

“A Hunger for Healing, Part 1”

The Twelve Steps as a Model for Christian Discipleship

Exodus 16:1-3, 11-18 ¹

Although I’ve never been a big fan of New Year’s Resolutions, I suppose we all tend to give a little thought to the trajectories of our lives at “the hinge of the year.” This is the New Year season for our Jewish friends, and with the time change fast approaching and fall well underway, thoughts about transitions of various sorts are “in the air.”

New Year’s resolutions tend to deal with making changes in our lives—doing more of this and less of that next year. New Year’s resolutions tend to be about getting control of things: our spending, our eating, our weight, our devotional life, our investing, our children, our work . . . fill in your own blank.

You’ve probably heard of Stephen Covey, the author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*² and a number of other acclaimed books about “how to get your life together.” There’s much wisdom in what he writes, and my thoughts often turn to his ideas about this time of year. Since Covey writes about “getting your life together,” I find it particularly interesting that at the beginning of one of his *Seven Habits* workbooks he wrote this: “Before you begin planning the things you want to be and do in life, there’s one thing you should know: YOU ARE NOT IN CONTROL.”

Well that’s a pretty encouraging place to begin, isn’t it? I’m not in control of my life, and nothing I can do is going to succeed in gaining control? What am I supposed to do with *that?!?*

The story goes that once upon a time a lone hiker ventured too near the edge of a dangerous cliff and slipped off. He was able to break his fall by grabbing a tree root that stuck out from the cliff, but his strength was quickly spent. In desperation, he called out, “Please, is there anybody up there who can help me?!” A voice called back—actually the voice of God—saying, “Let go of the root, and I’ll see to it that you’re safe.” The hiker thought about that for a moment and then called out, “Is there anybody else up there?!” Letting go just doesn’t seem like a very good option, does it? Holding on seems like a much better idea!

Our inclination notwithstanding, the message of the Bible is that the bad news is the good news: it’s only in letting go that we’re safe. In this, as in so many other seasons of our lives, the path toward getting our most essential needs met—the way to *a life that matters* and *relationships that last*—lies in a direction that we would never find on our own.

That’s pretty much what happened to Israel in this morning’s text. On their way to the Promised Land, the people of Israel found themselves starving in the wilderness. We don’t know how many people there were on this Exodus journey, but some estimates are as high as two million! Deserts just don’t provide that much food.

When the people cried out to God for help, God provided strange white stuff called “manna” to meet their hunger. Apparently manna didn’t look very tasty. As you probably know, the word “manna” actually means, “What is it?”

The good news was that, whatever it looked like, manna tasted like honey cakes. That would be pretty nice, wouldn’t it—to find fresh honey cakes on the ground every morning? God’s provision for Israel’s need came in a surprising way, and it also came with surprising instructions: though they were very hungry, God told the people to gather only enough manna for one day at a time.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on October 12, 2014.

² Steven Covey, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).

Well, the Israelites responded to that situation just as you and I would've probably done—they ignored God's instructions and gathered as much manna as they could to save "for a rainy day." But when they disobeyed God and gathered more than they needed, they discovered that the surplus manna stank and was full of maggots the next morning. "Only enough for one day," God said.

But on Fridays (the day before the Sabbath), things were different. Because the people were supposed to rest on the Sabbath, God told them to gather twice as much the day before, and on the Sabbath Day alone, the manna collected on the previous day remained good overnight. This "selective preservation" demonstrated the miraculous nature of God's provision, but it also emphasized the necessity of obedience, even if God's instructions about getting their essential needs met lay in a direction that they would neither have found nor have chosen on their own.

The truth is that God's provision for our need routinely comes in surprising ways. Is that not, after all, a primary lesson we learn from the Manger of Bethlehem, the Cross of Calvary, and the Empty Tomb? When we think about life in the fall of 2014, our thoughts probably lean toward hanging on, holding tight, storing up for a rainy day, and getting control of things. But I want to suggest to you that God's guidance for life improvement in these days may also come from and lead in surprising directions.

The surprising direction from which the guidance I want to suggest comes is the group Alcoholics Anonymous. I've had occasion to read a fair amount of the AA literature over the years, and I've been impressed by what I've found there. I've also been impressed by the sense of authenticity I sense in people who are seriously "working their Twelve-Step program."³

Working the Twelve Steps for the first time often takes several years, and the truth is that working the Steps really is a life-long project—as following Jesus happens to be, as well. I've actually thought for years that the Twelve Steps of AA provide a very helpful model for serious Christian discipleship, and I want to introduce you to these Steps over the next four weeks.⁴ I'll present the Twelve Steps of AA in a slightly altered version developed by a group called Sinners Anonymous, and we'll look at three more each week.

The **First Step** says that "**We admitted we were powerless over our sin—that our lives had become unmanageable.**" While the Bible is quite clear that you and I are—and will be—fully accountable to God for everything that we do and say (Matthew 12:36; Hebrews 4:13), the Bible is just as clear that all of our attempts to "get control" of our lives in our own strength are doomed to failure. So it is that the Twelve Steps require us to begin with the confession that we truly are powerless over our Sin; and this confession provides the foundation for both our healing and our hope.

Paul made this same point in Romans 7:15. Paul wrote his letter to the Romans late in life, after he'd been a follower of Jesus for decades. Yet even then he wrote, "*I don't understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do the very thing I hate.*" Paul's honesty about his predicament helps us to see that our own life-improvement projects are not going to be achieved by a single spiritual event, but rather require a life-long journey of growth . . . a journey that actually looks a lot like the Twelve Steps.

³ See Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976).

⁴ See Keith Miller, *A Hunger for Healing: The Twelve Steps as a Classic Model for Christian Spiritual Growth* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. v.

