

The Formula for Overcoming

This article is from the "Edifying the Body" section of the Church of God Big Sandy's Web site, churchofgodbig sandy.com. It was posted for the weekend of Aug. 6–7, 2011.

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HAWKINS, Texas—How many of us, over the course of our spiritual lives, have realized a persistent fault, habit or character flaw that has left us with a helpless sense of frustration? Maybe a better question is, "How many have NOT had such an encounter?"

Overcoming constitutes a year-round, lifelong obligation—clearly the most burdensome and irksome chore we will ever have. When we weigh this task against the enormity of sin and the downward pulls of our human nature, it seems *next to impossible!*

In the spring of the year when we go through a rather intense period of self-examination, we find pockets of hidden—and sometimes not-so-hidden—leaven that may leave us with a sense of futility, hopelessness or discouragement.

Yet, overcoming remains a task that our Elder Brother Jesus Christ has laid upon us (Matthew 5:48).

Matthew 5:48—"Therefore you must become perfect, as your heavenly Father has perfection."

And He has every confidence that, together, we can bring this job through to completion (Philippians 1:6).

Philippians 1:6—"For I feel confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."

This article reveals an insightful, but little understood, concept that lays bare why overcoming often seems nearly impossible. It provides a powerful formula that, when properly applied, will make overcoming exciting, adventurous and challenging.

A Paralyzing Affliction

In his book *People in Quandaries*, general semanticist Wendell Johnson proposes a theory to explain why individuals become so overwhelmed at programs of self-improvement and overcoming. He refers to an affliction that enslaves and paralyzes 90 percent of humanity.

Mr. Johnson termed this affliction the IFD disease. IFD stands for Idealism, Frustration, Despair, a predictable sequence that moves the hapless victim down a destructive spiral.

We could explain the abbreviation as:

- **I**—People set their goals or *ideals* impossibly high, beyond reach.
- **F**—They feel *frustrated*, with a sense of *futility*, in falling short of their expectations.
- **D**—They feel *demoralized* and *defeated* and do not desire to continue.

Highest goal possible

This article is not intended to attack the goal of striving after high ideals.

God wants us to have high ideals and standards. However, He does not want us to become frustrated in the process of attaining them.

The highest ideal we can imagine is becoming a member of God's family!

However, the process of undergoing the transformation from a carnal, physical body to a godly, dazzling spirit cannot be contemplated except as an end product of thousands and thousands of subprocesses.

Series of small pictures

We will succeed in achieving a workable and valuable goal when we spell out the ways and means of reaching it in measurable and attainable steps.

In other words, we cannot possibly grasp the big picture unless we see a series of small pictures.

In the context of Christian living:

- **I** refers to vague and hazily defined goals—ones that we do not measure in bite-sized chunks or increments.
- **F** refers to the frustration and anxiety we feel because we have not made intermediate, incremental objectives clear in our own minds.
- **D** refers to the despair we feel in falling short of attaining these spiritual goals of perfect godly character.

Fine as Incense

We often fail to move toward spiritual perfection because we do not ask for it, or, when we do ask, we couch our request in vague generalities.

God commands us to break our requests down finely as incense (Psalms 141:2).

Let's notice a verse in Psalm 141.

Psalm 141:2—"May You count my prayer as incense before You; the lifting up of my hands as the evening offering."

Many people often talk to God in generic, all-purpose petitions—such as “Please God, help me to overcome,” or “Please God, help me to change.”

When doing so, we fail to spell out to God exactly what we want Him to help us to do. It would be better if we broke down our goals into visualized objectives, as much for our own peace of mind as for God’s assistance.

Of course, God knows what we need before we ask.

Matthew 6:31-32—“Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.”

But we are the ones who need to know what to ask for. If we were more specific about the immediate steps we need to take, we would not have so much anxiety and despondency about the outcome.

Concrete examples

Our Elder Brother Jesus Christ used concrete, measurable (we might use the term “behaviorally stated”) objectives when He taught about godly behavior.

Notice the account of the Good Samaritan—an old chestnut of an example in the Gospel of Luke.

Luke 10:25—“And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, ‘Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ ”

Jesus asked the lawyer (verse 26): “What does the Law say? How does it read to you?”

When the lawyer quoted the two Great Commandments (verse 27), Jesus noted that the lawyer had answered correctly.

But the lawyer, wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus (verse 29): “And who should I consider my neighbor?”

The Good Samaritan

Jesus proceeded to tell the lawyer about the reaction of three men who came across a man who had been robbed on the way from Jerusalem to Jericho (verses 30-35).

A priest passed by on the other side of the road from the man (verse 31).

Likewise a Levite also passed by on the other side (verse 32).

Yet it was a Samaritan who demonstrated compassion for the man.

In verses 34-35, we see how the Samaritan helped.

- He bandaged the man’s wounds.
- He poured oil and wine on his wounds.
- He put the man on his animal to take him to an inn to take care of him.

