STRONGER

A Practical Guide to Physical and Spiritual Discipline

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Thanks to the many students who have joined me in a journey of exercise to encourage long-term ministry and overall health, including spiritual growth. In particular I am grateful for the “Beasts of Workout” who have joined me in our workout group, with Kevin Stone as my ace assistant in leading that team. Thanks as well to those who have allowed me to use their stories in this work. Special thanks to my son Josh for buying me P90X.

Dedicated to the ministers of the gospel who refuse to embrace gluttony or obesity in particular, or a lack of discipline in general, as a lifestyle.
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Introduction

Have you ever gotten to the place where you are sick and tired of being sick and tired? Have you been confronted by a physician who told you changes needed to be made? Have you come to grips with the possibility that many followers of Christ today – perhaps including you -- have compartmentalized Christianity to the point that we become okay with letting things go physically, intellectually, or relationally, as long as our spiritual life seems hunky-dory?

Are you ready to change?

Take heart. Others have been there and have lived to tell about it. Folks like:

--Pastor Chris, who lost 120 pounds, wiping out significant health issues he faced;
--A pastor named David who lost essentially the same weight as his daughter (who weighed 42 pounds at the time) making it much easier to lift her;
--Chad, a seminary student working three jobs with very little spare time who dropped 18 pounds and feels great;
--A Director of Missions named Mike whose doctor told him he was pre-diabetic, so he has lost 46 pounds and will lose another 45;
--A professor named Mark who lost 180 pounds after becoming convicted that his diet did not reflect the Lordship of Christ;
--A former student named Matt who has lost 148 pounds, ran a marathon, and by the time I release this Ebook will have completed his first triathlon.

These stories do not represent elite athletes or health gurus. Their stories and others demonstrate how regular folks became convinced that we can’t separate our physical fitness from our spiritual growth.

In other words, they represent a host of believers who seek to be STRONGER: physically, spiritually, emotionally, and relationally.

I make no claim to be an expert about the things that follow. Nor have I arrived, for I have yet much to do to be where I should be spiritually, physically, emotionally, and so on. But I write this as a hopeful encouragement to many, especially those in
At the end of last year, I was reading your tweets/blogs about being challenged to grow physically as we continue to push ourselves spiritually. At the same time, God was surrounding me with people who would be there to hold me accountable in this area. I had played college baseball, but that was a few years ago. I didn't know how out of control it was until I stepped on a scale. I was crushed to read 340 pounds. I knew I was big but not THAT big.

I had already begun working out in a gym towards the latter part of the past year. To commence this year, I added to that a much healthier diet and a running routine. Literally, I could barely run 1/8 of a mile to start. Within 10 weeks, I ran my first 5K without stopping. Today, I'm working on increasing my times as I push towards an even larger goal.

I've been focusing on 1 Corinthians 9 and repenting of every food I've ever eaten while running. But the real heroes of this story are the people God has surrounded me with. My buddy, Trevor, lost over 100 pounds last year. The day we went out to celebrate him reaching the century mark, he went on a 100-mile bike ride. He just recently competed in and completed an ironman triathlon.

Along the way I've been encouraged by friends and family on a similar journey. For me, that's been the key to the journey so far. Realizing God has a plan for me in this area, setting specific goals in key areas, and being encompassed by people to hold me accountable and to encourage me when it's needed.

At the beginning of the year, I created a two-year goal to lose 140 pounds. Four months into this journey, I'm down a little over 65 pounds. I'm humbled and appreciative for the journey God has me going through currently.

J.J. Gawlowicz

Thanks JJ. And thanks to the many people whose stories you will read. And thank you for seeking to be a follower of Jesus in all areas of life.
1. A Wake-Up Call

“America is becoming a nation of gluttony and obesity and churches are a feeding ground for this problem.”¹ Ken Ferraro

Why such a provocative statement at the outset? Consider the following:

--A 2011 Northwestern University study of 3,433 men and women over 18 years discovered that young adults who attend a church or Bible study once a week are 50% more likely to be obese;

--On a larger scale (no pun intended), as a nation America is projected to be almost 50% obese by the year 2030, creating $68 billion in health care costs, 6.8 million new cases of stroke and 7.8 new cases of diabetes.²

But there is good news: increasing numbers of Christ-followers in general and ministers in particular are moving from jokes about gluttony to recognize that how we approach diet and exercise forms a part of our sanctification.

I can relate to the stories of others who have gotten serious about their physical health as a part of their sanctification. I have had a similar journey, although as a youngster I would never have dreamed I might have weight issues. But like most young boys I wanted to grow up into a manly-man, so I began to want a strong body fairly early. At about age twelve my older brother bought a popular fitness program. It featured a cartoon in which a 98-pound weakling had sand kicked in his face by a bully, after which he stole the weakling’s girlfriend. Too puny to do anything about it, the weakling followed the course and soon beefed up to take on the bully with no problem.

But as I read the information, there was a problem. I did not even weight 98 pounds. I was so skinny I had to run around in the shower to get wet! Insecure as I was, I had little hope to grow stronger. From age twelve to about fourteen I continue to be depressed about my physical un-fitness.

As a teenager my spiritual growth paralleled my physical development in many ways. I grew from a skinny, weak, pretty sad freshman in high school who could barely bench press 110 pounds to a junior in high school who could bench press 300. At the same time I went from a nervous, crowd-pleasing sort of cultural Christian as a ninth grader to a zealous follower of Christ by the eleventh grade. While never being a star
athlete or a perfect Christian, by my senior year I received the highest award for an athlete at our school academically and served as president of my church’s youth group. And, the confluence between my spiritual progress and athletic involvement would serve as a key turning point in my development as a young man.

I did not realize then how much easier it was to grow spiritually and physically in those years. When you are a teenager you tend to think the world revolves around you and your problems mark a new depth of human tragedy and your triumphs represent unmatched achievement. After a few decades of adult responsibility from marriage to earning a PhD, from being a dad to being an author, I have since realized those high school years were as smooth as the other side of a pillow in comparison.

As a teenager I had my share of roadblocks, from a knee operation to the terrorizing experience of preaching my first sermon (those early sermons, yea they were really bad). But other obstacles in life have served as a constant reminder of the vital place spiritual formation must have in a person’s life. I also learned the importance of fitness, and how you really cannot separate the two.

In April of 2009 I found myself sitting in my office at Southeastern Seminary at the ripe old age of 50. I had gradually declined into a pretty pathetic specimen physically, but a pretty typical preacher. I was ready for a change. Fast-forward two and a half years later to December 2011: I journeyed to my doctor for the annual physical that guys my age need. I confess that for several years I only got one sporadically because I never actually liked all the report had to say. I had received the joy of an artificial hip my 38th year, which will ruin your whole day, and had a pretty sedentary job that encouraged the growth of a belt size more than the chiseling of a weight trainer. I had become clinically obese, which seemed so odd given how skinny I was back in the day. But this time the visit was different, for the Doctor glowed with great news: everything looked great—cholesterol levels, P.S.A. test (important to me as my Dad has battled prostate cancer for years), and others. But the thing my Doctor told me that surprised me the most was this: From December 2007 until 2011 (I failed to get a physical in 2008) I had lost almost 40 pounds.

I have lost essentially a large cocker spaniel from my body. It would be more accurate to say I lost 50 pounds of fat and gained 10 pounds of muscle. Picture me
lugging around that excess weight on a fake hip and you can see why my doctor was so happy.

As I mentioned, as a youngster I was so skinny I could stand sideways, stick out my tongue, and look like a zipper. My mom would take up my pants and I would have one back pocket. But something happened from about 30 to age 50: my weight went from around 185 then to ultimately over 230 by my 50th birthday. Why?

First, I became a Baptist preacher. More about that later, but ministers today, especially those in my Southern Baptist tradition seem to treat gluttony not as a sin but as an entitlement.

By the way, it is not.

Further, I became a PhD student, and loved the academic world while neglecting my physical world. I continued to compartmentalize, separating in my mind the lack of physical commitment from my spiritual life.

Then, I started traveling a lot and preaching. Wonderful ministry opportunities abounded, but I also ate out a lot, which is not good for you. Restaurant portions average about two meals in size.

Next, I got that hip replacement in 1998.

Your reasons may be similar or not, but we all have obstacles to personal fitness. Lack of priorities. Busy schedules. Physical limitations.

Finally, I slowly and imperceptibly allowed myself to compartmentalize my spiritual life from my physical life—not after all, my classes were full, my devotions fairly consistent. All was well, or was it?

When the pain of change is less than the pain of the status quo, you will change. I realized I had basically taken the posture that I was going to be one more fat, out of shape Baptist preacher who would do well to crawl across the finish line one day.

And I knew that frame of mind and shape of body did not honor the Lord. It did not help me grow spiritually. It certainly did not give me joy.

And, perhaps the most decisive factor of all, It set a lousy example for others.

