

Towards a Fruitful Spiritual Life

Reasons Why Our Intentions to Lead a Better and Holy Life Do Not Produce Results

The first and foremost reason why our intention to correct ourselves and lead a holy life remains without result lies in the fact that our intention is often too vague and indefinite.

A certain sinner, for example, says to himself: "It's high time for me to stop sinning, time to mend my ways ! I repent! I'll stop sinning!" The intention is quite indefinite. And because of this, although it might be sincere, it is unreliable and may not achieve the desired correction. He who has a sincere desire to amend himself must first of all determine exactly what it is that must be corrected. He must determine what is his greatest sin and what means he must use against it, and what dangers he must avoid so as not to fall into it again, since it has become a habit, a part of his life. All this thought and self-examination must come first and only then should a resolve be made, and that resolve should be specific as, for example: "Enough! with God's help I am no longer going to fall into such-and-such a sin; I'm going to break this bad habit; I'm no longer going to associate with those particular people who encourage me in this habit; I'm going to break off that unhealthy relationship; I'm going to use such-and-such means against this sin; I'm going to arm myself and muster all my forces against it when it begins again to tempt me."

The same thing must also be said about the resolution to lead a righteous life. By no means is it enough to content oneself simply by stating the following resolve: "From this time forth I'm going to lead a God-pleasing life." Such a resolution is not definite enough, and although it may have come from the heart, it is doubtful whether it will have any effect. He who desires to abandon a life of sin and live a righteous life must first of all examine which obligations he has most difficulty in fulfilling and does not like to

fulfill; what exactly hinders their fulfillment; what he must do, what means he must employ to fulfill them more readily. Having done this, he must make a specific resolve, as for example: "Now, with God's help I will try hard to fulfill this obligation which until now I have done so poorly; I will apply myself to using such-and-such means towards its fulfillment. For example, when someone offends me I will be more patient; I won't start using insulting and shameful language, or better yet, I won't answer back at all; in such-and such company I'll be more careful in what I say; at such-and-such times I'll try to pray fervently, something I have not done up to now, and so on." In general, the more definite one's intention to change one's sinful life and live righteously, the more it will suit the particular circumstances, the state of one's soul, one's relationship with others, etc., and the more hope there is of its bringing it into reality. When something is so definite one can more easily direct one's thoughts and one's strength to one subject and thus, of course, more easily achieve the desired goal.

Another reason why our good intentions fail, is because we do not hold firmly enough to our resolve. Scarcely two or three days pass by after our having made our resolution and we, in our normal daily routine of life amidst our worldly cares and pursuits, have already forgotten our intention, although at the time it was made with proper firmness of purpose. For this reason, if we truly wish our good intention to be realized, then each of us, every morning after our morning prayers, must immediately bring to mind and renew our resolution, saying in our hearts: "I promised God to turn away from this particular sin; I really wanted to fulfill this obligation; I must keep my promise!" Having renewed in this way our good intention, we must diligently pray to God that He would grant us the necessary strength to carry it out. Likewise, our intention must be renewed in this way throughout the course of the day. And when evening comes, we should never go to sleep without having first examined our hearts to see how we have spent the day: did we keep our promise to God? And if it happens that we went against our resolve, against our promise, then we must immediately ask God's

forgiveness, and once again renew our resolve and carefully watch over ourselves*. In such a way do those people act who are concerned for the salvation of their souls, and in this way they attain salvation!

The third reason we fail in our intention to lead a better life, is our excessive fear of the difficulties connected with such an undertaking. A holy life is not attained without work, without sufferings and difficulties; it often takes a prolonged and fierce battle. We must withdraw from occasions to sin, of which there are so many. We must sacrifice various enjoyments which are so pleasant, abandon many worldly pursuits which make life interesting, and endure many unpleasant things which because of our self-love are often so difficult to bear. For example, we resolved to withdraw from our natural inclination to become angry. In order to turn away from anger we must quietly endure a lot of what is to us almost unbearable, and to which our usual response would have been a stream of crude words; sometimes we must not justify ourselves even when we are in the right; often we must be silent when we feel the urge to speak; often we must give in to others even when the occasion does not demand it; we must often bear the offenses of others and not reveal our irritation; often force ourselves to patiently endure when we are slandered or laughed at like fools and cowards. All this we must endure if we truly desire to realize our intention to withdraw from anger.

