

“A Hunger for Healing, Part 2”

The Twelve Steps as a Model for Christian Discipleship

John 5:1-15; Romans 7:15-8:2 ¹

Last week we met a hiker who slipped off the edge of a cliff. As you may remember, our hiker was able to break his fall by grabbing a tree root that stuck out from the cliff. When he desperately yelled, “Is there anybody up there who can help me?”, God replied, “Let go of the root, and I’ll see to it that you’re safe.” Our hiker didn’t like that idea any better than you and I like it, but God’s message to us continues to be that it’s only in letting go that we are safe.

Last week we also looked at Manna, the Manger, the Cross, and the Empty Tomb to remind ourselves that the way to abundant life—though it really *is* open to us—lies in a direction that we would never find on our own. We also began to look at an approach to abundant life that offers hope and healing to all of us as we make our way toward *a life that matters* and *relationships that last.*

Our problem is that many of us—and perhaps it’s more likely to be most of us—find ourselves stuck in a life pattern of recognizing sin in our lives—sin that prevents abundant life—confessing it, repenting from it . . . and then repeating it. Toward the end of the message last week, I described this pattern as the “Twelve-Step Waltz,” a pattern in which many Christians “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.”²

And as I noted last week, I’ve been impressed over the years with the Twelve-Step approach to healing of addictive behavior—like Sin—that was initially developed by Alcoholics Anonymous. The Twelve-Step approach works so well that it has been adopted by Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous and Overeaters Anonymous, just to name a few. (As an aside, Ben Davis told me last week about some non-Twelve-Step approaches to addictive behavior, links to which I will provide with the online version of this sermon.)³

If there is sin in your life that persistently defeats you even though you’ve confessed it and earnestly tried to move away from it, you may be encouraged to know that believers across the centuries have struggled with very similar problems. Some of these are so universal that they’ve been called “The Seven Deadly Sins.” Those seven sins are Anger, Envy, Lust, Sloth, Gluttony, Greed, and Pride. Their variations are without number, and the Twelve Steps provide a structured approach through which you and I, too, can gain victory over any Sin that has become stubbornly established in our lives.

Last week we surveyed the first three of the Twelve Steps: (1) “**We admitted we were powerless over our Sin—that our lives had become unmanageable;** (2) “**We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity**”; and (3) “**We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.**”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on October 19, 2014.

² Keith Miller, *A Hunger for Healing: The Twelve Steps as a Classic Model for Christian Spiritual Growth* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 36. This book serves as a primary resource for this sermon. Future citations will be given as page numbers rather than as footnotes.

³ These methods are Rational Recovery, which doesn’t use support groups, www.rational.org; and SMART Recovery (Self-Management for Addictive Recovery), which does use support groups, www.smartrecovery.org. Both of these are predicated on cognitive behavioral theory without any reference to a “higher power.” While I do find cognitive behavioral theory useful in clinical work, my limited experience with addiction counseling causes me to put more stock in Twelve-Step approaches.

As we build on this foundation, our texts this morning introduce us to three kinds of people. The first sort of person is represented by the paralyzed man lying by the Pool of Bethesda. **This man knew he was sick, but he had sort of gotten used to it, and he just lay down every day making excuses rather than attempting anything that might improve his situation.** Does that sound like anybody you know?

The second sort of person is represented by the religious leaders of the Jews. **These guys thought they weren't sick at all—the problem was with everybody else—and they saw their mission in life as getting everybody else in line!** Do you know anybody like that?

Paul is an example of a third kind of person. Paul was quite aware that he was infected with the deadly Sin-virus, and he struggled mightily against it, but Paul realized that his best efforts really didn't accomplish much. As he put it, *"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"* (Romans 7:15).

Unlike the Scribes and Pharisees, though, Paul was willing to trust himself to God's healing power, and as he did, he discovered the wonderful reality that *"there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. For the power of the life-giving Spirit [frees us] through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death"* (Romans 8:1-2)!