The following is not a clinical, professional journal for fitness. But it does reflect the journey I have taken, one to get in better shape, to learn more about health and fitness, to be less compartmentalized and more holistic in my approach to life, and
lessons I have learned along the way. The stories of many others who have experienced
dramatic changes will illustrate the reality that you can change, and that we cannot
compartmentalize our physical life from our spiritual life.

A 2011 Northwestern University study of 3,433 men and women over 18 years
discovered that young adults who attend a church or Bible study once a week are 50%
more likely to be obese.

The goal of this Ebook is not to guilt trip you into some brief, guilt-ridden
response. The goal is not to help you get that “perfect body,” for in this life we will never
be perfect. It is designed to help you see that one of the ways we glorify God and worship
Him rightly involves how we take care of what He has given us, which includes our
physical bodies. I also want you to see that you really cannot separate your spiritual life
from your physical life, or your emotional, relational, or economic life, for that matter.

Remember this: if you know Christ and have thus experienced the wonder of
redemption, you belong to Christ no matter your waist size or your eating habits. You
are free in Christ. Bask in the grace of God! But the wonder of the gospel and its power
in us should motivate us to serve Christ with all that is in us to the best of our abilities,
not to earn something from Him, but to let others see the impact of the gospel in us, and
to show our gratitude to our great God for His goodness to us. Paul reminds us to
discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness (I Timothy 4:7). We must reject a
modern version of Gnosticism, that ancient heresy that said material things are evil and
spiritual things are good, and embrace the biblical teaching that our physical bodies
belong to God, and we should present our bodies a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2) and
glorify God in our bodies as they are the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:20).

I have neither the space nor the expertise to give you in this brief book all you
need to know for fitness from a biblical or a practical viewpoint. I am still learning, but I
am an eager student. My trajectory has been forever changed, and I hope this will help
yours change as well. I cannot educate you in your diet, except to offer practical
suggestions like STOP EATING SO MANY OF THOSE FRENCH FRIES.

Toward the end of the book some specific ways will be offered to encourage you.
The stories of my students and others who have made dramatic changes physically --
which have in turn changed them spiritually -- can serve to challenge you also. Some of
these will be found between the following chapters, starting with my former student Danny.

**Danny’s Story**

Danny Poyner is a former student who has seen an amazing transformation in just a year. Here is a summary of his journey. In 2010 he hurt his back, leading to two back surgeries. But the surgical report following the second surgery was the point where he realized he had to change:

“I saw the surgical report from my back doctor and read through it. There was one word on that surgical report that really caught my attention.

Obese.

About two months after the knee surgery, physical therapy and follow-up visits that occur, I was ready to get to work. On May 23, 2011, I made the conscious decision that something had to change with my health. Here I was, in my early 30s, having had two back surgeries and two knee surgeries thinking that I couldn’t continue on living like I was.

There are multiple driving factors in my decision to lose weight. The first are my back and my knees. Weight loss would remove pressure on these joints and hopefully eliminate future occurrences of pain and surgery. Then there is the diabetes that runs in my family. I don’t want to have to deal with that when I’m older. It is expensive and largely preventable if you can catch it before it starts. There is the stress that carrying around extra weight causes on your heart and other vital organs. And far from the least of my worries was my wife and now, two children. I don’t want them to grow up husbandless and fatherless because I couldn’t control my eating and I ended up dying of a heart attack.

Then there was the theological side of things. How can I, a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, stand before anyone and call them to repentance for their sin when I’m standing here labeled clinically obese? Both Matthew 4:4 and Luke 4:4 in recounting the temptation to a hungry Christ say bread alone is not the answer. Proverbs 23:2 says to put a knife to your throat if you are a glutton. Proverbs 23:20-21 says the glutton will come to poverty. Do not lust for the wealth and power the ruler has. The food, power-hungriness, and greed will consume you. Use what is given to you to sustain you and do not ‘over eat’ and be wasteful with this gift. Use it wisely! We are called to be good stewards and managers of the things God has entrusted to us, as demonstrated in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30.

All this said, the evidence was strongly against me. I had been convicted of not being a good steward of God’s gifts and of being a glutton. This is where I began on that May day. I woke up, stepped on the scales, and began the journey that has led me here today. In my next post, I will give more practical advice on how I have tackled my weight problem.”

Fast forward a year, where Danny writes:

“Today marks my one year anniversary from the day I began this diet. I am happy to report that I have lost a total of 125 pounds in the last 365 days. It has been a long road of weight loss, but it has been more than worth it. I’ve seen a lot of people over the last few days that I hadn’t seen in quite a while. It is intriguing that many of them said they
would not have recognized me outside of the church context. I don’t think I look that different. Apparently, I’m wrong.

Of course, I’m not sure I could have done it without my wife. She has been very encouraging, and convicting when I have let go for a day.

To sum everything up, if you have weight to lose, don’t delay. You aren’t getting any younger (no matter your age) and the longer you wait, the harder it gets. Diet and exercise are key. Don’t exercise just so you can have that extra strip of bacon. 70% of weight loss is diet. Pay careful attention to what you eat and be diligent about it. Don’t let it slide. Studies show that the longer you remain overweight, the more you pay for it in your later years. It isn’t only a ‘body’ payment, it will cost you in health care costs.

Some stats:
• Weight: 343 down to 218
• Body fat: approximately 36% down to 16%
• Pants: 44 down to 34/36 (depending on the cut)
• Shirt: 3XL down to XL
• Coat: 56 down to 46 (really a 45, but you can’t find those unless they’re custom made)
• Neck: 18.5 down to 16

Now what?

I don’t really plan on losing any more weight, even though I am still almost 30 pounds above the top end of my BMI range. What I am trying to do is cut about 6% more body fat. Hopefully, that will also be accompanied by an increase in muscle. I’m still lifting weights and trying to run, so I am hopeful that this change will not take too long. I am increasing to a maintenance calorie level today, and yes, I am still planning on counting calories. That number is around 2900 calories per day. Realistically, I hope to hit about 2700 with the increase (from approximately 2300 currently) being mostly protein. That would be almost an additional pound of chicken per day, so I’m going to have to get creative.

Start today. Don’t wait.”
2. The Role of the Mind in the Health of Your Body

“Your brain is the command and control center of your body. If you want a better body, the first place to ALWAYS start is by having a better brain.”

Before we go any further talking about your body and physical health, I want to start what you may think to be an unlikely place, but it is important part of your body if you are to see spiritual and physical changes that last: your mind.

It Starts with the Mind

After his magnificent description of the amazing gospel of Christ in chapters 1-11 of the book of Romans, Paul turns from this weighty biblical dogma to more practical matters. He begs us in Romans 12:1-2 to be consistent in the practice of presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice. All that of course is useless without a relationship with Christ, which is why Paul says “therefore” in verse 1, alluding to the aforementioned chapters 1-11. You can have the body of Tony Horton and the mind of Einstein, but if you do not know your Creator in a vital relationship through the work of Jesus Christ, you are simply marking time in a body that will one day be of no use to you. For more on that go to www.viewthestory.com and read about knowing Christ by faith. But if you do, you have no excuse to be lazy either spiritually or physically, which is the point of this book.

Paul does not separate our bodies from the work of salvation he previously described. “Present your bodies,” he exhorts, adding the challenge for us to refuse the world’s seductive tendency to squeeze us into its mold, but instead to be transformed. And how are we to be continuously being transformed?

By the renewing of our minds.

Not by our experiences, or our community, or our physical efforts, although all of these have value. Our minds are key. It is in our minds where temptation begins that can flourish into a weedbed of sin. It is also in our minds where we can be increasingly conformed to the image of Christ.

Before we deal with the issue of the connection between our spiritual lives and our physical lives, lets look at how we also tend to underemphasize the importance of
intellectual growth as a part of our sanctification. We too often separate our minds from our “spiritual” experiences, and then from our bodies. So we can be passionate about our devotions while being negligent in our dining. We can sing zealously in a church service about loving God and then treat a server like dirt in the restaurant after the service. We can have our quiet times daily and yet loathe reading good books, which is vital to our growth as well.

Ignorance, especially a refusal to dispel ignorance through a disdain for learning, does not lead to godliness. Do you value spiritual growth while ignoring intellectual growth?

Years ago a commercial focusing on funds for minority colleges reminded us, “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” True that. But the other side is true as well—a mind is an incredible tool to develop.