- At the inn he took out two denarii—two valuable coins—and gave them to the innkeeper.
- Then he told the innkeeper that, if the money was not enough to take care of the stranger, he would pay the difference.

Important question

After telling the story, Jesus asked the lawyer an important question (in verse 36): “Which of these three do you think proved a real neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?”

The lawyer answered (in verse 37): “The one who showed mercy toward him.”

Then Jesus said to him: “Go and do the same.”

I have heard several church leaders admonish their congregations that love should be considered more as a verb than a noun, demonstrated not so much by feeling as carrying through on concrete acts of goodness.

We can all probably think of examples of supposed church leaders who preach about love but whose actions do not support their words.

Yet we can also note people who back up their preaching about love by demonstrating love through continual deeds.

Famous poem

The modus operandi of such church leaders reminds me of an instructive poem of Edgar Guest: “I’d Rather See a Sermon Than Hear One Any Day.”

I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day;
 I’d rather one should walk with me than merely tell the way.
 The eye is a better pupil, more willing than the ear;
 Fine counsel is confusing, but example is always clear,
 And the best of all the preachers are the men who live their creeds,
 For to see a good put in action is what everybody needs.
 I can soon learn how to do it if you will let me see it done;
 I can watch your hand in action, but your tongue too fast may run.
 And the lectures you deliver may be very wise and true,
 But I’d rather get my lesson by observing what you do.
 For I may misunderstand you and the high advice you give,
 But there is no misunderstanding how you act and how you live.
 When I see a deed of kindness, I am eager to be kind.
 When a weaker brother stumbles, and a strong man stands behind
 Just to see if he can help him, then the wish grows strong in me
 To become as big and thoughtful as I know that friend to be.
 And all travelers can witness that the best of guides today
 Is not the one who tells them, but the one who shows the way.

One good man teaches many; men believe what they behold;
One deed of kindness noted is worth forty that are told.

Who stands with men of honor learns to hold his honor dear,
For right living speaks a language which to everyone is clear.

Though an able speaker charms me with his eloquence, I say,
I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day.

Serving the need

The biblical Good Samaritan was not praised for his altruism, benevolence or neighborliness, or his "way of outgoing concern," but instead for concrete behaviors such as bandaging wounds, pouring on oil and wine, setting him on his own animal, bringing him to an inn, and taking care of him (Luke 10:34).

Likewise when Jesus' brother James sets forth the behaviorally stated objectives for pure and undefiled religion in James 1:27, he uses terms that refer to what we could consider behaviorally stated objectives.

James 1:27—"Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father consists of this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

Consider also the specific concrete account of godly service Jesus describes in Matthew 25:31-36.

- "I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat."
- "I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink."
- "I was a stranger, *and you invited Me in.*"
- "I was naked, *and you clothed Me.*"
- "I was sick, *and you visited Me.*"
- "I was in prison, *and you came to Me.*"

Jesus described the opposite reaction to the same scenarios in verses 42-43.

The reward for the good behavior was listed in verses 34 and 46. The penalty for the bad behavior was also listed in verse 46.

Small steps to large goal

When our goals for overcoming are not spelled out in incremental, intermediate steps, we can expect the inevitable outcome to be demoralization and worry.

Motivational expert Paul Meyer describes anxiety about the future as a penalty paid in advance for failure or wrongdoing we have not yet committed.

Conversely, he defines success as the day-by-day realization of a predetermined, worthwhile goal.

Daily journal

I keep a daily journal with a to-do list of nine or 10 items. As I check each of these items off, I consider myself successful.

After administering preliminary diagnostic exams (uncovering problems in grammar and usage), I generally assign the goal essay as the first graded assignment.

Because students draw upon their own experience, the goal essay provides them with opportunities to use specific concrete examples, fulfilling the desired outcome of using examples as an expository technique.

I ask students to concentrate on specific personal development goals or specific relationship goals and focus on one problem, one perceived deficit, they wish to remedy.

Identify problems

To help students identify problems they want to correct, I ask them during an in-class exercise to provide 10 adjectives describing themselves at their current stage of personal development. Typically, a student might respond with the following list of higher-order-abstraction adjectives:

- Shy.
- Forgetful.
- Late for appointments.
- Indecisive.
- Careless.
- Lazy.
- Procrastinating.
- Hot-tempered.
- Obese.
- Stubborn.

I then ask students to pick one of these adjectives and discard the rest. After listing 10 adjectives, students will often indicate one problem that proves more annoying than the rest.

For example, if a student chooses *indecisive* as the descriptor, I encourage the student to identify specific incidents in which he has demonstrated this kind of behavior in order to avoid the less-factual but predictable "is-of-identity" description "I am indecisive."

