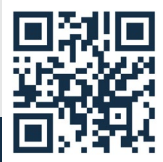


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Foreword by NFL Executive CHAD BRINKER



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1

Define Winning

*"But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory
through our Lord Jesus Christ!"*

—1 Corinthians 15:57

What does winning look like? Is it determined by a scoreboard? Is it measured by the size of your bank account or the position you hold? Is it a state of mind, a lifestyle, or the way you are viewed by others? How do you know whether you are successful in life?

While it might be hard to articulate, each one of us has an image that comes to mind when we think about winning. Our picture of success is what gives our lives direction. It shapes our thinking, chooses our heroes, creates our aspirations, informs our decision-making, and determines who we spend time with and even how we spend our money. I am convinced that God created us to win at life, and he has provided everything we need to be successful.

But what does it look like to succeed?

In 2011, my good friend Chad Brinker was standing on the football field at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas, after achieving one of his biggest goals in life. He and the Green Bay Packers had just become Super Bowl champions. But in that moment, Chad found himself

**OUR PICTURE
OF SUCCESS IS
WHAT GIVES
OUR LIVES
DIRECTION.**

asking, even though he was already a Christian, *Is this really all there is?* He contemplated how he had reached the pinnacle of his profession and thought he would feel more fulfilled by this win.

Later, he and I reflected on how this is a lot like the rest of life. We chase our goals thinking they are the wins of life, but then when we achieve them, we continually sense there must be something more. Yet more of these kinds of wins just leave us wanting, well, even more.

The same could be said about a business owner who finally hits his or her financial goal, an actor who wins an Academy Award, or a salesperson who records a new record of sales. These are all wins, sure, but is true success defined by these accolades, awards, or achievements? Or is there something bigger, something deeper, something more meaningful that defines what it means to win? And what about the times you don't win the award? Does that mean you are not a winner?

You might expect me to reply to this line of reasoning by saying the answer is simply about being a good Christian. But this just prompts even more questions: What does it mean to win as a Christian? Is it wrong for a Christian to be successful by "worldly" standards? If that is what you expect to hear from me, you'll be surprised. I don't believe God defines winning in life through bypassing success on Earth. Scripture does not vilify success, even that which makes someone famous. For example, it says, "Do you see a person skilled in his work? He will stand in the presence of kings. He will not stand in the presence of the unknown" (Prov. 22:29). My friend Chad is a great example of how God can use successful people to shine the light of his kingdom to this world. Through this book, I hope to show you that God's definition for success includes winning on this side of eternity.

So how should a Christian define success? Whether we grew up in church or decided to follow Jesus later in life, each of us has a vision for what it means to be a Christian. When this vision is lived to its fullest, the result is what we think winning looks like for a follower

of Jesus. If you had asked me to describe a successful Christian when I was a young believer, I think my description would have primarily involved things *not* to do. I might have defined winning for a Christian as *not* drinking alcohol, *not* having sex before marriage, or *not* speaking with profanity. Additionally, I probably would have described a life that was centered around attending church services. Maintaining those weekly appointments and executing them properly seems to be what most Christians prioritize as the picture of success.

Does this sound like winning?

Is success defined by weekly attendance and avoiding poor behavior in any other arena of life? I don't remember any of my employers ever evaluating me on whether I simply showed up for work. They seemed to be much more interested in my results. Most employers have a definition of success that involves a target for performance. We must know the target so we can know where to aim. If we hope to win at life, doesn't it also make sense to have a target for success?

Win the Prize

Since I have often viewed life through the eyes of an athlete, it has always seemed logical to me that there must be a way to win at life. Athletics has taught me much about living, and one of those things is the concept of winning and losing. I have done my fair share of losing in sports, but I have also won a few times; I've even been part of some championship teams. Here's one thing I know for sure: if the possibility of winning and losing were removed from sports, I would lose interest. The quest to succeed is what makes sports exciting for participants and entertaining for fans. And while athletics can certainly bring out the worst in us at times, it also serves as a vehicle to teach us some of the most valuable lessons in life: how to be great teammates, respect our opponents, work hard, and face challenges when they arise.

These lessons could be why Scripture frequently uses athletics as an illustration for Christian living. The apostle Paul seemed to be

especially interested in the image of competitive running. In one of his writings, he used the example of a race to urge his readers to prevail as disciples of Jesus. He said, “Don’t you know that the runners in a stadium all race, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way to win the prize. Now everyone who competes exercises self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable crown” (1 Cor. 9:24–25).

Paul’s use of this illustration was helpful for his readers in Corinth because their city hosted the Isthmian Games every two years. This athletic competition was second in popularity only to the ancient Olympic Games. Paul’s readers would have had a vivid image in mind when he used the metaphor of endeavoring to win a competitive race, so he and other New Testament writers often used this image to portray the life of a disciple. The athlete’s commitment to strict training and submission to the rules of competition reminded early believers of their own need to remain committed to the words of God (2 Tim. 2:5). The competitor’s removal of all hindrances and distractions to maximize performance illustrated their need to live a life of discipline and focus (Heb. 12:1). And the journey of each athlete led them toward their primary goal: upon entering the great stadium, they would see a square pillar at the opposite end where the victors would be crowned.¹ Paul compares this singular aim of victory to the spiritual goal of a disciple, using this image to urge his readers to “press on toward the goal to win the prize” (Phil. 3:14, NIV).

