Principle 5: Voluntarily submit to every change God wants to make in my life and humbly ask Him to remove my character defects.

“Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires.” (Matthew 5:6)

Step 6: We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” (James 4:10)

Step 7: We humbly asked Him to remove all our shortcomings.

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

Introduction

Tonight we are going to look at an overview of Principle 5. We are going to answer the question, How can you have victory over your defects of character?

Victory

We are going to use the acrostic VICTORY.

Voluntarily submit Identify character defects Change your mind Turn over character defects One day at a time Recovery is a process You must choose to change
The V is VOLUNTARILY submit to every change God wants me to make in my life and humbly ask Him to remove my shortcomings. The Bible says that we are to make an offering of our very selves to God. “Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. . . . Let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind” (Romans 12:1 – 2, GNT).

When you accepted Principle 3, you made the most important decision of your life by choosing to turn your life over to God’s will. That decision got you right with God; you accepted and determined to follow His Son Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

Then you began to work on you. You made a fearless and moral inventory of yourself. The first step in any victory is to recognize the enemy. My inventory showed me that I was my greatest enemy.

You came clean by admitting and confessing to yourself, to God, and to another person your wrongs and your sins. For probably the first time in your life, you were able to take off the muddy glasses of denial and look at reality with a clear and clean focus.

Now you are considering what Step 6 says: that you are “entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.” You’re at the place in your recovery where you say, “I don’t want to live this way anymore. I want to get rid of my hurts, hang-ups, and habits. But how do I do it?”

The good news is that you don’t do it!

Step 6 doesn’t read, “You are entirely ready to have you remove all these defects of character,” does it? No, it says, “You are entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.”

So how do you begin the process to have God make the positive changes in your life that you and He both desire?

You start by doing the I in victory: IDENTIFY which character defects you want to work on first. Go back to the wrongs, shortcomings, and sins you discovered in your inventory. Falling down doesn’t make you a failure, staying down does! God doesn’t want us just to admit our wrongs, He wants to make us right! He wants to give us a future and a hope! God doesn’t just want to forgive us, He wants to change us! Ask God to first remove those character defects that are causing you the most pain. Be specific! “In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps” (Proverbs 16:9).

Let’s move to the C, which stands for CHANGE your mind.

Second Corinthians 5:17 tells us that when you become a Christian, you are a new creation, a brand new person inside. The old nature is gone. The changes that are going to take place are the result of a team effort. Your responsibility is to take the action to follow God’s direction for change. You have to let God
transform (change) you by renewing your mind.
Let’s look at Romans 12:2: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

To transform something means to change its condition, its nature, its function, and its identity. God wants to change more than just our behaviors. He wants to change the way we think. Simply changing behaviors is like trimming the weeds in a garden instead of removing them. Weeds always grow back unless they are pulled out by the roots. We need to let God transform our minds!

How? By the T in victory: TURNING your character defects over to Jesus Christ. Relying on your own willpower, your own self-will, has blocked your recovery. Your past efforts to change your hurts, hang-ups, and habits by yourself were unsuccessful. But if you “humble yourselves before the Lord,... he will lift you up” (James 4:10).

Humility is not a bad word, and being humble doesn’t mean you’re weak. Humility is like underwear: we should have it, but we shouldn’t let it show. Humility is to make the right estimate of one’s self or to see ourselves as God sees us.

You can’t proceed in your recovery until you turn your defects of character over to Jesus. Let go! Let God!

The next letter is O: ONE day at a time.

Your character defects were not developed overnight, so don’t expect them to be instantly removed. Recovery happens one day at a time! Your lifelong hurts, hang-ups, and habits need to be worked on in twenty-four-hour increments.

You’ve heard the old cliché: “Life by the yard is hard; life by the inch is a cinch.” Jesus said the same thing: “So don’t be anxious about tomorrow, God will take care of your tomorrow too. Live one day at a time” (Matthew 6:34, TLB).

When I start to regret the past or fear the future, I look to Exodus 3:14 where God tells us that His name is “I am.”

