

The 'To Do' and 'Not to Do' Lists of Life

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In the Bible, as in life, there are things we are commanded to do and things we are commanded not to do. Of course, the 10 Commandments are a perfect example: You are not to have any other gods before Me; you are to remember the Sabbath. You are not to kill; you are to honor your father and mother. There are several more things on the 'not to do' list than there are on the 'to do' list.

But throughout the Bible we are asked to place many things on our To Do List: Love the Lord, your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself. Christ said this is at the top of the To Do List. There are still others: Be still and know that I am God; Ask, Seek, Knock; Do unto others; let your light shine – come to mind. Someone noted that

Christ alone made 147 commands to us, although many of those are duplicates or nearly the same. A couple different compilers have come up with lists of 50 commands of Christ.

There are hundreds of things in the Bible we are told to do and even more things we are told not to do. But more than anything else, we are told in way or another to ‘praise God’, ‘rejoice’, and ‘give thanks’, which are commands to be happy. God’s predominant theme is joy.

When it comes to real life, we also have lists of things to do, but sometimes we forget to write down the things not-to-do. For instance, at one point in my life I wanted to build of strength in my body. So I had to do certain things, like warming up properly, and working out with heavier and heavier weights, focusing on all the various parts of the body. But one of the things

that held me back was not paying attention to the things on my ‘not to do list’, like not eating so much desserts, junk food and too many simple carbohydrates.

The lesson I learned was that the secret to our success in any area of our life is hidden in our daily routine – in what we do and what we do not do. Both are critical to our strength of mind, body, and soul.

For instance, let’s look at the strength of mind. What is a strong mind? Someone with a strong mind might be thought of as having confidence, courage, control, commitment, and purpose. They can persevere through the toughest of times and come out on the other end stronger, not broken down. They can rebound from trials, learn lessons, move forward, and remain focused. They can face what the world has to

offer with an inner knowledge that “Yes, I can get through this!”

We have seen people buckle under the pressure of life: they give up, accept their circumstances with a negative sense of futility, anger, and resentment. Others have faced the same, if not worse circumstances, and grew stronger, more confident, more positive, and even joyful. It is not our challenges or circumstances that determine our lives, the mental strength we have, and our level of joy and happiness; it is how we react to those difficulties and the thoughts and attitudes we hold going into our struggles.

Amy Morin is a psychotherapist who studied mentally strong people. She catalogued the things they did and the things they did not do, which for her were the keys to their mental

stability and toughness. I will choose just a few from each of those lists.

Here are a few things she discovered mentally strong people do.

- 1.) They practice gratitude. I do not find it surprising that this one characteristic is first on her list. It is one of the commands in the Bible: be thankful in all things.
- 2.) They retain their personal power and do not allow negative people to steal their joy. They do not blame, accuse, or point their fingers at others for where they are. They accept responsibility.
- 3.) They accept challenges and do not avoid adversity. They see difficulties as an opportunity for growing stronger and wiser.
- 4.) They focus on the things they can control. Rather than wasting time and mental

energy of when or if the storm will happen, they invest their efforts in preparation.

Rather than trying to change someone else, they examine themselves and find ways to adjust their attitudes and perspectives.

They do not allow self-limiting reduce their potential or cloud their judgment.

- 5.) They tolerate discomfort. Mentally strong people aren't afraid to endure a little pain. Whether they keep running when their legs are tired or they resist instant gratification, they practice self-discipline even when it's uncomfortable.
- 6.) They set aside time to be alone. They understand the significance to “Be still and know that I am God.” It is healthy to schedule ‘me-time’ into every day. They understand solitude is essential to well-being.

But just doing the right things is not enough. Following the advice to “Eat more vegetables”, is insufficient to improving our health unless we heed the guidance to “eat less junk food”. Or accepting the Biblical counsel to “practice gratitude”, but refuse to “rejoice always, and pray continually”. It just doesn’t get us where we want to go. So in addition to our mentally strong “To Do List’ here are some items for our mentally strong ‘Not To Do List’.

1. Do not waste time feeling sorry for ourselves. Feeling disappointed, sad or grieving a loss is critical to our healing process. But self-pity is about exaggerating our misfortune and hardship, which causes us to dwell on our problems and stay stuck in our misery.
2. Do not cower from change. Change feels scary, because of the uncertainty of the outcome. But avoiding change prevents us

from growing stronger, better, wiser, and more useful to God. The world is changing, and our effectiveness as a Child of God often depends on our ability to adapt.

