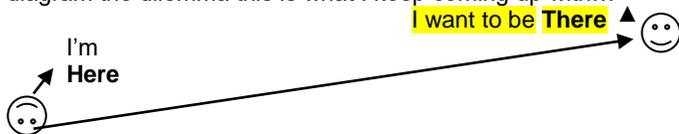


## THE SECRET OF CHANGE: How to Get from Here to There

There's a question that has riddled my brain for the longest time: **How can people change?** The Bible tells me apart from Christ I'm messed up. I keep sabotaging my best efforts. The bad stuff I don't want to do, I end up doing. The good stuff I want to do—"I can will it, but I can't do it" [See Romans 7:17-20]. With all our addictions, habitual behaviors, and personality flaws we feel so miserably frustratingly stuck. You'd think I would have conquered all my bad habits (food addictions, time management habits, too much TV etc). I'm nearing the age of 68 and I still struggle with my tongue, the words that come out of my mouth wound, bite and sting. How can I, can people change? If I could diagram the dilemma this is what I keep coming up with...



So how can the broken me progress to the new me and move me from here to there?

**I. BEGIN THE RACE.** Truth is you can't win a race you don't start. Here's how Paul puts it in Philippians 3:12-14. Your life in Christ, the unfolding drama of your life from start to finish is like an unbelievably strenuous Olympic marathon. We're not talking a 100 yard sprint, but a life-long marathon. And the first thing we want to say is that you must begin the race.

**The Starting Blocks** Something revolutionary had happened in Paul's life that had put him at the starting blocks in the marathon of hope. Paul writes in **Philippians 3:12-14**: "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which **Christ Jesus took hold of me**. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taking hold of it. But one thing I do (for me to live is Christ'-1:21) forgetting what is behind (quit obsessing about the moral triumphs and tragedies in your rear-view mirror) and straining toward what is ahead (sanctification-always advancing) I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus (the finish tape and ultimate goal—immortal sin-free bodies in the new civilization of God on the new earth). Now something transformational had happened. Paul had been apprehended. On the way to Damascus, Paul encountered a light more brilliant than the Sun, the Spirit of Christ ripped into his life. And he was grabbed in the core of his existence by the Lord of the Universe, Jesus Christ. Paul's life got swallowed up in Christ's story, swallowed up in victory. It was a dramatic movement from the Cross of Good Friday to the Empty Tomb of Easter. Paul was apprehended. "Christ Jesus took hold of me." The risen Christ is here in this room right now by His Spirit. He's handing you a set of cleats to begin the race of a lifetime. Something revolutionary must take place in your head. You must receive Jesus as your absolute Rabbi and His worldview must become your worldview. Here's the second matter...

**II. DON'T TRY, TRAIN.** Like most runners at the starting blocks, Paul lifts his eyes and fixes his attention on the finish line. The finish line Paul tells us precisely is perfection. "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made **perfect**" [Philippians 3:12]. The root Greek term is telos from which we get the idea of teleological which means to be goal driven. Our final goal is to be full-grown in Christ, to flourish, thrive with an undivided devotion to God. Now, in your movement from **here** to **there** every other ultimate narrative in life is fundamentally

flawed. You can try the **pagan pathway**. These are folks addicted to tailgate or frat parties where the booze flows, where dehumanizing hook-ups prevail, and people function like animals [cf 3:19] The pagan pathway will never get you from here to there. But neither will the **moralistic pathway** white knuckling your way to a moralistic perfection work. Dr. James Smith in his powerful book, *The Good and Beautiful God* argues so strongly against this strategy for Spiritual growth and change. He says that willpower actually doesn't even exist. You won't find your will "next to your gallbladder" [22]. For sure we have a decision making apparatus right here in the frontal lobe called the cerebral cortex. One side of the judgment center of the brain says Yes; the other side says No. But why do I excessively keep on saying "Yes" to too much ice cream and "No" to Broccoli? Why? Because I still have remnants of the fall messing with my mind, embedded in my bodily behaviors, and sabotaging my family system. My choice mechanism is messed up. The will like a horse "does not choose where to go, but goes in whatever direction the rider tells it to go...[And] instead of one rider, it [the will] has [three] the mind, the body, and the social context" [22]. If I just try harder, study harder, pray more, volunteer more, put more hours in at the gym, then I will really flourish. That's the path Paul was on, "in regard to the law a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" [Philippians 3:5b-6]. But Paul tells us this works righteousness performance treadmill is pure rubbish [skubullon=manure, maggot riddled garbage] "compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" [3:8].