What is this prize that symbolizes success in life? New Testament writers call it a crown, the prize given to winners of the ancient athletic competitions. It is equivalent to the gold medal an Olympic athlete receives in our times. This crown was actually a wreath made of leaves or flowers, and it was worn as a symbol of the victor’s triumph.² In Roman times, it was also used to honor military victors and distinguished citizens, similar to a trophy or plaque we might use today to recognize a special achievement.³ The winner’s crown is the

target of success for a disciple of Jesus. It is what makes the race of life worth running.

This “crown of life” (James 1:12) is given to each faithful servant of Jesus when they finish the race (2 Tim. 4:7–8). It is awarded by Jesus himself, the great Champion who has won our hearts with his love. He ran the race of life before us and “endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God’s throne” (Heb. 12:2, NLT). The grace of God has provided the track to run on, the love of Jesus compels us to run that track with all our might, and our aim is set on Jesus who stands at the finish line saying, “Well done” (Matt. 25:21).

Becoming a Winner

Receiving the crown of life is the ultimate win for a disciple. When our lives reflect this goal as our chief priority, we will live like a champion in every aspect of our lives—experiencing true joy, peace, and freedom. A closer look at the way the apostle Paul described victory to the Corinthians uncovers the way we live as winners in life. The crown is not received by someone standing on the champion’s podium alone. The winner is someone who also participates in the process of winning others to Jesus. In this brief description of the Christian’s race of life, we see the term “win” used five times:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might *win* more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to *win* Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might *win* those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might *win* those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might *win* the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. (1 Cor. 9:19–23, ESV)

Paul is describing what it looks like for a disciple to win at life. When we choose to follow Jesus, our lives are radically changed by his love. He becomes the Champion of our hearts and leads us to live more like him in everything we do.

This is winning at life: following the One who has won our hearts. And where does he lead us? When we commit our lives to Jesus and become devoted to his ways, he leads us to align our lives to his highest priority—ultimately winning others to him (Luke 19:10). Not that our efforts or our participation in his disciple-making mission makes us winners, but because we follow Jesus, we run the race as he did—and win others to him. We keep our eyes on the Champion, and he inspires us to help others cross the finish line (1 Thess. 2:19).

God made you to win at life, and he ensured that you can be a winner through a relationship with Jesus. If you are a disciple of Jesus, you have been given his message of victory to share. Jesus is the supreme Champion who conquered death and gave human beings the ability to truly win at life. He came to this Earth to liberate us from our “empty way of life” (1 Pet. 1:18) and to give abundant life to his followers (John 10:10). His sacrifice on the cross “disarmed the rulers and authorities” that once spoke shame over our lives and “triumphed over them” (Col. 2:15). When we share the message of Jesus with those who don’t yet know him, it truly brings out the best in us. We become who God made us to be, and this is what it means to win at life.

**WINNERS
MAXIMIZE THEIR
POTENTIAL IN
THE MISSION
OF JESUS.**

Are you living like a winner? Do your goals in life bring out the best in you? Are you maximizing your potential? Are people connecting to Christ through your life? I ask these questions to help you process the truth that following Jesus is about winning, and the reason I’m writing this book is not because that’s new information to you; it’s because I’ve found so few people know *how* to win.

Why Christians Are Not Winning

Many Christians have never shared Jesus' message of victory with anyone. According to research conducted by Lifeway Christian Resources, 65 percent of Christians agree that sharing their faith in Jesus with their non-Christian friends and family is the most loving thing they can do. However, this same study showed that only 30 percent of Christians take action toward this goal.⁴ This means most Christians are not winning. Why is this the case? I believe it's because most people don't know how to win. Christian author and speaker Zig Ziglar said, "You were born to win, but to be a winner you must plan to win, prepare to win, and expect to win."⁵ Most people don't expect to win others to Jesus, so they don't plan and prepare. When opportunities arise, they are not ready to win.

When I entered college as a young football player at Ohio University, I had a great opportunity to learn this truth. Much like the ancient athletes, I had endured years of training to prepare for this chance to compete. During the first week of practice, my coaches announced that a position on the team needed to be filled. They told us we did not have a long snapper for punts and field goals and offered an invitation: "If anyone has any experience long snapping, come early to practice tomorrow. We will be taking auditions." This was an opportunity for a freshman like me to get some playing time right away. But there was one major obstacle in my way—I didn't know how to win.

Long snapping is not a popular position in football. Usually, the only reason a fan knows the name of a team's long snapper is because they made a mistake. Before a punter can punt the football, the long snapper must launch the ball between his legs fifteen yards. Timing and accuracy are essential to ensure the kick can be completed successfully and prevent the defense from blocking the kick. I had learned this technique as a young middle school boy years before this moment in college. I worked on snapping the ball regularly and even

attended summer camps to refine my technique. I had filled this role for my football teams for several years until something happened during my freshman year in high school: I made a costly mistake. I launched the ball over the punter's head, which led to the other team getting the ball. This pattern continued for the next few practices and subsequent games. I was demoted and then did everything I could to avoid the role of long snapper. It was too much pressure.