The mind actually has a lot to do with so much in life more than just the knowledge we acquire. Recent research finds the mind plays a significant role when it comes to our physical health. Note the findings of psychiatrist Daniel Amen in his book *Change Your Brain, Change Your Body*:

I saw dramatic evidence of this a few years ago when I created a home study course for treating anxiety and depression. To test the course, we enlisted the help of ninety people to take part in the pilot program. The results were astounding. As I expected, most of the individuals experienced significant improvement in their levels of anxiety and depression. But that’s not all. A number of the people told us that by following the twelve-week program, they also lost twenty to thirty pounds. This surprising result showed us that when people help their brains, they help their bodies, and they were finally able to lose the weight they had been trying to shed for years.4

Researchers have known for years that exercising our bodies can help to overcome depression. I have read account after account of counselors who included consistent exercise as part of their work to help patients dealing with depression. One counselor observed that six weeks of exercise did more good than six months of therapy. Now, research in recent days shows us that exercising our minds can help our bodies overcome obesity as well.
In other words, holism trumps compartmentalization. Developing your mind, your spirit, and your body will have an impact on all of who you are.

What if we focused less on segmented parts of our day, like checking off a few spiritual activities while ignoring mental or physical growth, and instead sought to grow physically, mentally, and spiritually, valuing all of them as crucial and as interrelated? And, what if by doing this we have the compounded effect of growing in all three areas more substantially? Remember that Luke 2:52, the verse that describes our Lord from age 12 to age 30, says he “increased in wisdom and statue, and in favor with God and man.” Maybe that is why Paul said in I Thessalonians 5:23 “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We need a “through and through” view of discipleship.

What if we spent more time reading books and thus acquiring knowledge, and in prayer and Bible study developing our spiritual intimacy, and eating well and exercising to strengthen our bodies so we could do the first two things well?

I have met many believers who say the more focused they are physically, the more it helps them spiritually. And perhaps it works other ways as well: my appetite for learning can motivate me to be fit and to grow spiritually as well. Research seems to point that way.

After all, a mind is a terrible thing to waste.

**A Case Study in Physical and Intellectual Growth**

In his fascinating book *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* author Thomas Friedman decries how American students have fallen behind other nations in such fields as math and engineering. At the same time students in the U.S. have excelled at becoming couch potatoes: 65% of Americans are overweight, but this has become an epidemic among young people. “We are literally killing ourselves,” John Ratey says in his book *Spark*, adding, “What’s even more disturbing, and virtually no one recognizes, is that inactivity is killing our brains too—physically shriveling them.”

Enter the Naperville, Illinois, school district near Chicago. In this single district the 19K sophomores only 3% were overweight compared to 30% nationally. But the
students in this district are not only more fit. In 1999 their 8th graders took the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study test, an international standards test taken by 230K students globally. Ratey observes that in a time students in China, Japan, and Singapore rank consistently above American students, the Naperville class ranked 6th in math and FIRST in science.

What happened in this school district? Several factors, as one reason hardly ever explains such a remarkable performance. But one issue stands out: the beginning of school each day in Naperville called Zero Hour. Ratey observes:

“The essence of physical education in Naperville 203 is teaching fitness instead of sports. The underlying philosophy is that if physical education class can be used to instruct kids how to monitor and maintain their own health and fitness, then the lessons they learn will serve them for life.”

Imagine that, expecting young people to be responsible for developing their own fitness goals for a lifelong trajectory. Sounds rather like raising the bar to me. Someone should write a book on raising the bar for young people. Wait-I already did.

Ratey continues: “What’s being taught, really, is a lifestyle. The students are developing healthy habits, skills, and a sense of fun, along with a knowledge of how their bodies work.”

You mean you can teach young people that fun is not separate from learning responsibility? If so, maybe some of us adults could learn this also.

The Naperville school district ranks consistently in the top ten in Illinois even though the amount of money it spends per pupil is considerably lower than other top Illinois schools.

What has happened in Naperville did not begin with a brilliant educator with mensa-level IQ. It started with a PE teacher who read about the growing unhealthiness of American students. But you can read Ratey’s book to get the details, and I encourage you to do so.

For the Naperville students they no longer take gym classes with inane topics like learning the dimensions of a volleyball court. In the world of Google do we really need to teach students the dimensions of a volleyball court? They start with first period and heart rate monitors running a mile. What they discovered: learning is significantly enhanced by preceding it with exercise.
In other words, if you are looking for motivation for getting in shape, try this one: it could actually impact your ability to know and understand Scripture better. If you are a student struggling with academics, and sometimes discouraged or even depressed by your setbacks, try exercising. Get up, get active, start your day by getting your body going. Just do this for a while and see what happens. More studies than can be counted have noted the positive, ripple effect of exercise on dealing with depression, on eating better, on developing discipline, and on one’s general disposition.

Now we know that it also can directly affect academic performance. If you are serious about becoming better in your studies, about learning theology or understanding culture, about becoming more missional or simply growing in the knowledge of the grace of God in Christ, don’t start in the library at a desk with a stack of books, and don’t just add 10 minutes to the length of your quiet time--start at your home with some running shoes or a set of weights.

The Naperville School District discovered that exercise significantly enhanced learning.

The inverse is true as well—you will have to train your mind to push your body, to workout when you do not feel like it, to say no to bad foods or lazy patterns. But the more you take control over your mind, the more you will grow in confidence in your fitness, and in all of life.

As a result you can become far more healthy than you are just now. And you may discover you are smarter than you thought. And more spiritual.
Jeff Farmer’s Story

I pastor LifeTree Church in Hiram, GA and teach evangelism at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. In the mid 90s, I was in good shape, but I prioritized youth ministry and seminary over fitness. Over the years, I gained 130 pounds, topping out at 300 on January 1, 2010. I knew that I had to make serious changes or else I would not be around long. It affected my health, my ministry, and my self image. I prayed that day to get into shape spiritually, physically, mentally, financially and relationally. I set goals for each of these categories.

Spiritually, I would maintain consistent quiet time and exercise spiritual disciplines every day for the next 5 years. Physically, I would lose 130-140 pounds and run a marathon before I turned 40 (December 23, 2011). Mentally, I would learn a new language (Spanish) and learn to play an instrument (bagpipe) by January 2015. Financially, I would lead my family to living debt free by 2015. Finally, relationally, I would model a loving relationship with my wife to my two girls every day. I tell you these goals because that is one of the keys to my success. People need to hold me accountable.

I started out slow. Using the Couch to 5k program, I walked more than I ran until I was able to run a 5k without stopping. I changed my eating habits to include a healthy diet and no late night snacks. One day while running, I connected the dots – We always try to have immediate gratification only to pay a hefty price later. Physically, we eat what we want and enjoy life only to find that we are grossly overweight and out of shape. Financially, we spend on credit only to find we are deeply in debt. We neglect our families and our God for selfish reasons only to find strained relationships and stagnant faith. It is easier to invest the time and effort up front than it is to repair the damage done when we are selfish.

The results thus far have been positive. I have lost over 100 pounds and feel great. I ran the Marine Corps Marathon on October 30, 2011 and then the Long Cane 50k on May 6, 2012. My next goal is to run the Ironman before I turn 50. I find that big goals are my motivation. My relationship with my wife and kids is better now than it has ever been. We have paid off all our credit cards and are now working on our mortgage. I am getting better at Spanish (teaching in Caracas Venezuela in June) and I have started bagpipe lessons. Most importantly, I am experiencing a vibrancy in my walk with Christ beyond what I had ever imagined.

That is my story. My suggestions for success are:

1) Goal setting is important. Long term, mid range and short term.2) Tell people your goals. Just having others know your crazy plans will drive you to do it, but it also helps for a few to hold you accountable.3) Every part of your life is connected. Give it all to God and then work to improve yourself holistically.
3. The Good, the Bad, and the Opportunity Before You

Vince Lombardi famously stood before his players after an unexpected loss. “It is time to get back to basics,” he said, holding a football before them. “Gentlemen, this is a football.”

No matter where you are in your journey of life you should keep giving ruthless attention to familiar truth. Eat well. Exercise. Read your Bible. Pray. Laugh. Cry. Serve. Love. Sometimes the very complexity of our lives and the busyness of our schedule keeps us from focusing on the basics, with the result of becoming flabby spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, relationally, and physically.

Chris Guinn, an Alabama pastor, realized this. He admitted the bad, the ugly things in his life, and he changed. He saw an opportunity and he seized it. Here is his story:

I have lost 120 pounds. I did this through a program called Body4Believers. The health benefits have been significant in my life. When I got to 292 pounds I developed all sorts of physical issues. I began to pray for God to help me with whatever was going on in my life that was causing me to be the way I was. As I prayed I was reminded of 1 Cor. 6:19, and that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Ghost. I became convicted. I knew I had to change. Doing an online search of that verse I found Body4Believer, which happen to be written by a pastor who lived close by me. I called him and then met with him. I bought his book and started putting to practice what I was learning from this resource.

Body 4 Believers teaches you to eat real food in a way that you will get rid of unwanted fat while giving your body the nutrients needed to live energetically. This is really not a diet at all but a Nutritional Guide! I am eating more food than I ever ate and it is good food! Most diets get you to leave off at least one key nutrient that your body needs in order to lose weight and you will loose for a while but you can’t sustain it over a long period of time because your body has to have all essential nutrients. B4B teaches you how to get the protein, carbs and fat that you need but in a way that will set your metabolism on fire to burn unwanted fat.

