



ARE YOU READY TO CHANGE?

“If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door, it desires to have you, but you must master it.”

Genesis 4:7

Would you be interested in hearing the results of studies conducted on thousands of individuals that reveal how people overcome life controlling problems? *Changing for Good* is the name of the book Chaplain Steve assigned for us to read and then discuss at our staff meetings. It uncovers the secret of successfully making changes without psychotherapy. Each of us on staff were required to unveil an area of our personal life that needs to change and are applying the truth contained in the book to reach our goal. Below is a summary of what we have been learning.

How many times has someone pointed out a change you needed to make but you weren't ready? Other than salvation, only you can decide when you are going to change. Approximately thirty million smokers have successfully quit on their own which is twenty times more than those who followed a treatment program. Change unfolds slowly through a series of stages. The six stages of change outlined in the book are: Precontemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, Maintenance, and Termination. Forty-five percent of clients drop out of psychotherapy because the treatment doesn't match the stage of change they are in. The author's research concluded that people who try to accomplish change without being ready, are setting themselves up for failure. Many of the youth I meet with talk about changing because they feel guilty for hurting their families and do not like being locked up. Change, however, will require much more work than remorseful talk. Why does change take a long time? Why can't we just make a commitment today and change tomorrow? The Word of God says we reap what we sow (Galatians 6:8). If we have continually reinforced and gratified sinful desires, entrenched habit patterns will be the consequence. Seeds of change planted now won't bear fruit until a later season. Paul compared his ministry to an attack on mental strongholds in people's lives (II Corinthians 10:4-5). If Paul was working to tear them down, then so can we. The magnitude or significance of the mental stronghold determines how long it may take to change our way of thinking.



STAGE ONE: I DON'T WANT TO CHANGE

Why don't people work on their problems when their life is obviously being destroyed by them? Because they are precontemplators. "There is a way that seems right to a man but in the end it leads to death." (Proverbs 14:12) According to the data, only twenty-percent of people with problems are prepared to take action at any given time. People in the precontemplation stage do not think they need to change or truly believe their situation is hopeless. They are convinced that attempting to change will only lead to more failure. They alleviate their guilt or anxiety by ignoring the problem. Denial filters out information that might help them change. Rationalization finds excuses to give them permission to remain the same. Instead of looking at themselves, precontemplators find a scapegoat and criticize the flaws they see in others. Seventy percent of the smokers in a health maintenance organization showed interest in a program to quit smoking. When it was time to sign up, only four percent took action.

Right this moment, every one of us has something in our lives that needs to change. But what will cause you to start working on it? Sometimes God will put you in situation that force you to change but most of the time there is a long delay until circumstances really get your attention. If you continue to receive constant feedback and suggestions from several people, that may get you thinking. Seeing others improve their lives and becoming aware that assistance and support is available, can also move you on to the contemplation stage.



STAGE TWO: I AM THINKING ABOUT CHANGING

You become a contemplator when you begin talking about your problem and gathering information on what it is doing to you. Ask individuals close to you to honestly give their observation and opinion about your problems and weaknesses. Allow yourself to imagine distressing scenes if you do not change. Soberly review verses and stories in scripture of what sin does to a life. Clearly define the problem you have. Most problem behavior is used to cover up or escape from some other problem. When you begin to change, the relief or comfort you receive from the problem behavior is gone and the other problem becomes more noticeable. Make sure you identify the problem that the problem behavior is covering up. Start monitoring and recording exactly how it is effecting your life. Determine what you will lose if you abandon your problem behavior. If you have treated your problem behavior like a trusted, loyal friend, you will need time to mourn the loss in your life. Making changes in your life is like the man who wants to build a tower in Luke 14:28. You must first sit down and count the cost. Write out the advantages and disadvantages for changing. The end result will be worth it but be honest about what time, energy, and pleasure will be sacrificed along the way. "For waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisers." (Proverbs 24:6)

The temptation will be to start wishing for a magic cure or miracle plan that will make change easy. Many believers run to faith healers or seminars hoping that God will do all the work for them. "Perhaps hypnosis will work, or a new medication will be discovered!" Over time the contemplator begins to feel disgusted with their condition and develops a personal conviction of the value of change. Now they are ready to prepare for it.



STAGE THREE: THIS IS HOW I WILL CHANGE

The preparation stage begins when you start looking at the future and how your change will benefit your life. The focus now is on the action necessary to reach your goal and on building the confidence that this is absolutely the right decision. About half of all American adults initiate self-change every New Year's Eve simply because the atmosphere is right. It usually doesn't last because there had been no preparation.