I watched my college teammates gather to audition for the long snapping role, but I did not attend for fear of that pressure. As the years went by, I saw the player who earned that roster spot become a four-year starter. He also became an integral part of the team and eventually had the chance to play professionally. I missed an opportunity because I didn't yet know how to win at that position.

I'm sure you can think of at least one time in your life when you missed your moment to share Jesus with a friend or family member. You had an open door to speak, but you were afraid to risk an awkward conversation. Or maybe you thought to yourself, *There will probably be a better opportunity later*. Or perhaps you wondered, *Am I the right person to share Jesus with them?* I used to make this same mistake until I was taught how to win.

I have learned that God created me to win, and he expects me to win. And he didn't make his method of success a mystery. He laid out a plan in Scripture, and this plan will not only help you share the message of Jesus with others; it will also help you maximize your potential in every area of your life. This is because you are always at your best when you help others win. This is the life you were made for.

When you are aligned to God's winning ways for your life, you have the confidence to dream big and follow through on your dreams. You step up when opportunities arise, like the opportunity I was given on the football field. You bounce back from the challenges of life and continue striving to

**THIS IS
THE LIFE
YOU WERE
MADE FOR.**

be your best because you know how to win. You become who God called you to be and do what he designed you to do.

How to Win

Reflecting on my missed opportunity on the football field, I realized I lacked the components that Scripture says are necessary for winning. In this book, I want to help you learn to win by understanding these components and putting them into practice in your own life. Here's a summary of three keys to winning, which we'll unpack as we progress.

1. *Winners expect to win.* The main reason I didn't respond to the coaches' invitation was that I didn't believe I could win at the job. It's the same reason we don't often share the message of Jesus with others. We don't truly believe we can win others to Jesus. This is a hard truth to confront but facing it has served me well in learning the first step to winning. Winners take action because they believe their actions will get results. Many believers stay on the sidelines, waiting for someone else to share the message of Jesus because they don't believe their actions will make a difference.

In speaking of his goal to be a disciple who makes disciples, Paul said, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Phil. 3:12, NIV). If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, he has taken hold of you. He has invited you to be part of his championship team. Since there is absolutely no doubt he has achieved the victory, we are assured that anyone who is on his team also wins. There is only one score on God's scoreboard. If you are not winning in life, it may be due to your doubt about whether Jesus has won or whether he has made you part of his winning team. To the degree we lean on the reality that he has taken hold of us, we will press on to take hold of the prize. This is why we will begin here in God's plan to win.

2. *Winners aim to win.* There is a difference between competitive racing and casual running. Racers “run in such a way to win the prize” (1 Cor. 9:24). Casual runners are simply involved in exercise. The way to win at life is to view life as a race and pursue the prize like a competitor, “forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead” (Phil. 3:13). If you are not winning at life, it may be because you don’t realize why you’re running. As a result, you don’t have a clear vision of success beyond a casual jog.

I did not earn the job on the football field, because I was not aiming for true success. Instead, my objective was simply survival. My fear of losing was bigger than my desire to win. In life, you must clearly identify the target of success to have any hope of hitting the bull’s-eye. A clear vision along with well-articulated goals will align your life to what you hope to achieve. This is how Jesus lived while on Earth; he kept his joy before him at all times (Heb. 12:2). In this book, you will learn to identify Jesus’ target of success in your own life, using your unique talents, gifts, and abilities to strive to win the prize.

3. *Winners train to win.* An adage says, “We don’t rise to the level of our expectations. We fall to the level of our training.”⁶ Expecting to win is critical, and aiming to win is how we align our lives toward the prize, but it takes “strict training” to move us toward our goal (1 Cor. 9:25, NIV). Many Christians never experience the deep joy of disciple making because they have not been trained. They simply don’t know how to make disciples. It takes practice to do anything well in life, so why wouldn’t this also apply to our aim to win others to Jesus?

Since I did not expect to win the job as a young football player, I stopped practicing the skill of long snapping. This caused me to be unprepared when opportunity came. The same is true for winning at life. We must commit to practicing the skills that prepare us to win.

Time to Get Coached

If you are going to accomplish anything worthwhile in life, you need two things: a plan and a coach. The plan is the three keys to winning that I just explained, and in this book, if you'll let me, I will serve as your coach. I have trained hundreds of leaders from various backgrounds, and I've discovered a system that helps individuals win at life through helping them win others to Jesus. My training system involves a series of eleven exercises that I'll guide you through as you read this book. Each one builds upon the one prior, so be sure to follow the program in order.

As you complete the exercises, you will grow in your relationship with Jesus and learn to win at life. You will learn to discover your unique purpose, hear God's voice, and follow his direction; all of this will help you win others to Jesus. Each of these exercises points you to Jesus, and the practices are rooted in the ways he lived his life while on Earth. I refer to these ways of Jesus as practices because they are developed through time-tested use and they grow through experience, discipline, and daily habits. They are not simply intellectual. They are practical. Although these skills may never be fully mastered by any of us on Earth, they are the ways of the One who mastered life and can lead us to live the life we were made for.

As an athlete, coach, teacher, minister, father, and friend, I have had the privilege of watching successful people from all walks of life follow this process. I will share the stories of some of these individuals throughout this book. What we will see as we work together is that Jesus left us with a perfect pattern to follow. As we pattern our lives after him, we become who God called us to be, and we can then help others also learn to live as his disciples.