I’m not sure who gets the credit for the following illustration, but it’s right on. God tells me that when I live in the past with its mistakes and regrets, life is hard. I can take God back there to heal me, to forgive me, to forgive my sins. But God does not say, “My name is ‘I was.’ ” God says, “My name is ‘I am.’ ”

When I try to live in the future, with its unknown problems and fears, life is hard. I know God will be with me when that day comes. But God does not say, “My name is ‘I will be.’ ” He says, “My name is I am.”
When I live in today, this moment, one day at a time, life is not hard. God says, “I am here.” “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

Let’s look at the letter R: RECOVERY is a process, “one day at a time” after “one day at a time.”

Once you ask God to remove your character defects, you begin a journey that will lead you to new freedom from your past. Don’t look for perfection, instead rejoice in steady progress. What you need to seek is “patient improvement.” Hear these words of encouragement from God’s Word: “And I am sure that God who began a good work within you will keep right on helping you grow in his grace until his task within you is finally finished on that day when Jesus Christ returns” (Philippians 1:6, TLB).

The last letter in victory is Y: YOU must choose to change.

As long as you place self-reliance first, a true reliance on Jesus Christ is impossible. You must voluntarily submit to every change God wants you to make in your life and humbly ask Him to remove your shortcomings. God is waiting to turn your weaknesses into strengths. All you need to do is humbly ask!

“God gives strength to the humble,... so give yourselves humbly to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. And when you draw close to God, God will draw close to you” (James 4:6 – 8, TLB).

Wrap-Up

To make changes in our lives, all I had to do and all you need to do is to be entirely ready to let God be the life-changer. We are not the “how” and “when” committee. We are the preparation committee: all we have to be is ready!

Tonight, Jesus is asking you, “Do you want to be healed, do you want to change?” You must choose to change. That’s what Principle 5 is all about! Let’s close with prayer.

Dear God, show me Your will in working on my shortcomings. Help me not to resist the changes that You have planned for me. I need You to “direct my steps.” Help me stay in today, not get dragged back into the past or lost in the future. I ask You to give me the power and the wisdom to make the very best I can out of today. In Christ’s name I pray, Amen.
My name is John, and I am a grateful believer in Jesus Christ who struggles with codependency.

My earliest memories are probably kindergarten and the beginning of grade school. I was a pretty happy and extroverted little fella. I was very active, full of joy and energy, secure and comfortable in my own skin. We were Mom, Dad, my older brother (by three years), and then twin sisters a year younger — all together in Duluth, Minnesota. My parents were saved and belonged to an exciting new independent Pentecostal church. They were young and zealous, and had young and zealous friends, and a young and zealous pastor. My father worked at a men’s clothing store and my mom stayed home with us kids. Some of the families from our young and zealous church got together and decided to buy some property just outside the city limits in a lovely, private wooded area. They all wanted to build some homes together, form a Christian neighborhood, with Christian kids riding their Christian bikes on a Christian road, with Christian dogs chasing Christian cats ...

Our family quickly signed on to that project and soon we were living in a freshly built log home on Morning Star Drive.

I guess I was in the second grade or so when, one by one, each of us four clueless siblings was called upstairs into our parents’ bedroom for news of the divorce. This is how Mom wanted to break it to us. This is one of my few branded-in memories. I remember the unfinished texture of the wooden baluster on the balcony, my hand sort of trailing behind me on the railing trying to somehow slow my progress to my father and mother’s room. My older brother came out sobbing, and I just kept walking toward their room, straining to look through their cracked door. There was something evil crouched beyond that door: depression, pain ... unwelcome, unasked-for change.

It was so quiet after the divorce announcement. My parents used to fight a lot before the announcement, but now my dad hadn’t the spirit for fighting; he gave up. Again, the realization of past yelling matches came after the hush fell on that big log home. My father, one of the heroes, if there are any in this testimony, was so infinitely sad. My mom knew the pain she was causing —I do believe that —but at the same time, I have come to understand that she didn’t. She was not making decisions based on the truth. She was lying to herself, and to us, about how much fun her new life would be, our new life, would be. It was a fresh start, a new and exciting adventure. Her world was a cleverly constructed fantasy of greener grass.
She packed us up and moved us away from my father, to a farm where a new family was waiting. I remember her turning her head to us in the passenger and back seats while driving and repeating over and over, “Isn’t this exciting?”