Amidst all the difficulties of keeping oneself from anger or any other sin which manifests itself as particularly great, our soul often falls into despondency and all our strength seems to evaporate. In such cases we must immediately bring to mind various sacred truths and experiences which are able to restore our former spirit, our former strength, and give us hope of abandoning the sin from which we decided to turn away. Thus we must remember that no matter how weak a man is, with God's help he can do and endure all things if only he truly desires it and uses the strength which he is given by God. We must remember the millions of righteous ones who have

gone before us and their self-denial, patience and endurance which they left as an example for us and for the whole world, we must remember that above all God desires our correction, and because of this, knowing our weakness and our needs, He will unfailingly come to our aid if only we turn to Him with fervent prayer and make use of the means and the power which He has given to us. We must remember that the difficulties which invariably accompany any important undertaking are intimidating only to the lazy and faint-hearted; that only the first steps along the path of correction are unpleasant and difficult; that the farther one goes along such a path the easier and less painful it becomes; that any victory which we gain over our enemy makes us much stronger and better able to endure any further onslaughts. We must more often remind ourselves of the feeling of peace and satisfaction we shall experience when in the last days and hours of our life we look back at our past, at the difficulties we have heroically overcome, at the many sufferings borne with Christian patience, at the countless temptations conquered by our love for God, at all the noble deeds which we performed in secret before God's eyes alone, at all the favors which we showed our fellow man, at the faithfulness with which we fulfilled our obligations, often forcing ourselves to the utmost to do this. Finally, we must more often remind ourselves that for all this we will be rewarded by so much in the life of the age to come that all the difficulties which we overcome here in this life, all the sufferings which we endure in this age for the sake of a righteous life, will appear to us much smaller, in fact, insignificant, in comparison with the heavenly rewards. O, Almighty God! Now we count each minute of trial and suffering and we rarely consider the blessed eternity which delights the souls of Thy righteous and faithful servants. Brother! In your striving towards a God-pleasing life, when you weigh your earthly difficulties and griefs, place more often on the scale this eternity! It will outweigh all your trials, all the pleasures of worldly pursuits, pleasures and enjoyments.

The fourth reason that our resolution to lead a better life often fails, lies in the fact that we want immediately to become saints. Many

people, when they once feel an aversion to their sinful behavior, make a firm resolve to change their ways and place a good beginning towards this reform; but because this doesn't happen as quickly as they would like, and whether by habit or rashness they often fall into their old sins, they lose heart and come to the conclusion that it's impossible for them to change their ways.

Brother! Sister! People don't become saints overnight, Our old man does not easily yield to being transformed into the new man. A big tree is not felled by a single stroke of the ax. So it is with each evil passion which' is so firmly rooted in us. The way to perfection or to spiritual maturity, is almost always unnoticeable, just as are so many things in nature. A spiritual man passes through various stages of growth, just like the physical man. Much time is spent in childhood before reaching the fullness and strength of manhood. There is a long period of weakness, and only then does one become stronger and stronger, until finally one becomes a man. Only at this age is one capable of doing what is proper to a man. Likewise, a ripened ear of corn is at first only a seed, then a small blade of grass, then a stalk, and finally an ear of corn; but even this ear is not ripe all at once, but grows, then flowers, then it tassels and only then does it become ripe. The same is true of a righteous, life! Even the best man in the world does not suddenly become a saint. His perfection for the most part develops slowly and only little by little. Good earth which accepts into itself a good seed brings forth fruit, says the Lord, in patience (Lk. 8:15). To fall, of course, is not good, and it were better not to; but he who falls and then quickly gets up, becomes wiser and more careful, renews his good intention, fervently prays to God for new strength to attain a righteous life. Falls are not such a hindrance for such a man on the path to perfection. At the time of his fall he even gains strength (Sirach 3:31) and like the Apostle Paul, strikes ahead towards the mark of the prize of the high Calling, forgetting those things which are behind (Phil. 3: 13-14).

Here, then, are some of the reasons why our good intentions to turn away from sin and lead a better life are often unfulfilled. Let us avoid these pitfalls; let us try to make our resolution as definite as possible; let us remember more often and continually renew our decision, and let us not become faint-hearted if we do not at once reach perfection, but let us courageously surmount the difficulties we meet along the way in firm hope of God's help.