The plan is Bible based and is now being taught in churches in our area as an evangelistic tool. A couple of weeks ago I was with Greg Locklear -- the pastor who put this plan together -- and we saw someone come to faith in Christ. I am preaching with more energy and passion, and I can now preach about crucifying the flesh without my people sitting there thinking I have been FEEDING the FLESH!
Chris had to have a “come to Jesus” moment. He got to the place where the need for change became greater than the cost he knew he must pay to change. But he was smart about it. He engaged his mind to find a resource that fit; he tied his physical change directly to his spiritual growth and his role as a leader of a congregation. And he changed.

You may simply make some minor changes at first. I eat far too quickly. I try (and sometimes I still fail) to chew every bite 30 times. Slowing down when we eat helps us to eat less. Lead developer of Wordpress, Matt Mullenweg, lost 18 pounds with one change: chewing each mouthful of food 20 times.

We have to be honest with ourselves before we can change. We need to take an inventory. Please note: this could be a rude awakening for you. It was for me. I did not realize how out of shape and overweight I was until I computed my Body Mass Index or BMI. You can easily do this online at numerous sites such as this one: http://www.bmi-calculator.net/. Face the truth squarely.

Most fitness plans encourage you to take before pictures, measurements, and so on. All these can help to encourage you as you track your progress. Calculating your body fat percentage and other details can help as well.

Using online tools to compute your BMI can also help you to compute your Basal Metabolic Rate or your BMR. But you need to have a serious, defined the relationship) discussion with you and your eating. Then you can begin the journey toward wellness.

David Mills of Morehead City, North Carolina, had been a student pastor 15 years but would not take off his shirt at the pool with his students because of his embarrassment at his weight. He got sick and tired of this and began working out. He lost 45 pounds. One day he carried his daughter who weighed 42 pounds at the time. “I hadn’t had the energy to do anything like that in years,” he said, adding, “After an hour when I started to get tired it hit me; that’s how much weight I had lost! It feels great to be in shape and it has changed the effectiveness of my ministry.”
Here is the bottom line: If you eat 3500 calories less per week right now, you will lose a pound a week. For me, that means if I continue to work out rigorously 3-4 times a week, I can eat around 2200 calories a day and lose weight.

**The Negative Reality: Too Many of Us Are Fat**

I would always rather encourage than criticize. This is especially true when speaking to my friends and co-laborers who serve as ministers of the gospel. We are fallen and more often than not we also need to be challenged in areas where we need to be changed. I hope the following will be seen as an encouragement more than the words of a cynic. But the subject I am addressing has become an epidemic among ministers in the West.

If you are reading this and you are a minister, especially a Baptist one, I can predict something about you whether I have met you personally or not. Actually a few things:

--You are almost likely overweight. If you are that rare soul like my colleague Bruce Ashford and look like you need an IV to make it through the day (just kidding Bruce), you are overweight. See tests results above.

--If I am right, you are FAT. I was fat. I am still a bit overweight. But if we like desserts more than devotion and junk food more than disciple making, we have a problem.

Look at our churches. We serve donuts and pastries Sunday mornings. We serve pizza to our students. If we put the dietary standards given to public school cafeterias we would fail. And more than that, eating junk food in our churches has almost become like a religion. Just try organizing a Sunday morning snack table with only healthy food: fruits, yogurt, no bread or sweets. You will be treated like an infidel, an unbeliever, because you do not follow the religion of sweetness.

Maybe I am exaggerating; you can decide. But the statistics are everywhere and they point to a failure of the gospel of sacrifice and cross bearing to have any real bearing on what we eat, and thus on our lives in general.

I had to face the ugly word that I had been able to avoid as a youth: FAT.

If I am right and you are fat, you are likely also mad at me for writing this. Be
careful, because being fat and angry has “stroke” written all over it. Okay, weak attempt at humor.

I apologize for sounding like a jerk. Full disclosure: I still have 10-15 pounds I should lose myself. I am on a lifelong journey, but for some of us (like me) a jolt to our view of reality is needed to move us to change.

Let’s be clear. I am with you. The folks whose stories I am telling will tell you it is still a battle at times. But it is a winnable battle! Yes, I have lost around 40 pounds, had to buy new pants and belts, and found suits I can wear that wouldn’t fit for a decade. But I am still a work in process.

But let’s stop excusing ourselves and grow up and be men, can we? (Or women if you are female). We have too much junk in the trunk and too much love for foods that are slowly killing us. Ministers are shepherds of the flock of God; is setting an example for those we lead of any importance to us at all? We can be angry at those rare preachers who have the metabolism of a field mouse or those who seem to have hours a day to lift weights while we are busy in ministry. But the truth is we have time to do what matters, and our health matters.

I realize Paul said bodily discipline is of little profit compared to godliness, but he did not say it is of no importance. He also charged us to discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness.

Why does this matter?

--Americans ate 4 pounds of cheese in 1909 and 32 in 2000, mostly in pizza (pizza is not a health food).

--5% of youth and children were obese in 1971, 17% are now. That is not a healthy trend.

--We ate 41 lbs of fats/oils in 1909 per person, and 79 in 2000. Almost double. Can anyone say McDonald’s?

--Our children by some reports have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. Not a small reason for this is the food, the junk we consume.

--We have national standards for dog food but many school districts (and a ton of “Christian” private schools) have no health standards for their meals.

--Some nutritionists call the South, which some still call the Bible Belt, the Stroke Belt because of the obesity rates.
A few suggestions:

--Stop joking about how fat you and other preachers are. The Bible warns against gluttony, so enough with the mocking of Scripture.

--Shop at the edge of the grocery store where the food God made is found and less in the middle aisles where we fouled God’s food up with our processing.

--Stop eating junk food. Imagine French fries more as a slow working poison and less as a temporary taste teaser. Or worse, as yet one more example of a self-indulgent culture obsessed with immediate satisfaction while ignoring long term (and eternal) matters.

--Try this: get a book bag. Put 20-25 pounds of weights in it. Carry it wherever you go for a week. Then remember the feeling next time you want to eat a super sized candy bar or a big bag of chips in one setting.

--See your food intake as a part of your spiritual discipline. Remember what the Bible says, “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.” Let’s be honest; the more we value doing the right thing in all of life the more we will value doing right in the most important areas of life. Diet and exercise are NOT of greatest importance, but too many of us act as though it does not matter.

--Get moving. First, go see your doctor. Ask him to be very honest with you. Ask him for help. I have talked to too many people in the healthcare profession who do not understand the disconnect between a “man of God” who also lacks discipline in the most fundamental areas of life.

--Get a partner. Get someone who is not a quitter.

--Finally, if you are young and in decent shape, be aware of how quickly you can get yourself in a hole in terms of your health. See a close, holistic connection between your physical life and your spiritual life, and resist compartmentalizing your spirituality from everything else.

I will never see fitness quite the same as I once did. I will never not exercise. I have been bought with a price and I want to glorify God with my body.

I fear our proclivity to lift a fork more than a good book and to stop for fast food more than a quiet time will lead more than a few of us to both physical and spiritual disaster. We do not have to become elite athletes, but we should not be a couch potato either, should we?
There is a growing, national movement of healthier eating. We who follow Christ, who understand the Imago Dei and the call to glorify God, should be leading the way in demonstrating how following Christ changes everything, how Jesus makes all things new.

Including the number on our bathroom scales.

Okay, that was painful. I would rather encourage you to do well than point out your (or my) failures. We can change. We can see our lives, all of our lives, reflect the wonder of gospel change. Let’s get positive, starting with a very positive story about a professor named Mark Rathel, as reported in the *Florida Baptist Witness*. 
Mark Rathel’s Story

Eighteen months ago Baptist College of Florida Professor Mark Rathel embarked on a life change that has resulted in a 180 pound weight loss. For Rathel, who also writes Bible study commentaries for Florida Baptist Witness, it was a matter of “living out the Lordship of Christ.” Rathel grew up in Niceville enjoying his mother’s cooking, especially the desserts. He does not remember a time when he was not “heavy,” and his family—including two adult sons—“have never seen me skinny,” he said. His past busy life in pastoral ministry contributed to a sedentary lifestyle.

“At times a pastor may focus on meeting the needs of others rather than his own needs,” he said.

Not wanting to hear what a doctor might say about his physical condition, he shied away from annual physical exams. His first physical was in July 2010, when he was 52. Rathel said he was surprised to learn that he was pre-diabetic, with a high triglyceride count and borderline high blood pressure. He started to lose weight slowly, until a situation arose that forced a faster weight loss.

In December 2010 while making preparations to teach a “J-term” class during which he was required to drive his students to New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Rathel underwent another physical exam at Florida Department of Transportation to be permitted to drive a passenger bus. He did not pass the test because of high blood pressure.

“I didn’t know what I was going to do. There was no plan B,” he said.

