

Introduction

As difficult as it is to believe, 2013 begins on Tuesday and as always many of us have made resolutions for the New Year. That raises the question of course, **"Will we keep them?"**

Some of us won't. Consider the guy with this resolution history: 2009 – **No fast food**; 2010 – **Cut back on fast food**; 2011 – **No fast food lunches**; and 2012 – **Cut back on fast lunches**. Or consider the guy with this resolution history: 2010 – **Watch my calories until I get below 190**; 2011 – **Watch my calories until I get below 200**; 2012 – **Develop realistic attitude about my weight**. Most of us can empathize can't we? We know what it's like to make a resolution, even one that we need or ought to make, and then not keep it.

The text we read earlier, Matthew 13:44-46 speaks directly to that experience of ours. It teaches us the general pattern for making and keeping worthwhile resolutions. Let's examine that pattern today.

Two Parables

We know from Matthew 4:17 that the central message of Jesus during His earthly ministry was, **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."** **"The kingdom of heaven"** refers to the God and the realities of His spiritual world. **"At hand"** means that it's accessible to anyone who wants it. Those who choose to can take it or incorporate it into their persons and lives. That makes 13:44-46 a defining text because in it, Jesus teaches us how to do that.

He does so by telling us two mini-parables.

In the first, verse 44, a man discovers a priceless treasure buried in a field and covers it up again after he does. Overflowing with excitement and joy, he then pulls all of his assets together and buys the field. In the second mini-parable, verses 45-46, a merchant in search of fine pearls discovers one of incredible quality and value. Overflowing with excitement and joy, he then pulls all of his assets together and buys it.

You can see how these mini-parables relate to resolutions. Both men made one. The first resolved to attain the treasure and the second to attain the pearl. And Jesus reveals how they attained them. They followed a general pattern that we too must follow in order to make and keep worthwhile resolutions. That pattern is comprised of three steps.

Dream

First, we dream. Notice that the two men in our text had a dream – to have the treasure and the pearl. That helps us define what a dream is. It’s a vision or goal of being, doing, or having something. And that’s where almost every achievement or attainment begins. We dream it. Mother Teresa said to her superior, **“I have three pennies and a dream from God to build an orphanage.”** **“Sister Teresa,”** he chided her, **“You can’t build an orphanage with three pennies. With three pennies, you can do nothing.”** **“I know,”** she replied, **“But with God and three pennies I can do anything.”** She had a dream or vision and that’s where almost every achievement or attainment begins.

Let me ask you a question in that regard. Do you have a dream? If not, you and I can develop one and here’s how – by doing four things.

First, we identify a dream. We do that by asking and thoughtfully answering this question, **“What do I desire or need to be, do, or have?”** According to the University of Scranton’s *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, the top three resolutions for 2012 were lose weight, get organized, and save more money. Some people recognized they desired or needed to do those things. We also ask and thoughtfully answer this question, **“What do I desire or need to be, do, or have for God?”** After studying the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, a Christian I know resolved to eliminate all anger from his life. He recognized he needed to do that for God.

We do a second thing to develop a dream. We determine what the benefits of the dream we identified are. This involves reflecting on what it would be like to achieve or attain it – reflecting on why it would be

valuable, why it would be so much better for God, others, or us if we did.

We do a third thing. We determine what the costs of the dream we identified are. This involves examining what has to be done to achieve or attain it and what that requires in terms of time, energy, money, and anything else we value.

Finally, we do a fourth thing. We determine if the dream we identified is a bargain. We stack up the benefits against the costs and calculate which is greater. If the benefits outweigh the costs, it's a bargain. If the costs outweigh the benefits, it isn't.

Now, if the dream is a big enough bargain (if the benefits outweigh the costs enough), we are then gripped by the desirability of achieving or attaining it. The prospects of achieving or attaining it fill us with the same excitement and joy that the men in our text had.

At that point, we have a dream or to say it more accurately, a dream has us. We're in its grip in other words and I can't impress upon you enough the significance of that. When our dream is clear and strong, it will pull everything else that needs to be done to achieve or attain it along with it. When our dream is clear and strong, we likely will begin to pursue it and persevere. When it isn't, we likely won't begin to pursue it or will eventually quit if we do, perhaps before January is over.

I knew a pastor in Cleveland whose church was near a large Hispanic community. He wanted to reach that community for Jesus and believed learning Spanish would enable him to. So, he gathered facts about the cost in time, energy, and money to learn it. After that, he stacked the benefit, reaching the Hispanic community, up against the costs and concluded that the benefit was far greater. He was then gripped by the desirability of learning Spanish and that became his dream.

He illustrates the first step in the general pattern of making and keeping resolutions. We dream.

