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HOW TO BECOME A
**BETTER
PERSON**

MINI BOOK

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In a recent movie entitled "As Good As It Gets" actor Jack Nicholson plays the part of a paranoiac hermit who, despite his grouchy personality and fear of relationships, falls in love with the waitress who works at the restaurant he frequents.

During their unlikely romance the woman, frustrated by his difficult personality, challenges him to give her a reason why they should continue with their

relationship. In one of the best lines in the movie Nicholson looks at her for a moment and answers, "**You make me want to be a better man.**" Of course this melts her heart, as well as the audience's, and the couple move on through the movie to a happy ending.

There are plenty of ideas and positions in this movie that I personally don't agree with as a Christian, but the essential theme (man's yearning to be better) is one that we all can identify with and approve of. Now, in the movie, the love of a good woman was the motivation to change Jack Nicholson's character into a more caring and kind person. This is OK for a movie where we want an easy and happy ending in about two hours. In real life however, becoming a better person may require

more than someone's love. (Although that can be an important motivator.)

In real life we tend to repeat losing behavior over and over again, and end up trapped in negative circumstances created by our reoccurring bad decisions. In real life the secret to correcting bad behavior and becoming better people is to replace the elements of bad behavior with good and positive things in our lives.

Jesus explains this principle in Luke 11:24-28,

²⁴ "When the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and not finding any, it says, 'I will return to my house from which I

came.' ²⁵ And when it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. ²⁶ Then it goes and takes along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first."

²⁷ While Jesus was saying these things, one of the women in the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, "Blessed is the womb that bore You and the breasts at which You nursed." ²⁸ But He said, "On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it."

In this short passage, the Lord explains that it isn't enough to get rid of bad habits, bad thoughts, evil intentions; you have to replace them with good and positive things. If you don't, He says, you will eventually become worse than you were, not better. It isn't "age" that changes you, change is what changes you.

THREE CHANGES IN BECOMING A BETTER PERSON

1. Change Your Playgrounds

There are some places that you simply have to stop going to if you want to become a better person. Some of those places are physical, like a friend's house that has the Playboy channel or places that serve alcohol, if that's your problem. You know

which places have the greatest temptation for you, and you have to **not** go there.

Solomon, in the book of Proverbs, talks a lot about playgrounds to avoid:

Wisdom will save you ... from the adulteress ... for her house sinks down to death...

- Proverbs 2

The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked

- Proverbs 3:33

Paul the Apostle says we should "...abstain from every appearance of evil" in I Thessalonians 5:22.

We can't become better people without changing the places where our moral and spiritual failures are most likely to occur. To correct losing behavior and become better people we have to exchange these with places to go that will help us to be better. David, the second king of Israel, said,

For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand outside. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

- Psalms 84:10

You can't be a hermit, and joining a monastery isn't the solution. You have to aggressively seek places that will provide

the best opportunity for self improvement. For example, improving your environment at home by removing those things that might bring you down. Being at worship and Bible study regularly so that your life and lifestyle are anchored by the experience in this place and its influence. Looking for opportunities where you can be of service will definitely cause personal growth and improvement.

I used to say to my children when they were young adults, "the best place to meet a future spouse is at a church event, not a bar." In the end, the choice of what place to be in can usually be decided rather easily. Ask yourself, "will Jesus be in this place? Will He bless me for being here?" These questions will help you decide where you should go, and which places to avoid.

... another change necessary in order to become a better person ...

2. Change Your Playmates

Few choices in life are as crucial to our well-being and success as the choice of people we have as friends and associates. In other words, our "playmates." The Bible is quite clear on this subject when it warns,

Do not be misled, bad company corrupts good character.