Over Christmas break, the veteran professor increased his daily exercise and lost 13 pounds. Rathel passed the second physical exam just before the January class began. He also decided to “major on” weight loss in 2011.

His food choices changed to lean protein, fruit and vegetables, with no desserts. He purchased an elliptical exercise machine and re-ordered his daily schedule to include 90 minutes of exercise—30 minutes on the elliptical in the morning, and one hour of “strength training” every evening.

Rathel’s wife, Angela, became an ally in his quest after patiently waiting and praying for her husband to make up his own mind to lose weight, he said. She prepares healthy food, and the couple exercise together, he said.

“I’ve discovered that healthy food is better,” he said.

To bolster his personal revival of body and soul, the professor of theology and philosophy memorized Scripture on gluttony, especially Romans 16 and Philippians 3 in which Paul warns of false teachers who are slaves of their appetites. The word translated “appetite” is the Greek word for “belly,” he explained.

“There was a sense in which my appetite was an idol for me. I was not living out my witness in this area,” he said.

Rathel said he joked in the past that gluttony is the “besetting sin of Baptists, that I exemplified,” but now he considers it no joke, and he applauds churches that provide

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accountability groups for those struggling with weight.

“It is really a matter of Lordship,” he said.

His new schedule gives him more time for Bible study and prayer since he found that “discipline in one area leads to discipline in other areas as well.”

“I don’t doze off when I’m reading now,” he said.

Without 180 pounds of extra weight, Rathel’s latest blood work shows his sugar level, triglycerides and blood pressure in a normal range. He has noticed other changes, as well. Accustomed to carrying a “sweat rag” with him to the pulpit, Rathel now finds he can preach without it. His joints no longer hurt after standing before classes most of the day, and his energy level has increased, although he said he now gets cold after losing so much “insulation.”

“I discovered I have a tailbone, and that stadium seats are uncomfortable,” the Florida State University season ticket holder said with a chuckle.

Although Rathel made no formal announcement at BCF about his decision to lose weight, the dramatic changes are evident to his students and others, he said. When students decided to form a healthy choice club, they asked him to lead as faculty mentor. Their request proved to the professor that his weight loss has made an impact on campus, and he is grateful for their encouragement.

“I want to encourage others who have this on-going problem. If God can help me in this matter, God can do it for anyone. I could not do it without the Lord,” he said. “It is a day by day process and you can’t get overwhelmed by your goal. You have to focus on today.”
4. The Positive Perspective: Indulge in Discipline

What if families valued health together? One researcher argues that this matters a lot:

In a remarkable study that was published in a 2006 issue of Pediatrics, researchers found that compared to teens who watch a lot of TV, those who take part in a wide variety of physical activities are less likely to engage in risky behavior, such as drinking, smoking, drugs, violence, sex, and delinquency. This fascinating study also revealed that teens who participated in physical activities with their parents were the least likely to get into trouble with such behavior. These teens also tended to have higher self-esteem than both sedentary teens and active adolescents who didn’t exercise or play sports with their parents.\(^8\)

We can change. And if you have children at home, they can help to motivate you to change. But believing you can change has a lot to do with the change. And seeing the impact of change builds increasing belief in success, as Illinois student pastor John Howard attests. John actually worked out so hard he became too thin (I had to include a word for you folks, because you are out there!). He has found the fitness place he wants to be, and in the process has combined other areas of discipline:

I average 2 hours of elliptical running 6 days a week (5-7 AM each morning) and 1 hour of weight lifting (on my lunch hours). I learned that I could read a kindle while running on the elliptical. Now I have graduated to an Ipad but still use the kindle app. Each morning on my run, I study Scripture for 45 mins, then read a chapter or two of various books. Finally, I check out news, sports, etc. This routine has benefited my spiritual growth (more time in Bible study using Kindle books and the Logos app). I am able to get all of my D.Min reading done. I am able to study for Bible studies and sermons. And I stay in tremendous shape. This discipline keeps me disciplined in my spiritual life. I understand hard work and persistence and it carries over into all areas of my life.

As I reflect on my journey, here are a few observations...
--In November 2009 I began keeping track of all the miles I have run (via an iphone app). From 11/25/09 through today I have ran 5,816.84 miles. (Just this morning I did an extra long elliptical run...of 3 hours=13.51 miles.
--I have read through the Bible 6 times (2 chronologically, 1 through the ESV study Bible, 1 through the HCSB study Bible, 1 in NKJV, and 1 in NASB).
--I have read 86 books.
It has been transformational both physically and in my spiritual life.
Sometime just write down what you might accomplish if you were in better shape. For me it was as simple as not wanting to be totally useless in my 60s and 70s. As I mentioned earlier, we can change our mindset. The truth is the things you struggle with now can be changed. I cannot imagine a week going by ever again without exercising, for instance. And although I definitely “cheat” some on my diet, the idea of taking a week to splurge on huge amounts of pizza, French fries, and ice cream actually makes me ill. I have the occasional hamburger and candy bar, but they are rare, and far less satisfying than I once thought they were. I have found foods, like Greek yogurt, that satisfy my sweet tooth and give me nutritional value. I have discovered, and you can too, that discipline can actually become an indulgence.

One of the ways the Fall and the brokenness caused by sin reveals itself in our lives is the tendency to want things that actually do us no good, or at least only temporary “good.” Think of your favorite food: most of us do not think of salads or fresh vegetables as tasty with nearly as much relish (pardon the pun) of ice cream, chocolate, or fried foods. We would generally rather sit on the couch than get up and exercise. We would rather do a “quickie” quiet time than devote ourselves to intentional, deep study of Scripture. And, we would certainly rather chill with fellow believers than invest in relationships with the lost.

What if we saw things differently? What if we approached life from a truly biblical worldview, in which we gave ourselves to value the things of God and the things that brought glory to God? Certainly we want that. But the flesh is strong, and I know my own carnality craves comfort over sacrifice, pleasure over pain, and security over risk. I love serving Jesus when it is easy, when the wind is at my back and circumstances bring me joy. But what if I valued things that did not naturally please my flesh?

After all, Jesus said to rejoice and be exceedingly glad when we face persecution and derision for the Name (see Matthew 5). That does not come as easily as getting fat comes with middle age. It requires a constant change of mindset.

For me, the plan I followed (Power90 followed by P90X), I found conviction (hitting 50 and becoming sick and tired of being sick and tired), and I found a perspective (I quit using an artificial hip and middle age as an excuse). Now, much lighter and in a lot better shape, I have found something else.
I am learning to indulge in discipline. There is one other thing that helped to bring this about: I started exercising regularly with students. I LOVE students. I love mentoring, teaching, hanging out with students, more than anything on earth other than my family (and my son is also my student!). For a couple of years, on Monday-Wednesday-Friday mornings, I met with around 20-30 guys and gals to sweat, work, and push one another.

Too many ministers value the buffet line more than the finish line.

George Whitefield (among others) said he would rather burn out than rust out. I do not want to do either. And I certainly do not want to see overpaid athletes with the motivation of a consumer, or undertalented rock stars with their lust for the stage and the roar of the crowd, fulfill their task with greater zeal than I do when I serve the most high God and have all the riches of heaven ahead of me. Maybe that is why some in ministry are also so caught up in consumerism and opportunism, because we value possession and position far more than we value discipline -- and discipleship. The two words do seem eerily similar do they not?

Can one really be a disciple without discipline? Ask yourself how much you value discipline. Then ask yourself how much you value Jesus. No, we do not earn salvation or God’s favor. But Paul did tell Timothy to discipline himself for the purpose of godliness. What greater way can I show my gratitude to my Savior than to serve Him with all the drive of my life?

Take the dive. Indulge. Indulge with ferocity, in discipline.

Discipline Begets Discipline

If you will indulge in discipline you will learn that discipline leads to more discipline, that you can change your mind and learn to love exercise and the positive benefits of it and of proper diet. You will learn the difference between making excuses to fail versus finding reasons to succeed. For a long time, my fake hip and inability to run, along with my sedentary lifestyle and dining out practices due to my travel, all formed the perfect storm of excuses as to why I would end up as just one more fat Baptist preacher.

But I decided to turn my excuses into reasons. Instead of using my hip as an excuse, it became motivation. It really helped when I put in the P90X Plyometrics video
the first time and watch a man jump-train with a prosthetic leg. That will mess with your mind! I decided to become the best-in-shape seminary professor with a fake hip. I began to focus on what I could do instead of obsessing over what had been taken from me. I began to see eating out as a challenge to learn how to beat the system and eat healthier (hint: apps on my phone really help). I began to schedule time to exercise and protect that time ruthlessly.

I may never become all I could be, but I will never go back to what I was. And I am reminded every time I want to skip counting calories, every time I am tempted to ignore a workout, that I have come too far to go back to what I was. And that I am a disciple of Jesus, which includes discipline.