The secret of change, the method for incremental progress is not trying harder, its training. Paul writes in **I Corinthians 9:25**: "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training." Trying harder won't cut it. You can't just sit down at the piano and play George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue just by trying harder or a positive mental attitude. ["I think I can, I think I can, I think I can"] You take piano lessons! What you want to do is arrange your life around certain spiritual disciplines. Ortberg defines discipline: "Any activity I can do by direct effort that will help me do what I cannot now do by direct effort" [The Life, p. 51]. The spiritual calisthenics [solitude, rest, recreation, meditation/prayer, Scripture Study, and 7 plus hours of sleep every night, i.e., stuff you can do] empowers you to run the full marathon; the difficult journey beyond your present powers. **A life of joyful training is the secret to the end of full-orbed Christian living.** First, you need encounter Christ and begin the marathon. Second, you need to enter into a good and beautiful life of training. Here's a third thing: you need to participate in community. It's a non-negotiable for Christian growth.

**III. BELONG TO A DREAM TEAM.** I think of the powerful scene at the beginning of the movie, *Chariots of Fire*. You see a bunch of future English Olympic Champions running together, enjoying the run, pushing one another on. **[clip]** Together is better. "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" [Hebrews 10:24-25]. From the moment I got here in Raymond I sensed that this Congregation is serious about life-together. I was blown out of the water by the ginormous VBS this summer the 1<sup>st</sup> rate Music, the crafts, the food preparation, the Bible Story teachers, the skillful leadership necessary to make it happen and the 90 plus children whose lives were touched with the Gospel. Way to go Raymond CRC! When I saw how effectively you broke into multiple small groups six

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weeks in a row with the Case for Christ. Very, very few CR churches can pull that kind of thing out. You have a methodology for community that is dynamite. Fan that into flame as you move into the future. And when I see what an incredible joint effort with Bunde youth in Jams and Junior Jams under the leadership of Garrett Hovland. I am so grateful. See young people, as you move into young adulthood, go away to college perhaps, enter into your career, move away perhaps, becoming part of a local church where body life matters. I think it was John Wesley who said, "A solitary Christianity is the Devil's religion."

### IV. YOU NEED THE HOLY SPIRIT TO PUT A TIGER IN YOUR TANK.

I remember reading a Today meditation by Dr. Neil Plantinga and these words leapt from the page: "If you had Rembrandt in you, just think what a painter you could be! If you had Beethoven in you, imagine the sort of music you could write! If you had Christ in you, consider what sort of a life you could lead, and how magnificently you could love!" [Today, Sept 19, 1976]. Paul talks about this Spirit driven sacred advance in **Philippians 1:6**: "Being confident of this that He who began a good work in you will carry on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." The race God starts you on, He makes sure you complete it. What God starts He finishes. And then there's that text in **Philippians 3:12b-13** "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose." The energy you need to persevere in this marathon we call life comes from God. You can only work out what God works in. This is the Perseverance of the Saints. The P of TULIP. The reason we're going to make it to this finishing tape is not so much that we are holding on to God. He's hanging on to us. In my home I have a lot of pictures of Tigers. Sometimes we think it's like the card I remember receiving once that pictured a little cat hanging on a branch by her finger nails. And it read: **[image]** "Hang in there baby!" That's not the picture that's in my head. A mother Tiger is a fierce animal of enormous strength. Nobody, but nobody messes with a Tigress. And it's not so much that the little cub is hanging on to Mama that he makes it through the jungle. The reason you're going to make it through the blood, sweat and tears of the Christian life, through all the personal, relational, financial nightmares and losses of the Christian life is that Jesus Christ has a hold of you and He's not letting go. You've got a tiger in your tank. Jesus Christ. And He's going to get you home. Even when people all around you are crashing and burning giving up the race on the moralistic pathway or absolutely destroyed in all the drama and debauchery and crazy chaos of the pagan pathway, you can put one foot in front of the other relentless in your pursuit of progress in the Christian journey, because now you have a Tiger in your tank.

Eric Liddel **[image]** was an amazing Scottish athlete who won in world record time, the 400 meter race in the 1924 Olympics in Paris. But having been born and raised in China by missionary parents, he felt called to preach the Gospel in China. His life is celebrated in the 1981 Academy award winning film, Chariots of Fire. What really blew me away was whenever Eric ran he often would thrust his face backwards in an upward smile, as if he were gaining his joy and strength from God. In preparation for the '24 Olympics, Eric Liddel was consumed with training for the Olympics. As a result, he couldn't always make it to the mission meetings. **[clip]** Jenny was upset and told Eric so. Eric invited his sister out for a walk in the heather hills of Scotland. Kindly clutching his sister's arm, Eric explained. "Jennie, Jennie. You've got to understand. I believe God made

me for a purpose—for China. But He also made me fast!—and when I run, I feel His pleasure." You have a much longer race to run, dear friends. It lasts a lifetime. Don't skip practice and all the joy-filled training necessary for the journey. Don't try to run solo. You're part of a dream team. Don't try to run on your own. You need a Tiger, the Holy Spirit in your tank, you have history's greatest champion running with you and in you. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" [**Hebrews 12:1-2**]. And so for Christ's sake, run the race with joy. For when you run before His face, you can feel His pleasure.