This morning we'll let three more of the Twelve Steps begin to define a path by which we, too, can move from *"Doing the very thing I hate"* to *"there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus."* Let's continue our journey

The **Fourth Step** says that **"We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves."** What in the world is a "moral inventory"? Keith Miller suggests that we imagine transferring ownership of our lives to God in a manner similar to the way in which we might transfer ownership of a business. Such an inventory would involve identifying assets and potential earning power, as well as damaged, out-of-date, or otherwise unsalable merchandise.⁴

This idea of transferring ownership of our lives is just different language for what Paul was talking about in Romans 6, before the lament and affirmation we just read: *"though you used to be slaves of sin . . . you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of righteousness"* (Romans 6:17-18). The idea is not that we are helpless, but that we are free moral agents with the ability to choose who and what we serve. Paul wrote, *"you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness"* (Romans 6:16). So . . . back to the "moral inventory"

A moral inventory involves compiling a list of traits and behaviors in our lives that have violated God's moral order, as well as identifying our more positive traits and contributions. Because our negative, sinful behaviors are the source of most of our pain, a moral inventory spends a lot of time in that area. Looking intently for any evidences of the seven deadly sins is a good place to start.

This "searching and fearless moral inventory" needs to be written down, and one of many ways to do this is to create an encrypted file on your computer. There are several things to remember as you create this inventory. First, this is your own inventory, not someone else's.

⁴ Keith Miller, *A Hunger for Healing: The Twelve Steps as a Classic Model for Christian Spiritual Growth* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 61. This book serves as a primary resource for this sermon. Future citations will be given as page numbers rather than as footnotes.

Beware of the seductive temptation to self-justification. The point is not what someone else did or did not do. The point is what I did because of Anger, Envy, Lust, Sloth, Gluttony, Greed, or Pride.

Second, God already knows the truth. The point of Step Four is *to break through our own denial and self-justification* so that we can once again become persons of complete moral integrity and transparency—or so that we can become such persons for the very first time. Third, the Bible says that “*ALL have sinned*” (Romans 3:23), and because we’re all more similar than we are different, we can take courage from the fact that we have lots of company on this journey.

Step Four is pretty tough, but Step Five is harder. The **Fifth Step** says that “**We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.**” Did you hear the tough part—“*and to another human being*”? This is what it looks like to live out the Bible’s admonition to “*Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed*” (James 5:16).

I’m told that long ago our church in Bristol had a practice of meeting monthly to confess each other’s sins and to hold each other to account. I’m also told that, while these meetings improved the public behavior of the membership, they didn’t do much for the spirit of love in the congregation! Those meetings grew out of a significant misunderstanding of James 5:16, where we’re told to confess our sins **TO** each other, not **FOR** each other!

Well, so what’s the deal? Why can’t we just confess to God? There are several reasons: (1) without a witness, we tend to soft-pedal our sin and engage in considerable self-justification rather than in heart-felt confession and repentance; (2) without a witness, we don’t gain the release and healing that comes when someone actually does know all of our sin and *still loves us*; and (3), without a witness, we lack the concrete testimony of a brother or sister in Christ as a defense when Satan continues to use those past sins as a weapon against us.

Here’s another way to think about this. Imagine that a husband becomes involved in an affair and his wife finds out about it. Even though both of them know about this adultery, can they ever have a close relationship again unless he confesses it to her and asks for her forgiveness? No, they can’t. That sin will always be a wall between them.

It’s the same way with our relationship with God. Even though God knows all about our Sin, the transforming power of confession is that when I become willing to tell God what God already knows, then—and only then—our relationship can become clear again; the block, which was in me, is removed.

Keith Miller wrote, “Some people seek an easier and softer way by doing a ‘general confession’ to God alone. They are not about to name specifically the humiliating, ‘awful’ things they have done out loud before another human being. But this very act of specifically confessing things is what often leads to [healing]. The more afraid you are to tell about a certain act or thought in your fifth step, the more likely it is that confessing that particular thing will put a new crack in your denial and free you in a new area. There doesn’t seem to be an easier, softer way, and people who seek one apparently don’t understand the tenacious and tricky nature of this spiritual disease we are facing” (pp. 91-92).

I had a counseling client a number of years ago who came to our first appointment about half drunk. Even in such a shape, though, she told me quite sincerely, “I will do anything it takes—*anything*—to get well.” Over a period of several years of counseling, there were a number of tough places in which she hesitated at talking through what needed to be examined next in order to become well. On those occasions I reminded her of that initial desperate pledge, and I asked her

whether or not she had really meant it. By God's grace, she did accomplish the sweaty soul work of bringing healing to the terrible sexual abuse she experienced as a child, and she became free, not only from that inner terror, but from alcohol addiction as well. It is in working through the Fifth Step that deep healing begins to bring forth its fruit.