At the first meeting of the soon-to-be-step-family, I remember lots of dogs and the smell of a dairy farm. I was game; it DID look exciting. My sisters took things in stride as well, but my older brother did not. I adapted to this new life. I did whatever I was told; I was compliant; I had fun; I rode motorcycles; I pitched in with the haying; I picked rocks in the fields; I camped out with my stepbrother; I shot a pistol, rode the three-wheeler, grabbed an electric fence on a dare to see who could hold on the longest. I did it. I conformed. My brother did not.

In the midst of my mother’s chaotic relationship with this new husband, my brother went a little crazy. Our oldest stepbrother was a bullying beast of a teenager who had his father’s temper. He was full of hate, full of rage, and I stayed out of his way, laughed at his dirty jokes, did what I was told. My brother did not laugh, did not do what he was told, did not stay out of anyone’s way.

One night, out in the barn, my older brother had enough of our “bully stepbrother” and tried to crush his head with a lead pipe. He whiffed badly. I watched as my brother paid a terrible price for standing up to a bully. It was a terrifying experience, which led to me and my brother both moving back to our dad’s. My brother and I carried on a new existence at my father’s home in that huge, empty log tomb. Dad was not coping well and we weren’t enough to keep him going. He had seen his church collapse a few months earlier in a scandal. His church, his marriage, and his life had been taken from him; the rug had been pulled out; that was his new reality and ours.

Somewhere in the transition from grade school to middle school, depression took me like anesthesia. I remember it coming on, then I remember coming out of it. I ate a lot, I know that. I was like a Hoover vacuum on a very low setting. Whatever food was near me got sucked in, slowly but surely. I stared at whatever TV had to offer for hours after school, when other kids were outside playing. I began to skip school, constantly faking migraines. My mother was divorced again and off the farm. I didn’t care, I was depressed. She had repented of her foolishness, and my brother and I were going to live with her and my sisters again in a nice little duplex. I didn’t care, I was depressed. I was back with mom, my sisters, and my brother, and I was put in counseling. Now, I did care about that. I hated that. Maybe my hating counseling shocked me out of my depression. Counseling scared me straight.
When I did awaken from my depressed stupor, I found myself in the body of this scared, fat, introverted older kid. Mom was on welfare trying to get an education so I wore a lot of secondhand clothing. Bullies were a terror to me. I was much larger than most kids my age, but I was afraid of everyone. I was what others said I was. There was no doubt in my mind. I just wanted to disappear. That’s how I coped. I began to deal with problems through invisibility. A very big boy willing every part of his being to disappear into thin air best describes me at this time of my life. I was living a life of “quiet desperation.” I was tortured and tormented by my classmates, physically and emotionally abused, and I felt like I deserved it.

I was helpless, powerless, and daily frozen with fear, being constantly silenced by crippling insecurity. This overwhelming insecurity at times reclaims its hold on me. A strange residual social fear lingers, but I have learned to trust that it remains for God’s purposes. I choose to embrace this weakness and say with Paul: “His power is perfected in my weakness. When I am weak, I am truly strong.”

One day it all began to change. It started when I stood up to a guy in my class who wanted to take my seat, and what do you know, he backed down. I started lifting weights, then I went by myself and tried out for the football team, and I made it. Then I went to the church youth group, started cracking jokes, starting talking to girls. By my junior year of high school, I was starting for the varsity football team and ENJOYING school for the first time in my life.

My grades stunk, but I was happy and independent. I had been getting more and more involved in the youth group, and I began developing a vibrant relationship with God. I had prayed for salvation at five years of age with my father, but now I was beginning to understand and answer a clear call to His service. At fifteen, I seriously committed myself to Jesus Christ. I made a vow to live for Him for the rest of my life.