Decide

There's a second step. We decide to achieve or attain the dream.

The men in our text did just that. They firmly decided to attain the treasure and the pearl. The cost of doing so, all that they had, makes clear that they did.

Those two men illustrate something we desperately need to grasp. Achieving or attaining dreams rarely happens by accident, drift, or imposition. Where people rely on random causes and forces, very little of value transpires or occurs.

Let's go back to the pastor I knew. Suppose he tells me he's going to learn Spanish. I then ask him what he's going to do to learn it. To which he replies, "**Nothing, I'm just going to wait for it to happen.**" And that's what he does. Day after day, he just waits for it to happen, wondering if it will. That would be ludicrous of course. It wouldn't happen. Very few things of value, whether it's learning Spanish, losing weight, or eliminating anger, occur by accident, drift, or imposition.

They almost always occur, when they do, by firm decision instead. Choice far more than cause directs our lives. We achieve or attain dreams, or anything of value, by firmly deciding to.

Now, deciding is an aspect of intending. To intend something means to purpose it with our mind and with our heart (will). Sometimes, people wish that something would happen. Or they want it to happen. But they do not enough or nothing to make it happen. Their intention began to develop but it was aborted and never formed.

Franklin Covey, a time management firm, polled 15,000 customers about their New Year's resolutions. It found that 80% of people who make them break them. 33% in fact break them by the end of January. What's going on here? It's that the intention of those people to be, do, or have something began to develop but was aborted and never formed.

That helps us understand the link between intention and decision. Decision completes intention. Intention begins to develop and decision forms it. That formed intention then directs us to pursue our dream.

Let's go back to the Christian who resolved to eliminate anger from his life. He intended to do that and completed his intention by firmly

deciding to do it. Bodily habits and trying circumstances opposed him but he eventually prevailed over them because he had firmly decided to pursue his dream. Deciding completed his intention and made it robust.

Do

The general pattern for making and keeping resolutions involves a third step. Notice what the two men in our text did after they decided to attain the treasure and pearl. They discovered what attaining them required: gather all their assets together, sell them, and purchase the field and pearl. They then did just that. That reveals the third step. We do. We carry out the decision we made. We do whatever is necessary to achieve or attain our dream.

Notice I said **"whatever is necessary"** and not **"whatever is convenient."** Interested people do whatever is convenient. Committed people do whatever is necessary, which is what our dreams, if they're worthwhile enough, require. Commitment does have a source. A gripping dream leads to robust intention, which leads to committed action.

Anyway, this third step is primarily about the means for achieving or attaining our dream. When I say **"means"** here, I'm using the word in the traditional sense, as in **"the means to an end."** For our purposes today, the end is our dream and this third step is about the means to that end. We do two things.

First, we discover what the means to the end are. Almost every dream has means that are known to be effective in achieving or attaining it. So, we make the effort to discover what those means are.

Second, we employ the means we've discovered. We thoughtfully and persistently do the things that are known to be effective in being, doing, or having what we dream.

Let's go back one more time to the Christian who resolved to eliminate anger from his life. He discovered what the means to that end are. He asked me, **"How can I eliminate anger from my life?"** So I told him: repent when he gets angry, learn everything Scripture says

about anger, read good materials about anger (which I gave him), observe and analyze the anger of others, observe and analyze his anger, practice spiritual disciplines that address anger, and persistently ask the Holy Spirit to transform his anger into passion and joy. Having learned those means to the end, he then employed them to eliminate anger.

The Ultimate Resolution

That then is the general pattern for making and keeping resolutions. We dream, decide, and do, which confronts us with what I call the ultimate resolution. It's to access the kingdom of heaven at hand. There is a general pattern for doing so and it's the same three steps.

First, we dream. We determine the benefit of accessing the kingdom - pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy. We also determine the cost - forfeiting the freedom to live the way we want to. Finally, we stack up the benefit against the cost, which gives us clarity. We realize that accessing the kingdom is the greatest bargain in human life.

The second step is that we decide. Having clarity, we intend to access the kingdom and complete that intention by firmly deciding to. We choose to do whatever is necessary to access it.

The third step is that we do. We committedly carry out our decision by discovering the means to the end. That means is discipleship to Jesus. We then employ that means. We arrange all of our everyday affairs around being with Him, becoming like Him, and doing all He says.

Conclusion

I close with pictures that explain the New Year's resolutions that several drivers made: (1) Always replace the gas nozzle at the pump; (2) Try to drive closer to the speed limit; (3) Keep a safe distance between the police's car and mine; and (4) Don't park next to fire hydrants. Those resolutions, for those people at least, are good ones. But I leave you with the best and most beneficial resolution that all of us need to make and keep. Access the kingdom of heaven at hand.