STAGE THREE: THIS IS HOW I WILL CHANGE (Continued)

See your change as important as going in for a life saving operation. First write out the change you are going to make. Then write out how you will refocus or distract yourself when you will be tempted to act out your problem behavior. Write down any changes you must make in your surroundings or schedule that will make changing easier. Jesus told his disciples, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.” Temptation isn’t something to fight but to avoid and prevent. Then go public with your decision. This was what the ministry of John the Baptist encouraged. Mark 1:5 states, “The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” Baptism was the outward demonstration of an inward decision. Find someone to be accountable to who will also encourage your progress. Determine a way to reward yourself when you start to succeed.

Admitting a problem is not enough. Commitment includes not only a willingness to act, but also a belief in your ability to change. Paul told the Roman believers to count themselves dead to sin. Just as you are trusting Christ to save you from the eternal consequences of sin, also trust him for the moment by moment deliverance from the presence of sin. James 1:6 says, “But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.” Verse eight compares doubters to double-minded people who really haven’t made up their mind. Change must become something you prefer over not changing. Until you come to that point, you are not making a lasting decision. Hebrews 11:1 says that faith is being sure of what we hope for. Are you sure that change is going to take place? By faith you stop worrying about failure and are ready for action.



STAGE FOUR: I WILL CHANGE

The action stage involves adding new behavior to your life. The best way to break old habits is to simply make new ones. Romans 12:2 says we are transformed by the renewing of our mind. Those who live according to the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires (Romans 8:5). Whenever you are not being tempted, set aside time just to think about things that please and honor God. Mentally practice doing what’s right instead of falling into temptation. Constantly remind yourself of the desires you should be striving to fulfill. Paul said in Galatians 5:16, “So I say live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” You cannot sin while you are choosing to live under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Start acting on your God given wisdom and the new desires that come from the Holy Spirit. Wrong desires don’t have to go away but you make fulfilling the right ones a higher priority. Jesus said in Matthew 6:21 that where your treasure is, there your heart (desires) will be also. Value and treasure the change you have decided to make. David said that he delights in (finds happiness from) God’s law or ways (Psalm 119:16). When you hide God’s Word in your heart (Psalm 119:11) you don’t just know the right choice in your mind but you also have the desire to choose it.

The Lord had Zechariah tell the people to not despise the day of small beginnings. Change begins with a small act of obedience followed by many others. Let the law of the harvest (sowing and reaping) work for you. If you act upon the desires of the Spirit enough times, your life eventually becomes more and more controlled by the Spirit rather than the problem behavior. The lifestyle produced by the Holy Spirit replaces the lifestyle that resulted from giving yourself over to carnal appetites and worldly habit patterns. “Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey.....” (Romans 6:16). You chose to have an enslaving relationship with a problem behavior and now another relationship with your new master must be developed. Just as you offered yourself to that problem behavior, continue to offer your body as a slave to righteousness (Romans 6:19). Ephesians 4:22 says to put off your old self by putting on the new you created to be like God. Verse 23 says, “to be made new in the attitude of your minds.” The action stage means you continue to practice your new behavior and allow it to replace the old one. Monitoring your progress daily with some type of chart or scale will increase your awareness of your goal and motivate you to reach it.



STAGE FIVE: I AM CHANGING

The maintenance stage of change is perhaps the hardest. Now that you have gotten where you want to be, how do you maintain it? Many ex-smokers say, “Stopping is easy, I do it every day.” Commitments are something you renew over and over again. Paul told the Corinthians, “I die daily.” The maintenance stage begins when the excitement of progress is wearing off. Addictive behaviors will continue to hold some attraction long after a habit is broken. The most common threats during the maintenance stage are social pressures, over confidence, and enticing temptations that suddenly appear. Don’t let the taste of success cause you to think your problem behavior is no longer a danger. Remind your support people to keep asking you how you are doing and let you talk about your commitment. Some people carry around a crisis card with specific steps to take in times of high anxiety and stress. Just as maintaining good physical shape prevents illness and injury, maintaining good spiritual and emotion health makes you less likely to engage in destructive behavior.

Changing for Good uses the word “recycling” to describe how we sometimes revert back to a previous stage of change in order to be better prepared to advance. Successful changers usually cycle back through the first three stages once or twice. Thank God for second and third chances. Relapse is a normal part of change. It teaches you what you are doing wrong. A relapse is not the same as a collapse (returning to an old way of life). Take responsibility for any relapses and get over any remorse as soon as possible. We walk by faith and not by sight. A problem behavior is terminated from your life when it no longer matches the new image you have of yourself. You are not tempted to engage in it because you see yourself as a different person. This usually takes place in 3-4 years of work. Enclosed is a handout I will be using with the youth I counsel and disciple. Hopefully it will show them if they are ready to change and prevent them from feeling hopeless about their wrong habits and appetites. Thank you for your interest in this ministry.