Andrew Herbert, Chief of Staff at Criswell College in Dallas, also learned the lesson that discipline can be joy. Here is his story:

I came to Criswell College in 2005 and began studying full-time, serving bi-vocationally at a church, and working at the college. During this time, it was difficult to find time to work out and eat well. By 2008, I had gained nearly fifty pounds (from 155-200lbs), wasn’t exercising, and was eating whatever was fast and could keep me going in my busy schedule. There were days when I was having 6-7 Mountain Dews a day just to stay awake. After making some minor changes here and there, by 2011 I decided that I wasn’t being a good steward of my body.

I started a strict exercise regimen and weight loss program, more or less following the Slim4Life diet. I began eating well, drinking a lot of water, walking every day, then running, then running a lot. In a matter of four months, I dropped from 200lbs to 160lbs and was running 5-8 miles every other day, doing 600 crunches, and weightlifting on off days. I got in the best shape of my life and it really improved my quality of life. In addition to just feeling better, it really maximized my time. I was able to think more clearly, stay awake and alert without soft drinks, remain energetic throughout the day, etc. My blood pressure came back to normal, my weight came under control, and I found that even my walk with Christ improved as the physical discipline I was showing began to characterize a more faithful spiritual discipline as well.

I feel it is important both to my own health, my family, and my ministry to maintain discipline and continue to stay fit.

You are so right, Andrew. It is important. For all of us.

**Discipline by Subtraction: The Role of Margin**

What if I don’t have time to workout, or to learn to eat better, you may ask. That could be another ebook in itself, but a full book has already been written on the subject. If you find yourself overwhelmed at the thought of adding anything else to your life (even if it means subtracting excess weight), you should get the book Margin by Dr.
Richard Swenson. It has had a massive impact on my life the past three months since I first read it. Here is a little of what he says:

Margin is the space between our load and our limits. It is the amount allowed beyond that which is needed. It is something held in reserve for contingencies or unanticipated situations. Margin is the gap between rest and exhaustion, the space between breathing freely and suffocating. Margin is the opposite of overload. If we are overloaded we have no margin. Most people are not quite sure when they pass from margin to overload. Threshold points are not easily measurable and are also different for different people in different circumstances.

We don’t want to be under-achievers (heaven forbid!), so we fill our schedules uncritically. Options are as attractive as they are numerous, and we overbook. If we were equipped with a flashing light to indicate “100 percent full,” we could better gauge our capacities. But we don’t have such an indicator light, and we don’t know when we have overextended until we feel the pain. As a result, many people commit to a 120 percent life and wonder why the burden feels so heavy. It is rare to see a life prescheduled to only 80 percent, leaving a margin for responding to the unexpected that God sends our way.⁹

Before you begin making dramatic changes in exercise and diet, take a little time to evaluate your schedule. When I first got serious about exercising I literally had to calendar every single day, an hour a day, which meant on some days making hard choices. But I do not regret it, and I thank God for the way exercising has helped to make me rethink priorities in general.
Jon Glass’s Story

My former student and 35 year-old pastor Jon Glass went on the South Beach Diet 6 years ago. He wrote: “At the time, I weighed 218 lbs. (I am 5’ 8”). My weight had slowly been increasing and I knew I needed to do something. For 2 weeks, I ate no carbs. No fruit, no sweeteners, no bread, etc. I lost about 10 lbs. those 2 weeks. I was encouraged after just the 2nd day. I had good, steady, energy all day long. No more struggle to stay awake at 2 in the afternoon. This was enough motivation to keep going. After 2 weeks, I slowly added good carbs back into my diet. After about 6 months I was down to 165 lbs. I felt the best I had in years. During those months I did some light cardio workouts at the gym, maybe twice a week.

6 years later I weigh 172 lbs. I go to the gym more frequently and have added work with free weights. I have gained some muscle mass and continue to lose body fat. In my diet, I still avoid most sugars. We eat a lot of whole grain bread and pasta. Once I made the commitment to eating differently, it has been an easy process. When we go on vacation or around holidays, I determine that I will eat what I want, but then return to good habits after vacation, etc. It has worked well for me. I didn’t feel like I was ‘cheating’ since I planned ahead of time what my eating habits would be. I used to get discouraged in dieting because I felt like it was too easy to fail. It has worked for me to have a plan and stick to it. My plan happens to include ‘cheating’. In fact, I still have ice cream about 3 or 4 nights a week. I just get the sugar free ice cream now. I don’t feel like I am missing anything.

When I was 30, I figured I had to take control of my weight. As a pastor, it could easily get out of control. I realized that if I only gained 1 pound a month, after 5 years that would amount to 50 lbs!! 30 years in ministry, and that could really add up. I never thought I could be successful with a diet. But having a plan has really made the difference for me. For anyone who endeavors to do this, I would encourage with this. Once you lose the first few pounds you will feel much, much better. This can be the motivation to continue.”
5. You Need a Plan

“There is nothing wrong with change, if it is in the right direction.” Winston Churchill
“A year from now you will wish you had started today.” Karen Lamb

If you have gotten to this page and are ready to change, or are motivated to continue on the path of change you started, or even if you feel overwhelmed and are still unsure of how to get started, we now become really practical. Here is how change happens.

When it is time to change in a way that costs us, three things must happen. **First, we need to understand rationally the need to change.** Our minds must see the need to change. Information does not always lead to transformation. Smokers who know they need to quit normally do not, for instance. Just because a believer knows he or she should witness simply will not automatically lead to an evangelistic lifestyle. But we do need such information. When the pain of the status quo is less than the cost of change, you are ready to get after it. I knew I was dishonoring God to settle for being 40 plus pounds overweight and making excuses. I was ready to change. When my dad saw our son and his grandson copying him as he smoked, my dad was so wounded by his bad example that he changed. It was a brutally hard process, but he has not smoked in over a decade and a half now.

Director of Missions Mike O’Dell’s health got his attention because of his Doctor’s warning. At 58 years of age Mike weighed 306 pounds:

*My Doctor told me I was pre-diabetic and he was going to put me on diabetic meds if I didn’t lose weight! All I could think of were all of those people I have ministered to over the years who died from diabetes complications! I decided to live! So I went on a low carb diet with almost no sugar and started walking 30 minutes three times a week and lifting weights three days a week. I have lost 46lbs and 4 inches on my waist and feel better than I have felt in 20 years! My goal is to lose another 45 lbs over the next 12 months.*

**Second, to change when change is hard, we need a compelling vision.** The vision must be big, requiring serious commitment. The Harvard School of Business calls this a BHAG, or Big Hairy Audacious Goal. Look at the calendar. Add a
year to the date: if today is June 30, 2012, write down June 30, 2013. Where would you like to be then? If you have a long way to go to get in shape you need a long-term, lifestyle change, not a quick fix. I wanted to change my lifestyle more than my waistline, and I have. We need to see the great impact such a change would make, a glimpse of the future, a ray of hope. When the pain of change is less than the pain of the status quo, we will change.

I got the compelling vision when I bought a Kindle and on the first day I played with it, bought a book I saw there called *Reclaim Your Youth*. Written by a man older than me who got in great shape later in life, he offered no quick fixes, but a whole lot of hope. I have never been afraid to work hard if I had hope for success. So I began to get a vision for serving Christ well into my 70s and beyond, and having more energy in my 50s as well.

But I would argue we still need one thing more. Yes, we need to see that we must change. We also need a vision big enough to require genuine commitment, but one that offers hope.

**Third, we need short term wins to keep the vision alive.**

Peter knew intellectually that the gospel was for all. Yet when it came to Gentiles, he needed a compelling vision to see clearly they could receive the same gospel the Jews received. He got it, a real vision in fact, as we read in Acts 10. Rationally, he knew the Great Commission was for all. Then he received a compelling vision that he should not consider unclean those God considered clean. But then, he had a short term “win” in the form of Cornelius, a Gentile Peter led to Christ.

I would submit when it comes to radical change we need the same. And that is where P90X comes into my story. I had started exercising. I had lost some weight, the easiest pounds. But I knew I needed something more. Further, I had come to the place where I pretty much knew somewhat how to preach a sermon, teach a class, write a book, and so on. But I knew I needed a challenge, something that would kick my tail.

P90X is the most intense, sweat-inducing, body-pushing, tail-kicking workout I had seen since August two-a-days in high school football in Alabama. I **knew rationally** I needed to change. I saw a **compelling vision** that if I got in shape, it
would give me a much greater ability to minister effectively in my best years of influence (post 50). And P90X gave me the ability to have **short term wins**.

Soon is not a time. Soon is not a number. I needed a short-term confidence builder. P90X lasts 90 days. I can do that, I thought. So I did.

Okay, the first several weeks were brutal. I could not actually do all the workouts until about week 9. I had to skip plyometrics for a while because of my fake hip. But during the 90 days what happened (no, I am not showing pictures!)?