Specific measurable objectives

For example, if I want to overcome my lack of organization, I do not simply declare that I want become more organized. Rather, I identify specific measurable objectives:

- I will reserve next Thursday afternoon between 3:45 and 4:30 to delete old E-mail and spam from my computer.
- I will create an Excel document at 6:30 Sunday evening to record expenses for the car, including number of gallons, miles per gallon, number of quarts of oil, and routine repairs.
- Next Friday afternoon from 2:00 to 2:45 I will find divide the unprocessed clutter on the top of my desk into discrete categories such as (1) personal correspondence, (2) memos to be filed (or discarded) and (3) newspapers and magazines.
- If I want to overcome my shyness, I don't simply declare that I want to become more sociable. Rather, I would enumerate specific measurable behaviors:
 - At the college forum or assembly Thursday at 11 a.m., I will introduce myself to one stranger, extending my hand, establishing eye contact, and asking two specific nonthreatening questions such as "What did you think of the musical selection today?" Or "What major have you declared?" Or "In what part of the country do you live?"
 - I plan to rehearse the punch lines of two jokes I heard in Jay Leno's monologue last night and practice on fellow passengers in the elevator. I will look for someone who appears to look as uncomfortable as I do at public gatherings and attempt to make this individual more comfortable.

Living in the present

We should consider overcoming a fault or a character flaw as a "now" activity, not as a future possibility. Jesus advises His disciples to put high intensity into overcoming and living in the present—in the here and now.

He cautions us in Matthew 6:34: "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

We have the most success with overcoming when we break it down into daily, manageable increments rather than trying to envision it as a horrendous, lifetime project.

In Luke 9:23, Jesus recommends that we consider overcoming as a daily task, suggesting, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross *daily*, and follow Me."

Similarly, the apostle Paul says we ought to consider overcoming a daily, incremental process: "I affirm, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die *daily*" (1 Corinthians 15:31).

He again reinforces this day-by-day principle in 2 Corinthians 4:16: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed *day by day*."

Bite-sized chunks

British philosopher Sir William Osler summed up the concept succinctly when he said, "Live in 'day tight' compartments."

This does not mean that we live for today only. It means we should carve out a worthy lifetime goal, like becoming a member of God's family, into bite-sized chunks.

At the beginning of each day we would do well to set specific priorities, and at the end of each day measure our success.

For instance, we could set bite-sized spiritual goals, such as refraining to think or say coarse things when a rude, inconsiderate motorist cuts us off or drives 20 miles per hour in a 70-mile-per-hour zone.

These concrete situations will determine if the self-control, patience and peace of Galatians 5:22-23 have really matured in our character.

Perhaps we have a bad habit of gossiping about a brother or sister in Christ. We can set an incremental goal of changing the subject when gossip rears its ugly head.

In conquering an enslaving habit like alcoholism, people find it more productive to look at sobriety as a day-by-day, step-by-step process than as a grim lifetime of abstinence.

Explorer John Goddard has said, "Any task in life can be made easier when it is broken down into increments."

Various examples

Achieving spiritual goals resembles the physical task of pulling weeds. I considered clearing our 50-acre bean field of cockleburs an irksome task, but my brother and I managed to keep up our intensity by concentrating on the weeds immediately in front of us.

If we looked back, we would become self-satisfied and rest on our laurels. If we looked at the weediness of the entire field, we would become discouraged and tempted to quit.

Like many people, I am afraid of heights. When I had to, however, I was able to climb a windmill by concentrating on one step at a time, directing all my energies into climbing that one step. Both literally and metaphorically, all of us should be able to put one foot in front of the other.

Several years ago on *The Tonight Show*, Johnny Carson had a guest who had set himself a goal of eating a car. He had done this over a period of years by breaking, cutting or grinding all the components into bite-sized segments—even the battery, crankshaft and muffler!

One would think that becoming a member of God's family was every bit as worthy a goal as eating a car!

Whatever the goal, the principle of bite-sized increments remains the same.

For example, back in 1988 my wife, Julie, embarked on the task of getting a book manuscript ready for publication. We broke the task down into hundreds of small subprocesses, celebrating after each minor accomplishment. (We celebrated a lot!)

The euphoria of accomplishing one minitask supplied the energy to begin the next one. Similarly, failing to complete an insignificant minitask, like writing a letter or making a phone call, can grow into a millstone as one puts it off.

Remember the formula

Rabbi Meir Kahane suggested that the greatest curse to fall upon a human being happens when he looks over his life and finds it to be meaningless.

An empty life consists of the cumulative total of numerous empty days. If we can render each day of life meaningful, a lifetime of meaningful days will accrue to us, and we will have had a meaningful life.

The only real overcoming and character building are now—in the present—today. To those who do not live in the present, there are only empty yesterdays and fearful tomorrows.

We need to apply this better formula to our Christian lives: $O = M/G$.

Overcoming (O) consists of keeping our *motivation* (M) high while pursuing realistic, attainable, bite-sized *goals* (G).