

Change: It's not a Mission Impossible

by **René A. Lopez**

For some a radical life change is a “Mission: Impossible,” especially if their track record reads like a bad grocery list. Mine certainly did: burglary (arrested five times), grand theft, petit theft, theft (three times), loitering, possession of burglary tools, trespassing (three times), defrauding innkeeper (two times), evading transit fare, cocaine possession (two times), forced strong-arm robbery (three times), dealing in stolen property (two times), petit larceny (three times), obstruction of police officer (three times), resisting arrest (two times), battery on a police officer, alcohol violation and four drug rehabilitation programs. All of this occurred in the five years between 1986 and 1991. That was my track record. Not pretty. However, there came a point in my life that I decided to overcome *emphasizing excuses, bad examples and addictive experiences*.

Emphasizing excuses. I became a master at deceiving myself. I grew up without a father, and members of minority groups, such as I, sometimes have fewer opportunities than others. My mother raised me in a party environment, my parents drank, and my friends drank and did drugs. When I was nineteen, my mom packed my bags and told me to leave. That only added to my list of excuses: mom didn't love me. Bitterness ruled my life; drugs became my ally. At one point I was homeless and dealing drugs in Miami Beach. I filled my head with all sorts of excuses for why I had turned out that way. Yet a nagging thought pulled at me: *If I am smart enough to figure out reasons to fail, can I not also figure out reasons to change?* I had no excuse.

A prison sentence of three-and-a-half years gave me enough time to think. Yes, I had grown up with some disadvantages. So what? What family is not dysfunctional to some degree? There is no totally functional family on this side of heaven, since perfect beings that make-up such a family do not exist (Rom 3:10-11, 23). No matter what excuse I put forth, there were always examples of others who had overcome emphasizing excuses. So it was my turn.

Overcoming bad examples. Without a father figure at home, my mother and friends were my role models. On the one hand, my family lived by common ethical principles: do not lie, cheat, or steal. On the other hand, if someone called and someone

in my family didn't want to talk, it was okay to say, "He or she's not here." Having free cable from a bootleg box was considered okay since the cable companies are thieves by charging ridiculous prices. If items didn't get charged at the register, when we discovered it later we considered the amount a bonus. "It was the cashier's fault." My club-going friends were no better, not that they were to blame totally. At one point I surpassed them all in mischief, which caused most of them to avoid me.

Then I was introduced to the man who left the biggest imprint in history, Jesus Christ. Could he be my perfect model? Even religious people had let me down. Only when I read the bumper sticker, "Christians are not perfect just forgiven," did I realize Jesus Christ was the only perfect example (1 Pet 2:21-22). No matter how good people are, they are imperfect. A light came on.

Overcoming addictions. Having spent part of my early life drugging, drinking, and in debaucheries, I had tough experiences to overcome. Yet a friend encouraged me to have patience and said, "If it took you five years to walk into a forest, do not expect to leave in a week." Thus I began my journey out of the woods.

I quickly learned three key elements to overcoming addictive experiences: parting from the past, having patience, and having a purpose in life. Some define insanity as "repeating the same thing and expecting different results." I had to quit doing the "same thing." I needed to make a clean break. At first it seemed hard, but time and patience helped. In the beginning, memories of "good" experiences of my past life tugged at me. I reminded myself that sometimes the mind's defense mechanism blocks out negative experiences. This encouraged me to be patient.

But having Jesus Christ as the purpose in life was the ultimate key. True, some people change apart from a relationship with Jesus Christ. But they don't change *radically* without Him.

Now that I had purpose through my relationship with Christ, my "grocery list" began to change—and radically. I earned a B.A. with high honors from Trinity International University where I served as an adjunct faculty member for three years. I earned a Th.M. with honors from Dallas Theological Seminary, where I am currently enrolled as a Ph.D. student. I was on the National Dean's List twice and also given twice the Outstanding Young Man of America award for professional achievement, superior

ability and exceptional community service. There was also the J. Dwight Pentecost Ph.D. scholarship for Excellence in Bible Exposition. I have also been pastoring for the past eight years.

All these things—wonderful as they are—are garbage compared to the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ, who changed me. I share them to show the contrast of what I was before and what God has made of me. The radical change began when I simply *believed in Christ's promise that I could receive eternal life* (John 1:12; 3:16; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 11:25-27).

Perhaps you're thinking, "I am not nearly as bad as you were." That is precisely the point. If Jesus can take a person worse than you and change him, how much more can He also do a miracle of radical change in your life?