How to Overcome a Bad Habit

Third in the series “How to Overcome”

# Scripture: Hebrews 10:19-31

# Key Thought: From Hebrews 10, we can glean five practical tips that will help us beat any bad habit.

# Intro idea:

The main point of this passage is to encourage the readers to persevere in their faith and have confidence in God. In the process of his discussion, the writer, whoever it was, brings up a bad habit that many people there had and which also many people have today -- neglect of worship, finding all kinds of things to do on the Lord’s day besides honor him with their presence in his house. I looked at the passage to see if while the writer was motivating the readers to overcome their bad habit, he might also give us some hints on how to win the victory over our own bad habits as well, the same one and other ones. I think he definitely does. Let’s explore the passage together.

Before we begin, I would like each of you to think of a bad habit that you have been trying to get rid of, or should be trying to get rid of. Ask God to put it on your heart this morning to win the victory over this habit. Now let’s talk about how you can do just that. I have one in mind too. Don’t think of a whole list of them. One is enough. Two at the most.

# Place your confidence in God, not yourself. (vv. 22, 23)

The section about the confidence we are to have in God is actually part of the conclusion of the argument of the whole book so far. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we can come to God in confidence. Verse 22 – “Let us draw near with to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

One of the key mistakes we make in trying to overcome bad habits is depending only on ourselves. If we could have won the victory, we probably already would have. Bad habits are still around because they are winning over our good intentions. We need help to overcome. The sooner we admit that, the sooner we win the victory.

Where do we start to get that help? Not where you might expect.

The section begins with a section about our faith in God. That is the right place to start. Hebrews pictures a faith in God that includes a sense of forgiveness of sin – that’s what the expression “hearts sprinkled” means. It comes from an OT ceremony where Moses sprinkled water with a little blood it from a sacrifice for sin over the people as a sign of atonement for them. It meant that their sins were forgiven. Hebrews tells us that when we have confessed our sin to God and asked his forgiveness, then Jesus has forgiven us in our hearts. The old blood sacrifices have been replaced by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The “bodies washed with pure water” part probably refers to their testimony of faith in baptism. Having a personal faith in God through Jesus somehow gives us spiritual strength against our bad habits. That is because when we open our hearts to God, his Spirit helps us. But we seldom see the spiritual dimension of the battle.

Let’s see how this works with a very destructive bad habit that many people are fighting today—abuse of alcoholic beverages. The organization AA is famous for helping people to overcome that bad habit. They are also famous for the 12 steps they use to help people in that situation. Listen to the first seven. You will see that in order to defeat the habit, the alcoholic must place his or her trust in God, not in themselves.

**AA Steps 1-7 of 12**

**1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.**

So begin the journey to overcoming by first admitting that you have a problem you can’t solve by yourself – you need God’s help. If it is an outright sinful habit like pornography that you are battling, admit the sinfulness of it, and allow the Holy Spirit to make you aware of how much God hates what it is doing to you and to others.

Then cry out to God for help. And don’t cry out like the falling tree in the silly ad I saw recently—anybody out there?? No! Cry out with confidence for we have a “great High Priest over the house of God”, Jesus Christ.

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
 I will strengthen you and help you. (Isa 41:10 NIV 84)

# Get encouragement from a friend. (vv. 24, 25)

Verse 24 says, “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” This reminds me of a famous OT verse.

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. Pr. 27:17 NIV

The second hint we need toward breaking a bad habit is to get a partner who can encourage us in our journey. We need someone to hold us accountable. If we know they will be asking how we are doing on our weight, we will be less likely to eat M & M’s and caramel syrup on top of our ice cream. But we need someone who understands our struggle. A marathoner with a natural metabolism that could warm a room may not be the right partner for someone who has been very overweight since childhood. But someone who used to be overweight and has lost weight through proper eating and exercise may be the perfect one.