God made you to win, but becoming a winner is a choice. Not everyone who enters the race of life is a winner. There are no participation trophies; we do not receive the prize by simply showing up. When you choose to follow this three-part plan, which is a proven

way to win, you will become the winner God called you to be. You will define the right target for a disciple of Jesus, you will learn how to run the race of life as a competitor instead of a casual runner, and you will identify the practices needed to shape you.

Let's get started!

SHARPEN YOUR SKILLS

In the back of this book, you can find a section called “Sharpen Your Skills,” which contains training exercises for each chapter to help you learn the practices of Jesus. These exercises help you maximize your potential in the mission of Jesus by helping you enhance the skills of Jesus in your daily life. While it is, of course, optional, after you read each chapter, I encourage you to take immediate action by completing each training exercise.

The first training exercise is “The *Made to Win* Assessment.” This is a series of statements that helps you measure and observe your progress in learning to win. It is a great way to get started on your journey to win at life.

Additionally, alongside the “Sharpen Your Skills” section, I have provided discussion questions for each chapter that may be useful if you choose to meet with friends as you read this book to support one another in your aim to win at life. These are labeled “Huddle Up Questions” since it’s intended to function like a team huddle guide. A huddle is where individuals connect with their team, reflect on what just happened, and help one another plan for the next “play.” I discuss more about this vital aspect of discipleship later in the book, but for now, I encourage you to look for others who can walk through this book alongside you.

2

Expect to Win

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

—Jeremiah 29:11, NIV

C*atch Me If You Can*, a 2002 movie starring Leonardo DiCaprio, tells the story of Frank Abagnale Jr. While some of the details were exaggerated for dramatic effect, the film depicts Abagnale’s real-life journey of holding several high-profile occupations. The real-life journey for him began at seventeen years of age, when Abagnale worked as an airline pilot, a banker, a doctor, and an attorney, even though he did not go to school for any of these occupations. He faked them all. He perfected the skill of forging a fake ID. After making a lot of money and enjoying the perks of playing these roles, his pretending finally caught up with him. He was sentenced to twelve years in federal prison.

One of the primary functions of identification is to provide you with access. If you are rightfully employed at Walmart, your work ID will get you access to places a customer cannot go; a driver’s license can give you access to operate a motor vehicle or board an airplane; and a passport can give you access to enter another country. This principle gives us the truth behind the first key to winning: in order to win, you must first expect to win, and your expectations

are linked to your identification. It is your identity that determines your destiny. Just like you need an ID to gain access to where you want to go, your identity provides access to success in life. If your identity validates you as a winner, you can expect to win. This confidence will lead you to take winning actions in life, and those actions will ultimately lead to success. However, if you don't possess a winner's ID, you won't expect to win. And your lack of expectation will lead you to the wrong actions. Like with Abagnale, those actions will lead you somewhere you don't want to go.

The word in Scripture that best describes a winning expectation is "hope." For followers of Jesus, hope is not a flimsy wish but a strong anticipation of what is to come. Theologian William Barclay wrote, "The Christian hope is not simply a trembling, hesitant hope that perhaps the promises of God may be true. It is the confident expectation that they cannot be anything else than true."⁷ We are advised to *not get our hopes up* when we can't tell if something will come to be. This is not a problem for the one who believes in Jesus. We believe in the God "who gives life to the dead and calls things into existence that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17). When God made good on the promise to raise his son from the dead, we were given a confident expectation that his words always come true. Winning is not simply *a* possibility for those who follow Jesus; winning is the *only* real possibility for true life. Because of our confidence in the promises of God, followers of Jesus can "rejoice in hope" (Rom. 12:12), work in hope (1 Cor. 9:10), and "overflow with hope" (Rom. 15:13). In fact, the characteristic of expectation is so connected to the ways of God that he is even called "the God of hope" (Rom. 15:13).

Your identity as a follower of Jesus gives you a bulletproof expectation that you will win at life. And this is why you can also confidently share the message of Jesus with others. You are offering them the opportunity of a lifetime. While so many people are searching for a lucky break, you hold the ticket that always wins. With Jesus, we have "access through him by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2, HCSB). I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases this great scripture:

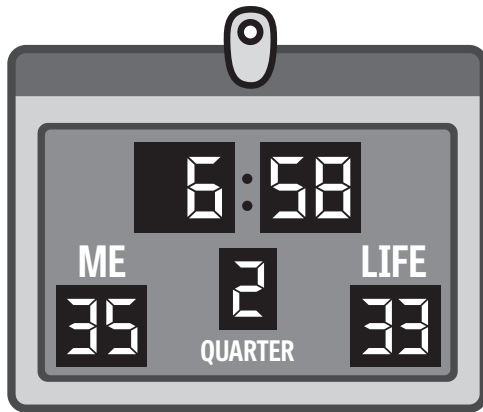
By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with him, make us fit for him—we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that’s not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God’s grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise. (Rom. 5:1–2, MSG)

In other words, followers of Jesus were made to win.