3. Do not worry about pleasing everyone. Other people cannot control our emotions without our permission, and we can't control theirs. It's not our job to try and make other people happy. In fact, becoming a people-pleaser causes us to lose sight of our values, who we are, how we fit in, our importance, and our self-worth becomes dependent on other people's opinions of us.
4. The mentally strong don't dwell on the past. Reflection is healthy but living there keeps us stagnant. The only time we can change, grow, transform, and take action is now.
5. They don't give up after the first failure or expect immediate results. Failure is proof

that we're pushing our limits. But just because failed once doesn't mean we are a failure. Failure supplies another opportunity to achieve the change we want—but this time with more wisdom than before. Real change takes time. Expecting to reach our goals overnight will cause us to give up far too soon. Life is a marathon, not a sprint.

6. They don't feel the world owes them anything. We will never find out how much we have to give if we keep track of what we think we should get. An entitled attitude causes us to become a passenger, rather than the driver, in your own life.

It is our core beliefs that either bring us to a point of joy, where God wants us to be, or a point of despair and depression. It is what we feel and believe about ourselves, others, and the world around us. Do we think we are a loser, or

that we will never measure up and be as good as other people? Have we concluded that everyone is out to get us, take advantage of us, have an agenda, and can't be trusted? Do we believe the world is antagonistic, harsh, oppressive and an impossible place in which to thrive?

If these are our core beliefs, then our brain will move all of the above items on the 'not to do list' to our 'to do list'. We will waste time feeling sorry for ourselves. We will avoid change like the plague. We will try our best to please everyone and accept everyone's opinion of us as the gospel truth. We will spend a large amount of time dwelling on the past, wallowing in its hurts and regrets. We will quit when things don't happen our way right away. We will feel entitled and will complain and blame when we don't get something we want.

The good news is that everyone can begin to develop the mental strength to become all that God wants and needs us to be. We may not be able to talk ourselves out of our self-limiting core beliefs, but we can start the process of chipping away at them. If we can recognize when we are feeling sorry for ourselves, catch ourselves when we are in the midst of a pity party and change our attitude to one of gratitude for something – anything – then our brain will start to process our reactions from a new perspective. It will begin to recognize that we are not determined to be a loser.

If we keep trying after we fail, our brain will start to see us as someone who will persist, persevere, and is trustworthy to see something through to the end. It will stop sending us

impulses to behave like a wimp who gives up at the first sign of trouble.

Often, we go through life with one foot on the gas and the other foot on the brake. We hold ourselves back although we are moving in the right direction. By giving up the things on the “Don’t Do” list, we free our self to progress faster and unimpeded.

Everyone visits the items on the Don’t Do List sometimes, and that is fine. And we are not weak or bad if we ignore the items on either list. Perhaps we have lessons to learn in this life from our errant thinking. Just be gentle and be aware. Developing mental strength is a lifelong endeavor; it takes hard work, dedication, and a willingness to overcome the world and the ego, and we may never get there. It is the path Christ is attempting to whisper into our hearts; the

path Spirit wants us to pursue – needs us to pursue –in order to express all of God’s love, peace, joy, wisdom, and courage back into Creation.

Life is filled with “To Do’s” and “Not To Do’s”, and so is the Bible. It is all about behavior modification. Science research has shown that if we behave in a particular way long enough, we start to become the person that exhibits that type of behavior. Researchers have demonstrated that actions affect our moral attitudes. That which we have done, even if evil, we tend to justify as right. We tend not only to hurt those we dislike but also to dislike those we hurt. Pound a desk long enough and anger will present itself. In sales it is called “Fake it till you make it”. If we act courageous or loving, we tend to become courageous and loving. The ancient ones knew what research is

validating: if we behave strongly, joyfully, and morally sound we will become strong, joyful, and morally principled. It is true that an inner change will change our outer environment, and it is also true that an outer change will change our inner environment. With God's help, we control who we are – either inside out or outside in.

So it is my prayer that I don't think any of us wish that on ourselves or anyone else. I pray that we can keep God's predominant theme for our lives on our minds and in our heart – to be joyful.

Let us pray....