I lost another 12 pounds on top of the “easier” 16-18 I had lost during the Power90 stage.

I feel better than I have in many years.

My artificial hip is changed. I can jump now. At one point our daughter Hannah commented that she saw me jump for the first time she can remember.

I am greatly encouraged to be disciplined in others areas, including those much more important than physical matters. I have thought long and hard about my travel schedule, my local church, and more than any, my family, followed by my students. This fall I will be making some sweeping changes in these areas thanks in no small part to the ability to make such changes physically.

I have more motivation and conviction regarding change in the Western church, and in particular my own tradition in the Southern Baptist Convention. We as a convention look in my opinion a lot like I did six months ago: a bit flabby, a bit satisfied, in need of refocusing and in desperate need of discipline about things that matter. If only there were a P90X for a denomination.

More than anything, I have found a way to continue to work to be in shape for the rest of my life.

For me, P90 and then P90X gave me substantial short-term wins to keep me going. That is what I had been missing in earlier attempts to get in shape. But there are other resources that can help. If you can run, for instance, you may like Nathaniel’s story:

*About 2 months ago my wife and I started a couch to 10k program that we downloaded to our iPhones. The program started out very easy and is getting progressively more challenging. It started by having us walk for 4.5 minutes and run for 1/2 a minute. We are about halfway through and now run for 5 minutes and walk for 1. Considering how challenging running was for both of us, this has been an awesome program because it has eased us into a*
workout program at a rate that we could feasibly do together. I will list below several benefits that it has afforded both of us.

- We both feel much better now that we are exercising more. I have noticed less allergies and congestion and feel less tired throughout the day. Not to mention, I have lost about 5 pounds.
- It has been great for our marriage. Running together gives us quality time together. Even though we don't talk much while we are running, mainly because we don't want to waste any breath, we have a mutual goal and are accomplishing it together. Even when we run separately, our mutual commitment to running helps us challenge each other and hold each other accountable. Our successes have been mutual successes, which is awesome. It has really helped us become partners in this area of our lives.
- It has been great for my spiritual life/education. I listen to podcasts and books on tape. It gives me about 3 hours a week where I can multi-task. I have listened to several SEBTS chapel messages, some of them several times. I have also been able to listen to Knowing God by Packer and Desiring God by Piper. It has been fun to combine physical training and spiritual training in this way.
- The Nike+ app allows us to store all of our runs online to track our stats and challenge our old records. This has actually made running much more fun for me. While I haven't loved running in the past, I have always enjoyed being competitive, even if I am just competing with myself. This has been pretty fun.

Here is a link to the “Couch to 10K” app.  http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/run-10k/id350529744?mt=8

We also use the Nike+ app, which I love. Had I found it first, I might not have bought the 10k app because it seems to do everything the 10k app does and more. However, I will say that the couch to 10k app has a much easier interface. Here is the link to that app - http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/nike+-gps/id387771637?mt=8

I love the fact that I took on a challenge and did not fail at it. I have too many times started something only to fail in finishing well. I want that not to be said of my life. Or of my family, my students, my seminary, or my convention.

I challenge you: in some area of your life where you KNOW you must change, consider this:

-Think rationally about what and how you should change. Get the facts.
-Ask God for a compelling vision to show you the remarkable impact of such change.
-Set a short-term win before you. Set a specific time. And be encouraged.

I can tell you now, every ounce of sweat was worth it. And it will be for you as well.
Linda’s Story

Nearly everyone who wrote me their story was a guy. But for any ladies reading this, here is a story from Linda Connelly to encourage you as well:

I have always used food as a source of comfort, self diagnosed as an emotional eater and definite binge eater. Having a bad day or few days and I would turn to food, greasy, heavy and always, always sweets. In fact desert was my biggest obsession, what will I have for dessert, did I need to stop on my way home to get it? Fantasizing about the food I would consume, planning out what to eat. Feeling too full momentarily dulled the pain I did not want to face.

Becoming a Christian did not fix this right away, slowly in my first few years as a believer the desire to binge went away. I still turned to food on my worse days, searching the pantry for anything to munch on out of boredom, lying to myself that it was alright to have two triple scoops ice cream cones was just fine because it was low fat. This pattern of self-destruction would have continued if God had not intervened.

Then on January first of this year (2012), God placed someone in my life that has significantly changed the path I was on. On Sunday mornings I serve as stage director, which means a very early morning. I need coffee, especially on very early mornings. On this day I went to Dunkin Donuts, instead of getting my usual bagel and coffee combo, I ordered the combo with a muffin. The only reason was it was cheaper. That muffin was huge, I basically begged everyone setting up to help me eat it.

That afternoon I received a message through face book from my friend Simon at church, offering to help me get healthy. He had helped his friend Josh makes weight for the army and he could if I wanted, to personal train me. This was huge; I had been trying for months to find someone to work out with, needing accountability. After meeting at Starbucks to discuss it we began meeting up the next at a park to workout. Surprising myself I kept showing up, cutting out ninety percent of the sugar I usually consume, not eating past seven pm. I began to lose a significant amount of weight.

Only through the strength of the Holy Spirit have I gotten as far as I have, losing nearly 70 pounds since January. During the course of these months I have become a runner, running up four to five miles a day (whether or not my friend is there). I also use a stationary bike for twenty to thirty minutes in the morning and up to forty five minutes in the evenings. The benefits have been amazing, I am far less irritable, and have so much more energy. Best of all when I sleep, it is a far better rest than before.

Besides the physical changes, God has shown me so much through this process. Learning how not to give up, remembering the rewards that await me once I finish. The thing that excites me now is how God plans on using me now that I have gotten healthy. Taking care of this body in this life will have far reaching effects for life on the new Earth. I still have my days when I want to seek comfort in food, and so far I have been strong in not giving in to those desires. This will be part of my life long struggle but not something I use as an excuse to not be healthy. This fall I hope to Lord willing to run in my first half marathon.
6. 90 Days Can Change Your Life

“Don’t say you don’t have enough time. You have exactly the same number of hours per day that were given to Helen Keller, Pasteur, Michaelangelo, Mother Teresa, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Jefferson, and Albert Einstein.” – Life’s Little Instruction Book

“How do you become more productive?” Richard Branson leaned back and thought for a second. The tropical sounds of his private oasis, Necker Island, murmured in the background. Twenty people sat around him at rapt attention, wondering what a billionaire’s answer would be to one of the big questions—perhaps the biggest question—of business. The group had been assembled by marketing impresario Joe Polish to brainstorm growth options for Richard’s philanthropic Virgin Unite. It was one of his many new ambitious projects. Virgin Group already had more than 300 companies, more than 50,000 employees, and $25 billion per year in revenue. In other words, Branson had personally built an empire larger than the GDP of some developing countries. Then he broke the silence: “Work out.” He was serious and elaborated: working out gave him at least four additional hours of productive time every day.10

In the New Testament we read on numerous occasions a comparison between one’s physical life and discipline on one hand and one’s spiritual condition on the other. In I Corinthians 9, for instance, Paul explained how he disciplined his body as an athlete so as not to be disqualified (see verses 24-27). In I Timothy 4:7-8 Paul told Timothy to train (discipline) himself for godliness, arguing bodily discipline is of some use. And, Paul used the analogy of an athlete in II Timothy 2:5, and of a marathon runner in Philippians 3:14. Paul saw no gaping chasm between one’s physical life and one’s spiritual condition.

Question: what is one area in your life that keeps you from running hard after Christ?

We recently had a 30 day challenge to fitness on our campus. One young man lost 10 pounds, others had similar yet varying results. We are told it takes 21 days to form a habit, and one can see change physically, spiritually, or in other areas in 30 days.
But 90 days has become for me the new ideal. P90X, and its predecessor Power90, convinced me of this. In 90 days you can see demonstrable change, and change that actually can affect your long term trajectory.

Note: If you are middle aged especially, get a physical. Let me say this again: GET A PHYSICAL.

Make sure all is functioning before starting something grueling. And when you do start, do not overdo it the first week or two (also known as the Sin of the Dumb Young Guy). If you are not in very good shape, stay away from P90X and by all means avoid P90X2. Get Power90, the thing I used for 90 days before doing P90X. Or just start walking. Then running. Most people, especially those middle aged or older, will never need anything more strenuous than Power90. You will only become discouraged if you try P90X unprepared. Far more have started P90X than have ever completed it. There are other training approaches such as Crossfit or Insanity, to name a couple.

That being said, whatever workout you use, remember two vital things: 1) You must also reshape your DIET. These workouts all include diet helps. It is far better to learn to say no to unhealthy foods than to work them off after gorging on them. 2) When starting out it is fine and typical not to finish the whole workout. The key is getting through the 90 days, not fizzling out the first week because you tried to keep up with the elite athletes on the DVD.

So what should you do? Start exercising NOW. Get a program: Power90, P90X, etc.