Fake ID Cards

If someone is not winning, likely it is because they don’t expect to win. We know we can, but do we expect it? A lack of expectation results in people either quitting altogether or resorting to the actions of a fake, like those of Frank Abagnale. People often forge a fake ID card to get themselves in the door somewhere. Fake identification might come in the form of a small rectangular piece of plastic, but more often we fashion it through our actions. Here are three examples of fake IDs that people commonly use to gain access to success in life.

The first is what I call the fake ID of “Production”:

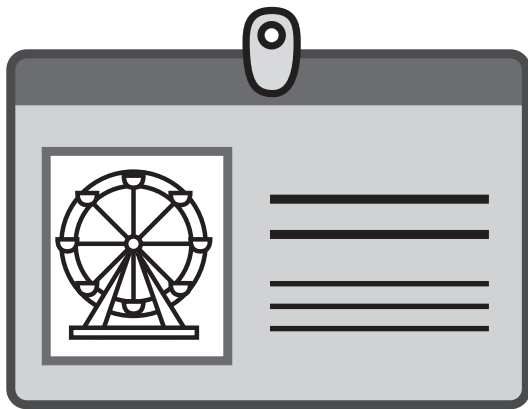


Scoreboard: The Fake ID of Production

Some of us have a picture of a scoreboard on our ID card. It represents the results we must achieve to know we are successful, and the only way to accomplish these results is through our hard work. In this illustration, our identity is established after the final score demonstrates we have won. This is the ever-elusive moment that we will know we matter. There are many problems with trying to win this way, and I have personally experienced its downfall many times in my own life.

Early on, I saw life as a scoreboard. Whether in sports, academics, or my profession, I thought if I could identify the way we keep score, then I could minimize my weaknesses, emphasize my strengths, and achieve success by scoring the most points. This would make me matter to others, myself, and God. This same fake ID might be used while winning others to Jesus. I have been tempted to think God is keeping score of how many people I teach and baptize. But trying to win through production is a fake form of identification that is a misguided attempt to earn God's favor and love.

The second type is the fake ID of "Survival":



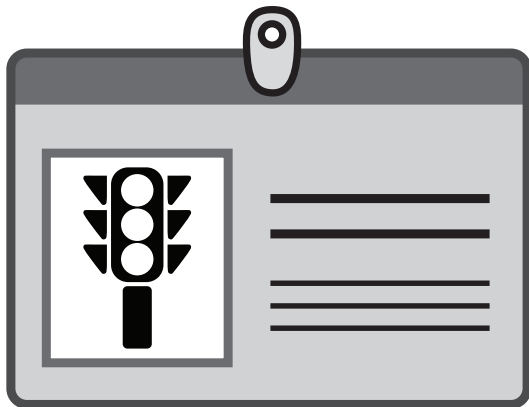
Ferris Wheel: The Fake ID of Survival

Another picture often found on someone's identification card is that of a Ferris wheel. What do Ferris wheels do? They repeat the same cycle over and over. You hop on the ride only to come back to the same place you started. The ride may be enjoyable as you go around and around, but ultimately it doesn't get you anywhere. This is the way many people see a successful life. If they survive the ride, they have achieved their goal. In this illustration, winning is not defined by results but by maintaining the routine. If you keep coming to work and avoid getting fired, you are successful. Physical health is not defined by physical fitness but by simply checking off your doctor's appointments. On the Ferris wheel of life, surviving the ride—not producing results—is how you know whether you've won.

This is a common way some Christians define "faithfulness." The fake ID of Survival is fashioned by following a pattern of religious ritual every Sunday. In this scenario, I think that if I can repeat this pattern each week, I am living a faithful life and will ultimately be rewarded with a place in heaven with God one day. Along the way I may spend time with good people who are taking the ride with me. I can invite new people to join the ride, but success for them would be the same as for me: they must learn to repeat the same weekly cycle in order to reach their goal of heaven.

As a young man, I remember struggling with the lack of adventure in this picture. Where's the challenge? How does this help me win at life? In this illustration, our purpose is simply surviving the ride. No wonder this model is unattractive to those seeking Jesus. Once they try it, it leaves them looking for more—and they end up compartmentalizing their faith from the rest of their lives or even neglecting it altogether.

The third false identity card can be called the fake ID of “Approval”:



Traffic Light: The Fake ID of Approval

This third form of identification is a traffic light, and people use it to gain access to success. With this ID, you are waiting for the green light of someone else’s approval. As a result, you may get stuck in a job you don’t like, stay boxed in a relationship that isn’t working, or pursue a goal you don’t really want. This is similar to the scoreboard ID, but your reputation becomes your identity instead of your productivity. Other people’s opinions hold your ticket to happiness. You work toward a goal because you want someone you admire or even people you have never met to approve of you. Instead of aiming for the true win, you aim for someone else’s definition of success as your identity. You might have been told this is the life that’s right for you, but it’s not the one God designed you for.

What makes you feel accepted? Could it be hitting a certain threshold of money in your bank account? Or is it a relationship you hold on to even though you know it is not in your best interest? Maybe it’s a title or position you hold. Is it your number of followers or how people respond to you on social media? These are all avenues of approval that we think offer abundant success, so we stop at the traffic

lights, waiting for them to turn green. We let someone else define success for our lives.

Identity Check

What's wrong with using a fake ID to gain access to winning in life? One clue is found by examining what all fake IDs have in common: scoreboards, Ferris wheels, and traffic lights require modes of living that base our expectations on our outcomes.