# Be motivated by long-term consequences. (vv. 26-31)

At first read, Hebrews 10:26 seems one of the most difficult verses in Scripture. Certainly it cannot mean that if we keep falling into a particular sin, Christ’s sacrifice is not effective for us. If Jesus taught us to forgive others 70 times seven, how much more will God be longsuffering of our repeated failings if we genuinely repent. The key to understanding the verse is to relate it to the grave danger which this book is warning against—apostasy, falling away from believing in Christ; in short, unbelief. Two other times in this chapter there are related admonitions. In 10:23 “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess.” And in 10:35, 36 “So do not throw away your confidence.; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere…” Back at the beginning of the book, in 2:2 “How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” He means if we fail to believe in or keep believing in what God has done, there will be consequences. This is also the message of 10:38,39. To “shrink back” is to fall back into unbelief, which leads to destruction. Its opposite is to “live by faith (38) and “believe” (39) which brings salvation.

But the point for us this morning is that the seemingly harmless bad habit of neglect of worship had terrible probable long term consequences – unbelief and God not being pleased. The person skipping worship a couple weeks here and there was not thinking about these, but the Scripture writer wanted them to think about them. By the way, there is still a relationship between worship attendance and belief. I recently read a study of college kids and their religious preferences. There’s a lot of research these days about the “nones” – those who say they have no religious affiliation. The opposite of that are those who maintain their church connection into young adulthood. Researchers found that those who were strongly attached to church in young adulthood were those whose parents took them regularly to church. Regular church attendance matters.

Our bad habits have long term consequences too, but we prefer not to think about them. When I overeat, I gain weight. When I gain weight, my sugar goes up and inflammation in my body increases. My blood pressure increases too. I am prone to more damage if I fall and more likely to fall too. Overall, my life is shortened. All this because I keep eating too much. And each bowl of ice cream may be partly to blame even though I soundly deny it. Now I really have to be good. My wife is my accountability partner. But you get my point.

Bad habits now have long term consequences. If we will recognize them, it can help motivate us to change our habits.

# Replace the bad habit with a good one. (v. 24)

One practical tip we need when confronting a bad habit is that we are unlikely to be successful if we are merely trying to stop a bad habit. We usually need a replacement. It is our nature. We are creatures of habit.

This is why you see people who quit smoking taking up gum chewing or running. This is why I try to eat less by drinking more tea. If only it worked better. Especially people with an addictive type personality require a new addiction – a good one. If your bad habit is watching too much TV, you can’t just stop watching TV until you also decide what you are going to do in the time you will have on your hands.

In this passage, the new habit is easy. The bad habit was neglect of worship so the new habit was regular worship. “Not neglecting to meet together…” NRSV

Think about the bad habit that you are trying to break. What is a good habit that would help to replace it in some way?

# Persevere! (v. 36)

For the last hint, we need to jump down in the passage to verse 36. “You need to persevere, so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.”

In order to conquer a bad habit, perseverance is essential. Since we have had the old habit for a long time, it is unlikely that we will win over it all at once. It is not impossible, and I’ve heard many testimonies of people who did. My father-in-law was delivered from alcoholism instantly when he opened his heart to Jesus. I’ve heard of others who immediately stopped swearing. But for most of us, winning over a bad habit is a process of prayer, discipline determination and encouragement from partners. We often get discouraged and quit the fight and the bad habit gets even worse. But that is exactly when we most need to remember the looming consequences. And it is also the time to remember to persevere. To get up one more time than we fall down and keep going until we win the battle with God’s help.

# Conclusion

Prayer response
Prayer by someone who has not really started on a journey with God and desperately needs God’s help with a bad habit.

O God, I have depended upon myself and run my own show for most of my life. Please forgive me for ignoring you. But this morning I admit that I need your help. I acknowledge my sins and ask your forgiveness too. Please help me to break my bad habit that has me bound and free me to serve you as you have promised. In Jesus’ name, I plead, AMEN.

Prayer for all of us who feel the Holy Spirit’s convictions about a bad habit we need to break.

Our Father, you know the habit that you are putting in my mind right now that I need to break. I confess that I cannot do it alone. I need your help. To ignore it when you are encouraging me to change and teaching me the consequences of not changing would be sinful. Please help me to adopt a new habit to replace it. Help me to know who among my friends will be an understanding encourager for me too. Please help me to have confidence in you because of your promises to help me. By your grace, grant to me the victory over this habit through Jesus Christ, my Lord, AMEN.

(Promises to look up Isaiah 61:1, 2; Luke 4:18, 19; 1 Corinthians 10:13, 15:57)