Paul hammers the point that our real problem is not “sins,” lower-case, plural, but “Sin,” upper-case, singular. You and I have a disease—a “dis-ease”—that goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve made clothes for themselves, those clothes represented a control behavior by which they tried to manage the anxiety they felt after they’d chosen to break off their relationship with God. Adam and Eve had cut loose their anchor, and they were adrift on an anxious sea.

Now if you’re thinking that this all has to do with the person in the pew in front of you (which it does, of course), but not with you, perhaps you’d allow me to ask a few questions. Is there any loneliness in your heart this morning? Are you aware of any jealousy or resentment? Do you have any relationships that are damaged or broken? Are there people you want to influence but cannot? Are there any behaviors over which you feel powerless? Do you have any persistent but unexplainable physical ailments? *Does any of that sound unmanageable?*

You may be willing to concede that some areas of your life feel unmanageable, but you may also be uncertain about this Twelve Step approach. Well, that’s okay. The Twelve Steps only work for people who are sufficiently broken and sufficiently hungry for healing to be willing to work them. You may not be in that much pain right now, but let’s look at Step Two, anyway, because such a time is quite likely to come, and I want you to be ready for it.

Step Two says that **“We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”** Step Two reminds us that the key to unlocking the doorway to authentic Christian faith is helping folks to develop a willingness to believe.

Sam Shoemaker once put it this way: “Don’t pay any attention to whether you believe or not. Just pray every day for thirty days that God will meet you at the point of your greatest need, and see what happens to you.”⁵ Many persons who take the Twelve Step journey report that, no matter what sort of Higher Power they used as they began the program, as they moved along they found themselves in relationship with a Higher Power who sounds remarkably like Jesus.

Again, even if you’re able to affirm the journey of salvation as a life-long process, you may be choking a little on the idea of needing to be “restored to sanity.” You have my sympathy, but consider this. **The Twelve Step definition of “insanity” is doing the same things in the same way and expecting different results.** That’s a pretty good description of most of our resolutions, isn’t it?

Do you remember those fears, resentments, broken relationships, and other anxieties that you remembered a moment ago? In addition to those, do you find that you sleep too much, or aren’t able to get to sleep? Do you work too much? Do you procrastinate? Do you do any of these things even though you don’t want to do them? And do you think that you really are in control of them, or could get “in control” if you just “made up your mind to” or took the time to do it?

A critical step in moving toward healing is realizing that such thoughts of control are nothing more than illusion. They’re part of that pervasive denial of dependence and need that the Sin-disease causes in us—all the way back to Eden.

Building on this awareness, **Step Three** says that **“We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.”** The “as we understood him” is a part of the journey toward Jesus, as well as the journey that continues on beyond our initial faith commitment. Our understanding of God needs to grow and deepen throughout our lives, and

⁵ Miller, p. 36.

“turning our will and our lives over to the care of God” is an ongoing challenge. Step Three may be the first place where we really have to confront that Voice from above that says, “Let go of the root [*that is, give up your efforts to control your Sin-disease*], and I’ll see to it that you are safe [*that is, I’ll give you a new nature that is Sin-resistant*].”

Up to this point, the Twelve Steps are very similar to many of our more familiar explanations of salvation such as “The Four Spiritual Laws” or “The Roman Road.” And it’s at this point that many Christians “turn in their tickets” and stop making much spiritual progress. The author of Hebrews, who may also have been Paul, wrote about this problem: “*You have been Christians for a long time now, and you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things a beginner must learn about the Scriptures. You are like babies who drink only milk and cannot eat solid food. And a person who is living on milk isn’t very far along in the Christian life and doesn’t know much about doing what is right*” (Hebrews 5:12-13).

Keith Miller described what happens when we stop at Step Three: “Christians often do what we call the ‘Twelve-Step Waltz’: One, Two, Three; One, Two Three; One, Two, Three. They see that they need God, see that their lives aren’t working, and they commit their lives to Christ, again and again. But not many go on to being spiritually well. That’s what steps Four through Twelve are about.”⁶ We’ll continue looking at those next week.

Well, has anything about the Twelve Steps caught your attention this morning? Can you sense any “hunger for healing” beginning to stir within? If you don’t sense any need for these steps, don’t use them. There are other ways to follow Jesus. **I must warn you, though, that it’s awfully easy for our efforts at control to work just well enough to prevent us from being truly healed, from experiencing the deep joy, peace, and purpose that God intends to give us—and preventing that is Satan’s real purpose, after all.**

But if you sense hope here, then I encourage you to let God’s Spirit keep working in your heart. **God really does intend for you to have a life that matters and relationships that last**, and the message of the Manna, the Manger, the Cross, and the Empty Tomb is that the way to get what we yearn for and what we desperately need lies in a different direction than what we first thought.

Jesus said, “**For whoever wants to save their life** [*that is, who continues to attempt Sin control under their own power*] **will lose it** [*will remain trapped in failure and discouragement*], **but whoever loses their life for me** [*that is, lets go of the limb and falls into my arms*] **will save it** [*will find that if I set you free from Sin, you will be free indeed*]” (Luke 9:24).

Because following Jesus involves a lifelong journey, it really doesn’t matter how long you’ve been a disciple of Jesus, or whether you’re just now deciding to follow Him. We can all still pray this version of the “sinner’s prayer”:

*Fill my cup, Lord; I lift it up, Lord.
Come and quench this thirsting of my soul.
Bread of Heaven, feed me ‘till I want no more,
Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole.*⁷

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Richard Blanchard, “Fill My Cup, Lord.” Assigned to Word Music, Inc., 1964.