Coach Nick Saban, considered by many to be the greatest coach in college football history, is known for saying, "Outcomes are a distraction."⁸ Saban reminded his players to focus instead on the *process*, or path of success. Fake IDs emphasize the distracting nature of outcomes earned through our results, our routines, and our reputations. They are modes of earning access through our own effort. This might seem to be the right method in the moment, but this is not the way we were designed to win. As Scripture says, "There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death" (Prov. 14:12).

Fake IDs may get you in the door temporarily, but they ultimately lead to dead ends. The destructive nature of these forms of identification is in the seeds they sow. Fake IDs say, "You are not enough . . . you are not loved . . . you are not accepted . . . *unless* you do XYZ." This mentality has led many to character collapses, botched relationships, and burnout. The trickle-down effect of basing your identity on your outcomes is that relationships don't matter as much as getting things done. Taking care of your mental and physical health becomes less important than earning others' approval. And ultimately, when you resort to using a fake ID to win, it means you don't really expect to win. You are saying that who you really are is not enough. If this message is hitting close to home, you are not alone. I learned this hard truth as I attempted to use all of these fake IDs to win at life.

As a young man, I kept score in life through my quest to be a successful football player. Being big and strong was the way I knew I was winning in life. But this couldn't last forever, and there was

always someone bigger and stronger. So when this didn't make me feel validated, I resorted to the Ferris wheel ride of "going to church." This weekly routine made me feel safe at times, but the more I grew to recognize my sinfulness, the more it led me to look for something else that could soothe my shame. This is when I would pull out the fake ID of Approval. My father's approval, my coaches' opinions of me, and how I was viewed by my friends would make me feel better. But this didn't work long-term, because I would inevitably disappoint these people when my performance didn't match expectations. Even if these people didn't point out my failings, my opinion of myself would be what I would focus on. It always left me filling a void.

If I couldn't find success through my athletic production, surviving the ride of religious performance, or winning others' approval, where could I find it? Everything changed when I learned the true process of winning. It all started with an invitation I received that was based not on my actions but on my true identity. This invitation was to walk along a path.

The Path of Expectation

The process of walking a path is the image Scripture uses to describe true success. It is on this path that we discover our true identity and gain access to success, and it's why we can expect to win. The first time Jesus formally issued an invitation to walk this path was to a few young fishermen:

Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." (Mark 1:16–17, ESV)

Jesus' invitation gives us a picture of true success. Winning at life is maximizing one's potential for the mission of Jesus, and the way we do this is worth repeating: it comes by following our Champion, the One who won our hearts. When we choose to follow Jesus, we are

joined together with him. He walks alongside us and helps us grow to be like him. This partnership solidifies our identity in what he says about us, not what anyone else says or thinks. It is the adventure of a lifetime that results in going where he goes and winning others to him. With Jesus, we learn to walk the path of life with skill and work harder than we ever thought possible because we find rest in his love. We can expect to win because we are following him, and his steps always lead to success.

With this invitation, you don't need a scoreboard ID because Jesus affirmed his love for you before you ever did one thing right or wrong. You also don't need a Ferris wheel ID because his path leads to a life of adventure, not a life of ritual. And you don't have to wait on anyone else's approval at the traffic light because he has already said, "You are enough." He doesn't say, "Get your life right for me." He simply says, "Follow me."

The Identity of Expectation

Expecting to win comes from a strong belief in your potential to win because of God's work in your life. It is a matter of confidence, which determines the actions you take, and your actions are what produce your results. Counter to what many believe, the greatest way to solidify this confidence is not by examining your outcomes; rock-solid confidence comes through the process of following.

The term "follow" has taken on a different meaning in recent years. Following someone through virtual connection is more like being a fan than being a partner in the mission. But when Jesus invited people to follow him, he was persuading them to commit their lives to him as his "disciple." This is the term of identity that will solidify your expectations to win. Being a *disciple* of Jesus is the most valuable description of identity ever offered to human beings. It means you spend your life sitting at the feet of the One who embodies success, the One who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? The Greek word often translated as “disciple” also means “learner” or “pupil.”⁹ Perhaps the closest English word we use today is “apprentice.” For a clear definition of what it means to be a disciple, let’s examine the original invitation of Jesus:

“Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men” (Mark 1:17, ESV).

In his invitation, there are three components. Jim Putman has rightly summarized these into a concise definition: “A disciple is following Jesus, is being changed by Jesus, and is committed to the mission of Jesus.”¹⁰ In other words, being a disciple of Jesus is not something we do; it is someone we become. When we choose to follow Jesus, we walk behind him. As we align our lives to his steps, we will experience a change in everything we think, say, and do because we have finally discovered the path we were made for. In the years prior to Jesus’ life, a common saying arose in Judaism that illustrates this point: a disciple is one who, when following their rabbi, walks “in the dust of their feet,” following so closely he becomes covered in the dirt kicked up by their teacher’s sandals.¹¹ This is a beautiful picture of what it looks like to follow the Lord. Your search for life is over, and your path is one that follows his lead.