The **Sixth Step** says "**We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.**" We in the Church are generally folk who have stopped committing the more obvious sins, but we are also frequently folk who are still quite familiar with Anger, Envy, Lust, Sloth, Gluttony, Greed, and Pride.

Each of these Seven Deadly Sins has to do with control: ANGER and SLOTH are tools for manipulating the behavior of other people. ENVY and LUST involve the desire to take control of something away from someone else. GLUTTONY and GREED involve the desire to control more than my share of *things*; and PRIDE involves the desire to control other people's *perceptions* of me.

Beyond this, many dimensions of our relationships with our children are really covert efforts at control, as is much of the content of our prayers. A substantial portion of our prayer for ourselves and for others tends to operate out of the conviction that *we know what needs to happen*, and we ask God to bring that about. That's control.

In the Sixth Step, we turn loose of control—even control of our own healing. Keith Miller again: "It was in doing the Sixth Step that I saw why I had become so exhausted. I'd been trying to do *God's part* in the spiritual growth and healing process. In the program I was told that my part was 'being entirely ready,' being ready to *let God* be the controller and life-changer of myself and others. When I did that, my sponsor said, I would see how God's power is released to flow through our lives to clean them only when we quit trying to control the *how* and *when* he is to use that power"(p. 112).

The leaders of the Jews were captive to several of these sins, and the paralyzed man by the Pool of Bethesda must have been as well, because when Jesus asked him "*Do you want to get well?*" he answered by making excuses. To the man's credit, though, when Jesus told him to get up, the man *obeyed*, and in so doing, he was healed. The Sixth Step brings us to the place where we, like this man, have to face the fact that there are many secondary benefits to our sinful practices that we're not eager to give up.

So how do we move forward with Steps Four, Five, and Six? The place to begin your "fearless and searching moral inventory" is with **resentments and disappointments**. "Resentment" and "disappointment" are really just different words for "anger," which you will recognize as one of the Seven Deadly Sins. **Resentment and disappointment cause violence in violent people and illness in non-violent people** (p. 72).

Let yourself begin to be aware of all the resentment and disappointment in your heart, and start writing it down. Toward whom are you resentful? What happened to cause this disappointment? What effects is this particular resentment or disappointment having in your life? Most importantly, try to identify what you did to contribute to the birth of this resentment, and what you've done to nurture and sustain it. You don't have to do this all at once. Just begin the list and work on it as God reveals things to you.

After you've worked on resentments and disappointments awhile, begin to list your **fears**. Anywhere there is fear in our hearts, there we have not yet fully trusted God's love and care to be at work in our lives. There we are still trying to assert control and force life to work out the way we want it to rather than trusting God to control how and when His power acts in our lives.

After you've gained some ground identifying your fears, add to your inventory an examination of how you've handled your **sexuality**. Look at how you've pursued financial and emotional **security**. Begin to identify things that others might view as **defects** in your character. Again, don't be in a hurry. Just begin the list and add to it as God reveals things to you—and God will, if you really want to know.

When Step Four is finally finished, there are three parts to Step Five: (1) choosing a person to whom you will admit “the exact nature of your wrongs”; (2) meeting with that person and telling him or her what you've learned in Step Four; (3) receiving any feedback the person you've chosen has to offer.

Your Fifth Step listener needs to be someone who is trustworthy and non-judgmental—preferably someone who has also done Step Five. This person doesn't have to live near you. Some folks have traveled hundreds of miles to complete their Fifth Step. Bear in mind that the person who receives your Fifth Step is primarily a witness as you confess Step Four to God. When your appointment comes, ask your listener not to interrupt or to make any comments until you're completely finished. State clearly that what you're going to reveal must be kept totally confidential, forever, and make sure that this is clearly understood.

You may just want to read your inventory. Most of us want to stop to explain why we think we did certain things, but that desire must be resisted. The point of confession is to admit that I did do these things, period. Most people find that completing the Fifth Step brings a feeling of relief and cleansing more profound than they could ever have imagined. The Bible calls it “Grace.”

The paralyzed man by the Pool of Bethesda is a good illustration of what happens when we take Step Six. He had to give up a lot in order to get well, and that's why he hadn't done it. He didn't want to give up playing “Poor Me,” “Ain't It Awful,” “Kick Me,” and “Look How Hard I've Tried.” He didn't want to have to take responsibility for his life. There were lots of secondary gains in being a part of the “I've been sick forever” crowd. So Jesus asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

I guess that's the question for you and for me this morning, too. Do we want to get well?