I graduated from high school and eventually moved with my mom to the Twin Cities where I was back to being a “nobody.” I had been lightly recruited by a couple local colleges for football and had received a small scholarship at a Christian university in Missouri, but that insecurity came back stronger than ever, convincing me all efforts to succeed were hopeless. I began a slow and steady roll back into depression. I was not in church, not in school. I was back to a day-to-day existence without meaning, without purpose, working the graveyard shift at a local gas station. My mom had many relationships over the years following the farm with one deadbeat after the other; but in St. Paul, Minnesota, she picked up their king in a bar one summer evening.
He told her that he was the son of a wealthy CEO, and that he would pay her back if she would spring for a weekend of partying in Duluth. He had no intention of paying for anything; he wasn’t the son of a CEO; he was a con man running up her credit cards, depleting her savings, until finally he showed his true colors. One evening he took the rented Cadillac my mother had charged for their lavish weekend fantasy and disappeared. After my mom called the police a few days following his departure, I found him late one night passed out on the seat of the stolen Caddy.

I wanted to save my mom from these guys every time. She was always able to sell me on them, and then when she turned against them, I was right there with her, comforting her, consoling. I was blinded to her responsibility in these situations. I wanted to be somebody’s favorite —to save someone —and she was beginning to rely on my shoulder to cry on. No matter what she had done to me, or to the family over the years, I loved her, I still believed in her, and that was what I desperately clung to. So, I called the police on the loser in the Caddy, and I was the hero, until my mom decided to bail the con man out of jail. When she walked through the door with him, I almost fell out of my chair. The king was back. I gave my mom an ultimatum. I was amazed and hysterical with anger when she gave me her answer. No. This man would stay, and I would go. Back to my dad’s I went.

Soon after moving back to my father’s, I had an opportunity to move north and play football at a community college. It was at this remote, “nowhere” school that I learned about the wonderful numbing effects of alcohol. It was easy to let it all go there in Virginia, Minnesota. I was alone, I was depressed, and I was a waste. My life consisted of football, a meager schedule of classes, alcohol whenever and however I could get it, and a girlfriend hand-picked to put up with my moodiness and drinking. I had plugged into a local church the moment I arrived, but it couldn’t hold me; I just was too wrapped up in my pain, in coping. The discovery of alcohol was a revelation. It made me more depressed, but in a bittersweet, self-pitying, brooding sense.

I dropped out of college after my first year, and ended up rooming with my best friend from high school back in Duluth. I began working another graveyard shift cleaning the floors at a grocery store. I was sleeping through the days, stockpiling alcohol on the shelf, working a dead-end job that I could barely hold, picking fights. Now I was becoming the bully. I would drink at home, and then go out drinking, drive home drunk, and drink. There was nothing else in my future. This was my life, for the rest of my life.

One night I was alone, and I was sober, or I was drunk, or someplace in between. I do remember the shotgun in my hands. I had my grandfather’s double barreled shotgun across my lap. I tried to put it to my head, but fear swept over me. Was I so pathetic that I couldn’t even kill myself?
I began playing games with loading it and trying to peek down the barrel to see
if I could get up the courage to take this seriously. I wept and screamed on the floor
of my room for God to save me, but I was alone. He must have had enough and
abandoned me; I couldn’t blame Him. I wanted Him to leave me alone; I didn’t
deserve love. I was going to die, and I was going to be as insignificant in death as I
was in life.

I was finally ready. Calm and determined, sniffing away the last of the tears, I
said my last half-hearted prayer, “Lord, if You’re there, it’s time to let me know,
or I’m finished.” Another ridiculous ultimatum.

But, in that little upstairs apartment, God answered me. The room glossed over,
and I was in a cave. Ribs became part of the infrastructure of the room, and I was
inside something. It was a vision. The only one I have ever had. And it wasn’t angels
and harps. It was me clearly in the inner guts of a fish. I grabbed hold of that vision
with two desperate hands, finding and opening my old Bible from youth group. I had
no idea where the story of Jonah was. It was a book in itself. The story was familiar,
but what did that have to do with me? Then I saw it, the prayer in the second chapter.
Jonah’s prayer is what was in me. My spirit had been speaking this in groans, in the
throes of anguish. “In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From deep in
the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to me cry.... I said, ‘I have been
banished from your sight....” The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded
me.... To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever.
But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit. When my life was ebbing away, I
remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you.... What I have vowed I will make good. I
will say, ‘Salvation comes from the Lord’” (Jonah 2:1 – 9).