Notice in the passage from Mark mentioned above that becoming a disciple of Jesus was not earned. It was freely given. This is why it is truly the identity of expectation: you expect to win because you trust in the victory of Jesus, not your own efforts. If you didn’t create your identity by your own efforts, you can’t lose it either. Have you ever lost your driver’s license or work ID? It can be extremely nerve-racking to lose an important document that affirms your identity, but it doesn’t mean you have lost your actual identity. It’s only a document.

Similarly, your outcomes also do not dictate your identity. They may reflect how well your actions align to your identity, but they cannot change who God designed you to be. Your true identity is not earned by achieving any particular outcome; it is a gift from the One

who made you. It is not achieved; it is received. Even when a disciple's performance does not measure up to the standards of winning, they are still victorious because of who they are following. And if a disciple can't see where the road is headed, they at least know the One they are following will lead to success. As long as you stay on the path of Jesus, you are guaranteed to win. As Scripture says:

Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. (Heb. 12:1–2, MSG)

Winning Is a Lifetime Choice

My family once lived in a house that backed up to acres of woods that were impassable when we first moved in. Over the years we ventured into the woods to blaze new trails. As we created these trails, it was exciting to invite friends to walk the path with us. Before they would arrive, I encouraged them to dress appropriately, and I would quickly assess their physical ability to navigate the path. When we began walking through the woods, I showed them where to go and what to notice along the way. On certain parts of the path, I encouraged them to stay behind me since the trail may have new obstructions from tree limbs or rocks. Throughout our walk together, my companions were constantly making a choice. If they chose to let me lead, they were choosing to follow me; they were choosing to follow my steps and listen to my voice.

The choice to follow Jesus begins when a seeker first responds to his invitation, but that also marks the beginning of a lifetime of choices to continue following his steps and listening to his voice. Unfortunately, modern versions of Christianity can make committing to Jesus seem more like dealing with a travel agent who sets up your trip instead of

following the lead of a trail guide. We are encouraged to accept Jesus as our Savior who died for our sins, but we don't hear much about submitting to him as our Lord. This is not what Jesus meant when he invited us to follow him. He wants to lead us along his path, showing us where to go and what to do. And in addition to being our guide, Jesus Christ is the One who carved the trail and paid the price for us, as well as the King who owns the ground we walk upon.

As a young believer, I thought that when someone committed their life to Jesus, their journey was essentially complete. Their ticket to heaven was punched. They were in the club, so what was left to do? This would be like someone seeing a signpost for a new trail and thinking they have experienced everything there is to offer simply because they found the trailhead. My early idea of Christianity did not demand any life change; it simply involved a schedule change. Notice, though, that Jesus said following him was only the beginning of the path. When someone makes the choice to follow Jesus as Lord, he envisions a transformation in their life.

Jesus uses two powerful words to explain the nature of this transformation: "make" and "become." To make something is to fashion it for a purpose. Think of a piece of furniture: the raw materials (wood, hardware, fabric) have potential for purpose, but a builder must apply creative energy to make the pieces fit together and hold the weight of a human being. Like making a new piece of furniture, Jesus makes his followers fit for success. Those who have never followed Jesus are not fit for their purpose because they have not yet been built by Jesus.

**JESUS
MAKES HIS
FOLLOWERS
FIT FOR
SUCCESS.**

Every person possesses the raw materials to become who God made them to be, but they must be made new. As Scripture says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10, ESV).

When Jesus said, "I will make you become," he meant that his followers would be given a

new identity. Disciples of Jesus are prepared to do something new by *becoming someone* new. The reason many believers do not experience life transformation is because they have not received their new identities. Jesus has a vision for your life, to create someone who has never existed before. He creates in you the life you were made for: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Jesus told his followers, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9:23–24, ESV). Our Champion was saying the only way to find true success in life is to leave your fake IDs behind and embrace who he designed you to be through a lifetime commitment to him. This is when you discover your true identity. It is also why you can expect to win at life, and it leads to a lifetime of winning others to him.

To this winning vision we now turn our attention. What will it look like when the Lord maximizes your personal potential in his mission? Without this, nothing else in this book will make sense.

SHARPEN YOUR SKILLS

Are you ready to win? Begin with this powerful first step: expect to win. Put your eyes on Jesus, the great victor, who overcame the most powerful opponent—death. Then follow him in every area of your life so you can live with confident expectation. I believe it is very important for you to pause here before moving forward. Examine your faith in Jesus and be sure you have accepted his invitation. Remember, faith in Jesus is the only reason you can truly expect to win. It provides you with an identity that gives you access to everything you hope for in life. If you are unsure about this commitment, nothing else we will talk about in this book will matter. You can't win others to Jesus if you don't expect to win. If you would like to learn more about the

process of making a faith commitment to Jesus, check out the resources in the section called “Further Coaching” in the back of this book.

Second, I encourage you to complete the next training exercise in the “Sharpen Your Skills” section called “Winning Expectation.” It is extremely powerful in helping you solidify your expectation to win. This exercise helps you identify the specific ways God has shaped you to win through your unique life experiences and relationships. Then use the discussion questions in your huddle to help others deepen their expectation to win at life.

Sharpen Your Skills

The *Made to Win* Assessment

Training Exercise #1

Our first exercise is an assessment to help you measure and observe your progress in learning to win. As you rate yourself on this series of statements, it will shed light on your current capacity to win and indicate which areas of your life may need further development. After completing the assessment, consider the reflection questions that follow and share your answers with a trusted friend.

