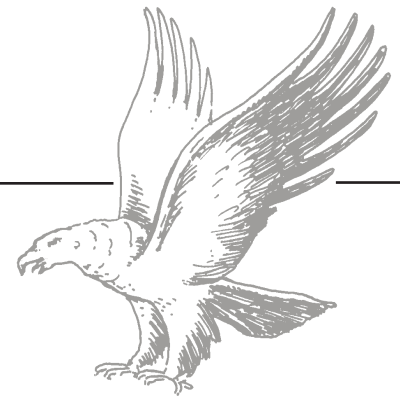


Wings

*"Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles."
Isaiah 40:31*



December 31, 2017

"I Will" . . . Or Will I?

New Year's resolutions, like all resolutions, are notoriously hard to implement. The problem lies not in our nature (derived from a distant source), but in something closer to home.

"For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good" (Rom. 7:15-21).



As we stand on the threshold of a new year, many of us are preparing (once again) a list of changes that we are determined to make in the coming months. With the best of intentions, we commit to putting off bad habits, and start practicing good ones. Whatever the disappointments of the past, *this* year will be different. I *will* make these changes in my life. Or will I? Will this

year's resolutions run out of steam and fall by the wayside like so many others in the past?

Despite full knowledge of what is bad and good, we humans struggle to follow through on our resolutions. The Israelites who came out of Egypt declared to Moses, "All that the Lord has spoken *we will do*" (Ex. 19:8)—yet almost immediately began challenging everything God said. They discovered the same thing that so many of us have learned: making verbal commitments is easy; following through on those commitments is hard.

Paul described the problem well in his description of his own struggle with besetting sin: "*To will* is present with me, but *how to perform* what is good I do not find." Paul knew the frustration of trying to follow through on his good intentions.

Why is it so difficult for human beings to make changes in their lives? Twice in this passage, Paul lays the blame on the "sin that dwells in me" (v. 17, 20). The Calvinist takes this to mean that man is so corrupt that he is

utterly incapable of making any positive changes on his own. But we need not be so harsh on ourselves. This indwelling sin is simply *the power of bad habits to stay bad*. However we develop these habits—whether through ignorance, our upbringing, the influence of bad associations, or all the above—once we settle into a pattern of behavior, it is our nature to stay there. Disrupting that pattern is not impossible, but it requires a serious exercise of will power that most of us are ill prepared to muster.

For it is our will power that is being challenged here. When the prodigal son evaluated his sorry condition, he knew there was only one way out: "*I will* arise and go to my father" (Lk. 15:18). In this case, the sinner's will overcame the bad habits—"he arose and came to his father" (v. 20). It was the hardest thing he ever had to do, but a new life of joy—based on forgiveness, not perfection—rewarded his changed behavior.

Like the prodigal son, I can "arise and go" in a different direction, too. It comes down to one question: *How badly do I really want to change?*

— David King



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