- I Corinthians 15:33

The scriptures also provide numerous examples of men and women being led astray by the influence of others:

- Lot's family was influenced by the inhabitants of Sodom, leading to sin and destruction. Genesis 19
- Aaron listened to the unfaithful among the people and was led into idolatry by making a golden calf. Exodus 32:1-4
- Solomon's wisdom could not protect him from the influence of pagan wives.
- Even Peter the Apostle was pressured by the Judaizers to compromise the gospel for a time. Galatians 2:11-16

Let's face it, we are easily molded by the character of our friends and business

associates. My mother always knew what I was up to by examining the friends I hung around with. The old saying is so very true, "birds of a feather flock together." If you want to be a better person, then you need to associate with people who can help you be a better person.

You don't need fifty of these people, one is enough. But it needs to be one who is better, and can encourage and stimulate you to becoming better. In school they choose the best students to tutor the weaker ones. In the military they select the most experienced and disciplined soldiers to train the recruits. In life we must also seek out those who have proven and demonstrated their success (usually in the areas of our failures) and cultivate

friendships and associations with these people.

Our problem is that we usually find it easier to maintain friendships with those who share our weaknesses and who will not challenge us to do better. It's comforting to know that our friends won't judge or try to change us or themselves so that everyone can continue to enjoy their sins without guilt. Solomon says,

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.
- Proverbs 27:17.

To become a better person we need to replace the bad influences around us with good ones - even if it scares us a little. In order to have an improved character we

sometimes need to experience the pain of having the old one stripped away in the fires of a challenging friendship.

... in order to become a better person ...

3. Change Your Playthings

Recreation is meant to be a blessing when it is virtuous, balanced and controlled. For many today however, recreation is immoral, obsessive and out of control. So much of what we view under the guise of entertainment degrades or diminishes us as human beings.

Jesus reminds us,

Your eye is the lamp of the body, when your eyes are good, your whole body is full of light. But

when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness. See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness.

- Luke 11:34-35

Our "playthings," be they TV / Movies / music / games / activities must not be the cause of us being less than what we've been called to be as Christians, and that is the holy children of God. Sometimes our "playthings" are not bad in and of themselves but we allow them to take over our lives to such a point that we neglect the important things in our lives like caring for our families, worship and fellowship with the saints, as well as service and work in the name of the Lord. For example, if your eye only sees your playthings, your games,

your recreation to the point where you no longer see your Lord, your brethren and your ministry, then you are indeed filled with darkness.

Becoming a better person requires us to exchange the things that only give us pleasure with things that bring God pleasure. Things such as:

- Activities that edify us in Christ
- Activities that build up the kingdom
- Activities that honor God

This doesn't mean eliminating all forms of recreation, just those things that hold us back from growing in wisdom and stature in the Lord. Paul says,

When I was a child, I used to speak
as a child, think as a child, reason
as a child, when I became a man, I
did away with childish things.

- I Corinthians 13:11

If you want to be a better person you have to exchange the toys of childhood for the tools of ministry that God provides the saints for service:

- to their families
- to their congregations
- to this lost and hurting world

SUMMARY

Becoming a better person is a desire shared by a majority of people. After all, few people ever say, "boy, I'm working on ingraining my smoking habit, maybe even passing it along to my children!" No, most people want to be better, not worse. For that to happen we need to remember the basic changes mentioned here. Change the places, people and things that drag you down, and exchange these with places, people and things that embody the type of person you want to become.

Of course, after saying all of this, I want to make one more important point in order to keep this matter of self-improvement in perspective. Becoming a better person is not what saves us: believing and obeying

Jesus Christ is what saves us. A non-believer can improve himself here on earth, but no amount of personal improvement can atone for past sins and mistakes. The only way he can be good enough for God is by believing in Jesus as the Son of God and washing away his sins in the waters of baptism (Acts 2:38; 22:16).

As for Christians, they seek to better themselves as a response to God's grace. They grow because of God's blessings. Christians make an effort to improve as an expression of thanksgiving and love towards God, not as a way to save themselves or achieve personal righteousness. Christians are made right and acceptable in God's eyes through continued faith in Jesus, not through personal growth (Romans 4:4).

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