On a separate sheet of paper, rate yourself from 1 (low) to 5 (high) in each of the following areas:

1. I am fully committed to following Jesus as the Champion of my heart.
2. I believe God made me to win at life.
3. I have a strong sense of purpose, and I am confident that my life is headed in a positive direction.
4. I tend to make good choices that are influenced by what I value, not by what others think.
5. I have a clear vision of what God expects of my life five years from now.
6. I have specific, written goals for all major areas of my life.
7. When I am given a task, I work until it is completed and am not easily distracted.
8. I have a daily plan that helps me achieve my goals.
9. My devotional time is vital and a major factor in energizing my life.

10. I am surrounded by a strong community of like-minded people who add value to my life.
11. I often think about helping others succeed and reach their goals.
12. When I encounter adversity or setbacks, I find ways to keep moving toward my goals.

Each of these twelve statements tells us about our expectations for winning at life and our potential to win others to Jesus. Notice that they are not based on results but on our attitude toward God, ourselves, and others. This evaluation can help us assess what may be holding us back from winning.

Total up your score and reflect on where your score fits within the following rubric and what you can do to grow:

- 47 or below: I need a plan to follow and a coach to guide me. I will learn to win by looking to the Champion, Jesus Christ, and his love for me. I will commit to learning the practices of Jesus, and I will focus on what I can implement immediately. This will help me maximize my potential in the mission.
- 48–53: I have room to grow, but I am on the right track in growing as a winner at life. I must evaluate who is mentoring me and stay open to those who have demonstrated positive results in their lives. I can reflect on what areas need the most improvement in this next season of life and be strategic about my growth in these areas to help me maximize my potential in the mission.
- 54–60: I have been intentional with my personal growth and have received solid mentorship. I can reflect on what has helped me develop to this point. I will continue what has served me well, and I will remain open to one more way to grow in my aim to maximize my potential in the mission.

Don't worry about how to address the challenges this evaluation may reveal. As you continue to learn the principles in this book, I will

walk you through God's plan for success. For now, it's helpful to simply reflect on where you are today. Then, I encourage you to meet up with a friend or a group that can help you see yourself from a different perspective. You can use the discussion questions in the "Huddle Up Questions" section to win at life together.

Winning Expectation

Training Exercise #2

We can expect to win because of our identity in Jesus Christ. He saves us and gives us everything we need to win at life (2 Pet. 1:3). Once we access this salvation through trusting in Jesus as Savior and Lord, he uses unique life experiences and relationships to shape us for winning. As you reflect on what you have experienced and endured in life, and on what God has placed in your hands to use for his mission, your expectation to win will grow even more.

Answer the following questions:

1. What life experiences have shaped you to win? *Don't just think about the common experiences we all share as human beings. Take special note of the unique things that have happened to you.*
2. Whom have you known who has shown you how to win? How have you seen what it takes to win, and how has their example motivated you? *Think about your family, teachers, coaches, and mentors.*
3. What adversities in life have you already overcome? How could these experiences also be ways that God is preparing you to win at life?

Now that you have reflected on these items above, try to find a word (or phrase) that summarizes the qualities you have learned through these experiences and examples. For instance, you might represent a challenge you endured in life with the word "perseverance," or you might summarize the example you learned from a mentor with

the word “excellence.” Imagine you are writing these words on foundational bricks that God stacks to build your life. Then actually write them on a separate piece of paper or journal. This exercise will compile evidence that helps you solidify your expectation to win. Not only has God designed you to win through saving you, but he has also shaped you through your unique life story.

Huddle Up Questions

Chapter 1 Huddle Up Questions

1. Read 1 Corinthians 9:19–27. What did it mean for the apostle Paul to “win”? How have you been tempted to define success in life by a different standard?
2. As you review your self-assessment, what themes do you see? Why do you think you rated yourself lower in some areas and higher in others?
3. How would you summarize your expectations to win at life? Do you believe you were made to win? How do you know?
4. How can we pray for one another today?

Chapter 2 Huddle Up Questions

1. Read Romans 5:1–11. On what basis do followers of Jesus expect to win?
2. In what ways has your expectation to win at life possibly limited your impact in the mission of Jesus?
3. What are the summary words you identified from the training exercise? What led you to choose these words?
4. How can we pray for one another today?

About the Author

Chip Pugh serves as the director of team development for the Tennessee Titans, where he trains players, coaches, and staff members in character and leadership development. In addition to this role, he also serves as the team chaplain for the Titans. He is the co-founder of Be1Make1, a ministry that trains people to live and lead on mission for Jesus Christ, as well as the co-founder of Church for the Campus, a ministry dedicated to training and sending leaders to reach the campus through launching disciple-making churches. As a certified strength and conditioning coach, he has spent much of his professional career training athletes, CrossFit competitors, and fitness enthusiasts. He has been an instructor in leadership development at Tennessee Tech University, where he also served as an FCA character coach to the athletic teams. In his athletic career, Chip competed as a football player at Ohio University, where he earned a master's degree in coaching. He and his wife, Nicole, have two daughters, Rory Love and Reagan.

CHIP PUGH MADE TO WIN

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