I dedicated myself to the Lord that moment, telling Him that what I had
vowed as a committed Christian in my youth, I would make good.

I signed up for the fall to go to the Christian university in Missouri where I
had initially, upon graduation, received a seed scholarship for football. I had no
idea where the funds would come from, but it was clear that was the place God
wanted me. It was where He had wanted me all along. I had been running from
a call. Like Jonah.

I was accepted to the school and the money somehow was there for me to
attend. Life was so sweet these three years of school. I was away at school,
playing football. I had Christ-centered classes, and Christian friends, so why was
I still struggling to maintain my sobriety? There were rules against drinking. I
had even signed a covenant that I would abstain from alcohol. But that didn’t
mean opportunities didn’t present themselves; it didn’t mean opportunities
weren’t created. My last binge ended late one night after staring into the
disappointed eyes of the most beautiful woman God has ever breathed life into.
My girlfriend had been able to melt away some of the walls that were again
forming around me — we even began talking about marriage, about kids, about everything — but we hadn’t talked about this drinking stuff before.
Another stamped-in, burned-in memory is when I stopped by her off-campus apartment after having a few drinks, and then a few more drinks with some friends who lived in the same apartment complex. My girlfriend didn’t say so, but it was all over her face when she saw me. She was disappointed. I don’t think she ever really thought twice about us — we were in love and flying recklessly and blissfully toward our future — but in that instant, I saw a loss of respect ... even some doubt. She loved me for the right reasons — for the Christian man I wanted to be — and this wasn’t it. It was in this moment, confronted with this past-and-once-again-present coping strategy, that the double-standard I was keeping between my Christian ascent and my worldly descent came to a head. I was either going to become the man God had created and called or go back to despair, loneliness, death, and hell. I chose life, and have never, in over a decade of sobriety, ever regretted my decision.

My girlfriend and I got married, and I received a degree in criminal justice, but ended up enjoying a counseling group I was placed in during my practicum so much that I began to explore counseling and social work as a career. Together we moved to my wife’s home state of Delaware where I began working for the state’s Division of Family Services as a family crisis therapist.

During my five years in that office, I toiled through a master’s program in social work, and began group and individual work at a private counseling agency on the side to earn hours for my clinical licensing. I loved the work, I loved counseling, and I loved group process.

What I didn’t realize is that in working two to three jobs ministering to others, I was neglecting my ministry at home to my family. Three jobs at times kept me away constantly, and I was even volunteering any leftover hours at the church. It was exhausting — and a trying time for my marriage.

I tried to convince my wife, unsuccessfully, that this work was my mission field. I was giving my all in answer to “the call.” But my absence was wearing on her, on us. We had two girls, and I didn’t see much of them. My explanation to them, to myself, and to God was that I was needed out there; people needed me; they needed saving! She had her parents to lean on, my kids had their grandparents. Those I helped didn’t have anyone but me. Isn’t being a Christian about helping the helpless AT ANY COST?
What I didn’t fully realize is that through college, working toward a degree, playing football, and now with my career goals, my master’s degree, my striving for success in counseling others, I was succumbing to the pressure of trying to earn back my value. The value I had lost by being a fat, spineless nobody without any answers. My professional life was a tenuous balance of keeping everyone happy with me, spinning anything negative, running from conflict, blaming others, justifying my very existence, running, running to keep that distance . . . keeping the helpless loser I once was far behind me.

