



Can you relate? Excuses! We have all made them. Sometimes it's easy to justify why we haven't achieved our goals in light of the trauma we have lived through; we feel stuck, discouraged, exhausted, and unmotivated—is it just me?—and so we cut ourselves slack when our goals travel with us from 2019 to 2020 to 2021 to 2022 to 2023 to 2024. Yikes. What if I told you that it wasn't your fault? You heard me right! What if the problem was your focus on the "goal" itself?

James Clear, preeminent author of [Atomic Habits](#) says, “You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.”

Clear recently released an iOS only app called “[Atoms](#)” in which he distinguishes between goals versus habits—he goes into greater depth in his book. In one illustration he makes the point that it’s impossible to make accurate predictions about the outcomes of two different people with the same goal. However, if you are told the habits of the the two people you can come up with reasonable predictions (e.g. a person who exercises 3x per week versus another person who exercises 1x per week; a person who reads 20 minutes daily versus another person who only reads 20 minutes one day per week). As you can see from these examples, these people may be well-intentioned about their goals of getting in shape or reading more, but their outcomes will vary significantly without the right habits to support their goals.

Productivity is a big industry these days, and I would caution you to take advantage of as many free resources as possible before spending money, regardless of whether you have money to spend. I’ve fallen for the trap of believing that buying a course or paying for a subscription was just the push I needed to get serious, only to find myself back where I started because I didn’t take a holistic view of transformation to begin with—I thought I could buy change through more activity instead of getting clearer about my identity (see my [1/19/24 newsletter](#), “[Rest and Identity](#)”). Start with who you want to become and then identify—and do!—the habits that support that new identity!

I was struggling in my current job when I started 17 years ago, and the leadership of my church at the time supported me by creating a “Power Team”—three middle-aged professionals who worked with me on everything from my wardrobe to my analysis and application of the feedback I was getting from my bosses at work. At one point in the four to six months that they worked with me, I was still getting negative evaluations from my bosses; I was at my wits end because I was doing everything I could to improve. However, something was missing—I wasn’t starting my day in prayer to ask God to bless my efforts and give me wisdom. So I began to wake up earlier and consistently prayed, and that’s when things turned around and my bosses started to give me glowing reviews. I continue to reap blessings from that challenging time in my life; it is the most vivid personal example I can recall of God being true to His promise in Matthew 6, verse 33 of the Bible: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (NIV).”

The Temple Takeaway:

Trying harder is not always the issue. In light of my work testimony above, I wonder if God was waiting for me to seek Him first before He blessed my efforts—please note that this assumes that what we’re doing is actually within God’s will to begin with. Sometimes instead of doing what God is blessing we ask God to bless what we’re doing! At one point in your life you have

probably been told to work hard. And then you have probably also been told to work smarter not harder. As important as working harder and smarter is working holy. Where do you need to work holy by putting God first?