Across the nation more and more realize the need to be focused both spiritually and physically. Join that movement! You just might be amazed at the energy you have as a result. I just finished a 3 state run in just over 5 days where I spoke 14 times. And I feel great! I can tell I am so much more healthy today than three years ago.

But wait a minute you may say: I cannot afford P90X or Crossfit or these other programs. What do I do. Try this: you can follow the “beasts of workout” program I did with our students three days a week and believe me, you will get fit, if you do it three days a week and do some form of cardio at least a couple of others days. And cut the fat and eat more protein and veggies. Here is the link to the FREE video: http://alvinreid.com/archives/2125. Note: there are four sets, so if you are just starting only do two sets at first, or three. Then increase as you get stronger.
I want to help men of God my age and older who are terribly out of shape get started and rescue their latter years for Christ. I want to push young men who are often better at quitting than ministering to learn the value of discipline, perseverance, and self-control. I want to continue to encourage ladies and men to learn the value of sacrifice and selling out because doing so physically can also encourage us to stretch our faith as well.

Of all the stories I have used here and those I have not, the two things that remain constant in those who made lasting changes: 1) they began to track their diet, most with a phone app, 2) they began some kind of workout that they would actually do with consistency. Do these two things for one year and then email me. I promise you will be glad at the change!

One of the most significant things I have done in my life the past decade is to start working out. This includes the practical reality that I needed a program fitted to my schedule. DVDs and exercise bands can be taken on the road as I travel. You may need the accountability of going to a gym; for me that is just one more burden to add to a busy schedule. I can work out just fine in my house or my hotel room.

We have one life to live. Just one. Why would we not do all we can to the glory of God to live for him? I just finished a grueling week of travel, speaking, and teaching. And I feel great, not exhausted at all. Why? Because for three years I have been working out. Where could you be in three years?

Maybe it is time to find out.
Your Story Right Here

After each chapter so far I have included a story. Fast forward one year. If you began today to change, to be serious about your physical discipline as well as your spiritual discipline, what would your story be? Take a few minutes to jot down what you wish your fitness story would be one year from now. Send it to me if you like at areid@sebts.edu. You be the next story of change.
CONCLUSION

“Nobody can go back and start a new beginning, but anyone can start today and make a new ending.” - Maria Robinson

“Everyone wants to change the world, but no one wants to change himself.” - Tolstoy

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” - Lao-Tzu

Okay, there is one more thing I have to reiterate. Be accountable to others on your journey. As a professor, once I stood up and said (and tweeted) that I was doing P90X, I had no choice. Throw up, yes. Learn to eat a lot more protein, sure. Sweat and want to find a reason not to go on, you bet. But quit, never. I have never known a student to be inspired by someone who made a commitment he did not keep. We need accountability, like Trevor.

Trevor made an agreement with a coworker: they would go to the gym together three times per week, and if either of them missed a session, that person had to pay the other $1. In his first gym visit, Trevor walked for four minutes on the treadmill. Not long thereafter, he ran a mile for the first time since fourth grade. Now he has run two half-marathons. It’s not the $1 that matters (Trevor does quite well), it’s the underlying psychology. Whether it’s one dollar or one inch, there are ways to ensure that the first step takes you to where you want to go.11 If you are part of a church staff, one of the ways you can build your team and become more disciplined is to push one another in fitness, like student pastor Matt Cobb:

I serve as the Senior High Minister at Southern Hills Baptist Church in Oklahoma City. We have a staff that truly encourages one another & enjoys getting to hang out over a great lunch. In fact we enjoyed those lunches so much that we would go out to eat several times a week! Each of us saw the effect, as we were feeling more and more sluggish. We saw how our energy level to love our families & serve the church was slowing. Clearly something had to be done. This past December, our group of 4 ministers decided that it was time to hold one another accountable. We wanted to begin to discipline ourselves in what we put into our bodies & how we use them.

Our group ranged in weight goals from wanting to lose 20 pounds to losing well over 100 pounds. We each started counting calories with an app on our phones & started working out. I can honestly say that the first week was brutal for all of us! I felt weak & miserable after each workout. The first time I tried to run, I couldn’t even run one mile without having to stop & walk. I missed foods that I had come to enjoy so much, too much! Yet each of us has seen incredible
rewards in fighting to stay disciplined with our bodies. We still go out to eat, but make smarter choices. We’ve continued to work out, but the workouts have increased & strangely enough become enjoyable. Each of the 4 of us has seen weight loss become a reality. Every one of us has lost between 20-40 pounds since January of this year & there is no sign of slowing down.

The interesting part of our story so far has been the way that disciplining our bodies has impacted other areas of our lives. I know that we have all talked about how our belief in the beauty of the church has been reawakened by experiencing the impact of doing life together & committing to see discipline change us, our times with family have been strengthened by having more energy to love, invest, and enjoy them, and our times in the Scripture and Christian reading have been deepened by this commitment to discipline.

I truly believe God is glorified when we discipline our bodies. The members of our church have taken notice of our weight loss & it has been amazing to see how it has become a platform to have great, godly conversations with members about how they discipline their lives. So fight to discipline yourself, it is absolutely worth it.
I sent out a tweet as I wrote this book encouraging others to send their stories. Some of these you have read already; others follow. There was such a response I could not fit them all in, which is encouraging! But here they are, and I apologize if you sent one to me and I missed posting it in this ebook. Note the variety of approaches but also note the factors you see in common.

One of the most remarkable stories comes from a young man who has continued to encourage and inspire me. Matt Henslee has lost 140 pounds, and now has run both a marathon and a triathlon. Check out more of Matt’s story at at iamsureofthis.com. He wrote me: “In short...at Thanksgiving 2010 I was 288. I began diet immediately and committed to run if I ever made it to 250. Once I hit 250 I began exercising, continuing the diet changes, and started to use LoseIt.com to track both. I’m now at 148 pounds!”

Pastor Ken Cavey has lost 60 pounds and now has 10% body fat. “Man, it feels good to run 9 miles with the army guys in my congregation. Half marathon in now in sight,” Ken wrote me. What did he do? “I began recording everything I ate so that I would know what went into my body. I used fitness pal on my phone. I found an excellent trainer and paid for her to provide for proper technique and right exercises. Then it just started a momentum and she helped me set goals. Paying provided good accountability.”

Are you a full time seminary student? Chad Reister, as a full time SEBTS student who also worked three jobs made time to lose 18 pounds. How? “I did it by combining p90x, Insanity, running 3+miles and eating a low glycemic diet.”

Raleigh Pastor Ed Handkins experienced long term change, losing 50 pounds over 20 years and keeping it off. “I became a diabetic when they changed the definition (early 1990s),” he wrote. “I changed my diet (some) and started walking on the treadmill. I lost about 30 pounds over one year. I stayed at that weight for about 10 years. Diabetes is chronic and progressive. When I needed to increase my meds I also became more strict with diet and exercise. I am now about 50 pounds lighter than I was 20 years ago. The diabetes is well controlled and I feel good. I discovered that as we age we don’t need to start doing less. We need to do more - be more active. Set positive goals and keep balance in your life.”

My friend and Corporate Chaplain Kevin Bussey wrote the following: “I have lost 15 lbs and 2 pants size from February to May. I changed my eating habits by eating 5 small meals a day every 3 hours. I used Advocare Supplements (my wife is an advisor) to help me. She lost 28 lbs 2 years ago and has maintained it so I thought I would join her. I also work out 3-4 times a week. My diet has changed immensely. I don’t eat junk anymore. I eat better than I did before and the food actually tastes better. I splurged the other day and had pizza and felt horrible. So I’ll go back to eating fish, chicken and veggies. At the same time God has allowed me to lead 4 people to
Christ in the workplace. I feel better than I have in years.”

Maybe you are a busy college student with all sorts of excuses. Here is the story of student Joshua Admire:

“After graduating high school and started to commute to a local community college, I stayed with the youth group as an assistant leader. I had never been much of a fan of exercise or having to choose healthy over taste. But that fall I had stepped on the scale and it read 298! I was completely blown away by the concept of me weighing 300lbs! I was so shocked that I had allowed myself to get this far. My family is also on the bigger side and seeing how their lives are didn't make me feel any better. All of a sudden, this question popped into my head, "If not now, when?" When would I lose this weight? It'll only get harder the older you get. So I decided then and there to get into shape. It's taken quite awhile, with plenty of times where I broke down for that burger or convince myself I didn't have to workout that day. But the key to all of this was eventually continuing. After that burger binge, I’d work it off sooner or later. This upcoming September will be 2 years and I have already lost 75lbs with only 25lbs left to go. I'm so proud of this progress! I feel like a huge weight has been lifted off of me, pun intended!”

IF YOU DO NOTHING ELSE, DO THIS:

1. Get an app to count calories and do so for one month.
   Oh, there is one more thing. Let me know in a year how you are doing.

“Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.” The Apostle Paul


Ferriss, (Locations 1398-1404).