One day, God called me to a fast. A one-week fast. I managed to doubt it and fight it for a good month, but I finally relented. When the fast was over, I was incredibly disappointed. No lightning bolts, no giant handwriting on the wall. What a rip-off! Oh well. It was done and I had been obedient. A few weeks later, my brother-in-law, a youth pastor working in a little church in West Virginia, called and asked if I would travel to West Virginia to talk to his church’s men’s ministry about outreach. His pastor had felt God leading the church to do more for those outside their four walls. I said I would be glad to do it, and soon found myself talking to a small group of men in Clarksburg, West Virginia about Celebrate Recovery, and some other outreach programs I was heading up in our church in Delaware.

A week later, I was being asked to consider interviewing in this same church to do outreach ministry full-time. God was orchestrating a miraculous life-change, and soon I was chugging through the mountains in a U-Haul contemplating this new direction in my life and ministry.

Now the recovery program I had started in Delaware was very loosely based on the Celebrate Recovery curriculum, and I had plans in West Virginia to veer even further off the Celebrate Recovery course. I have since discovered why I was reluctant to conform to the program. Running my own program, my way, was all about pride. Tailor-making my own recovery program elevated me to the keeper of all the keys, giving me the illusion of being in complete control and helping me stay aloof in a “therapist” role. It kept people looking to me for the answers. I wanted to be their savior. “I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior” (Isaiah 43:11).

After several months of running the “John” recovery program in my new ministerial role in West Virginia, with frustratingly minimal success, my wonderful little church sent me to my first Celebrate Recovery Summit. It was during those three days in August 2006 that I felt challenged to make a commitment to run this ministry by the letter. I had been fighting it, as I was to learn later, mainly because I would rather help “those people,” rather than be one of “those people.”
However, as I listened to the testimonies given at the Summit, as I worshiped with the thousands of lives being transformed by the power of God through the truths of this program, I felt the gentle conviction of the Holy Spirit calling me to submit and SURRENDER. I had been asking everyone to share their lives with me, to open up, be completely transparent so they could find healing and hope for their lives. However, I had never really done that myself. What hypocrisy! During a question-and-answer time at one of the Summit workshops, I made a public confession that I had been using the Celebrate Recovery name, but had not been following the model. It was at that vulnerable place, the giving up of my power, where my own healing began. You could say that my journey of discovery into my own emotional and spiritual DNA finally began when I submitted to the Celebrate Recovery DNA. While I had been trying to construct a new me through meeting the needs of others, God had wanted nothing more than to deconstruct me by exposing my own many hurts, hang-ups, and habits. Through the work of this ministry, especially going through the step study, I finally dared to get honest about my past.

Principle 5 says, "Voluntarily submit to every change God wants to make in my life and humbly ask Him to remove my character defects." “Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires” (Matthew 5:6).

Finally, I would have to take a real look at myself and either change or continue in my own pride and ego. Then, as I wrote my inventory, I realized something that broke me to a point where I hadn’t been broken before. I started to see and feel how much my efforts to replace God with self-sufficiency and self-righteousness had grieved my God and Savior Jesus Christ. After sharing my inventory, with the help of another minister, I made my first heart-wrenching amends. My first amends were offered to God, and through that process I felt His forgiveness, mercy, and love for me like never before.

In that place of grace, He gave me a new awareness of a value I could never earn, and a value I will never lose.

“How deep the Father’s love for us, how vast beyond all measure that He would send His only Son, to make a wretch His treasure.”

Today I have come to a new realization and reliance on His economy. It is not by my strength, not by man’s might, but truly by His Spirit that I (and others) find true recovery. My wife and I celebrated our twelfth anniversary in June. I have four beautiful daughters. (Yes, I am powerless and my life is truly unmanageable.) My family has now become my most important and cherished ministry.
I want to encourage anyone who is feeling the overwhelming weight of insecurity to let go, get vulnerable, and trust in the Lord. In Principle 7 we are taught: “Reserve a daily time with God for self-examination, Bible reading, and prayer in order to know God and His will for my life and to gain the power to follow His will.” Celebrate Recovery rightly emphasizes this complete dependency on Christ as the only opportunity we have for true peace, security, and salvation.

I thank God for His love, and I thank God for my family; I thank God for this program and for my incredible Celebrate Recovery family; and I thank God for the opportunity to share my testimony with you.

Thank you for letting me share.