

# “A Hunger for Healing, Part 3”

The Twelve Steps as a Model for Christian Discipleship  
Matthew 5:23-24; 7:1-2 <sup>1</sup>

As we continue our journey through the Twelve Steps of “Sinners Anonymous” as described by Keith Miller in his book, *A Hunger for Healing*,<sup>2</sup> you may remember that the Twelve Steps divide nicely into four groups of three. **Steps One – Three** have to do with coming to grips with the deadly stranglehold that Sin has over our lives. **Steps Four – Six** have to do with achieving a clear spirit with God through searching and fearless confession of our Sin.

This morning, we consider **Steps Seven – Nine**, which have to do with achieving a clear spirit with other people through equally searching and fearless confession, repentance, forgiveness and restitution. And next week we’ll conclude our overview with **Steps Ten – Twelve**, which have to do with continuing to practice the disciplines that are essential for lifelong healing and growth.

As we begin today, the **Seventh Step** says that “**We humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.**” Whereas the Sixth Step deals with *being ready* for God to remove our defects of character, Step Seven involves *actually releasing these things* and letting them go.

While this transition sounds simple, the difference is profound. A man once sought help from a Christian counselor because he was having trouble with his anger. His angry outbursts were having very negative effects in his family life and in his work. When the counselor asked him, “What would your life look like if you got rid of your anger?” the man was silent for a long time. Finally he said, “But if I get rid of my anger, what will I have left?”<sup>3</sup>

While anger may not be your particular struggle, there are things that are. Whether you secretly struggle with Anger, Envy, Lust, or Sloth, Gluttony, Greed, or Pride, or with any of their untold variations, it’s pretty safe to say that you and I each have places where we regularly struggle with particular sins.

Keith Miller noted that taking Step Seven is the greatest act of humility many of us have ever been asked to undertake: to transfer complete control of our recovery to God. Although this step sounds simple at first, it is an amazing spiritual watershed. Where we’d once asked God to *help us* get *ourselves* out of our pain and get our lives back on track, now we put ourselves completely in God’s hands so that *God* many remove *any* defects that stand in the way of our being the person God wants us to be—and letting God decide what those defects are, and when and how to remove them (p. 116).

**Step Eight** marks the transition from God-focus to Other-focus, and leads us into new challenges. Step Eight has two parts: (1) “**We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and (2) we became willing to make amends to them all.**”

Our “searching and fearless” moral inventory in Step Four helped us become aware of the many, many ways in which we ourselves have sinned against other people. Steps Five, Six, and Seven took us to that place where we must always go first: to God’s Presence in confession, forgiveness, and release. Step Eight begins to “put feet to our prayers.”

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on October 26, 2014.

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

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Miller, Christianity Today International.

The purpose of Steps Eight and Nine is to do everything that love allows to get rid of anything abusive or harmful that stands between us and other people. Before God's love, healing, and freedom can become fully released in our lives, we have to do all that we ourselves can do to heal the bruised and broken relationships in our past.

We begin the Eighth Step by making a list of every person we can identify with whom we have or have had a strained, damaged, or broken relationship. Then we go back over that list, asking God to reveal to us how we ourselves contributed to those situations.

Because the things we do that hurt other people don't always hurt us, there are probably ways in which we've hurt the people close to us that we'll never know unless they tell us . . . *so we ask them*, being careful to take what they tell us very seriously, and resisting every inclination to minimize or to justify our offenses. And it should go without saying that, when apprised of hurts we've caused, we offer humble and sincere apology together with a request for forgiveness. True repentance is also willing to make meaningful restitution where this is possible and appropriate.

The last part of Step Eight involves releasing the pain and anger that remains in our hearts because of what others have done to us. "Forgiveness in this sense means simply that we release our need to punish, to get even, to make the other person apologize or do *anything*. We release our need to continue to be hurt or be angry about what they did" (p. 143). Where there is culpability on the part of the other person—and there often is—we leave recompense to God, who alone is a righteous Judge.

The point here is that every pain, every resentment, every hostility that we refuse to release to God requires considerable emotional, spiritual and physical energy to maintain, and therefore makes us less energetic and less alive. Try to imagine that you have fifty huge helium balloons tied to your waist and that your task is to swim downward under water with such continual force that all of these balloons remain beneath the water's surface. This is similar to the amount of emotional, spiritual and physical energy that's required to keep our ancient wounds either out of our conscious awareness or else to nurture the bitterness to which they give birth.

Every now and then, one of these balloons comes untied and breaks free, breaking the surface of our consciousness and entering our awareness. Our normal reflexive response is to grab the balloon, retie it more securely, and continue our herculean efforts to manage our balloons. If, however, when each balloon breaks free—or in this case, when we choose to untie them, one by one—we do the sweaty soul work of facing that pain and allowing God to heal it, every balloon that is released passes into the upper atmosphere and explodes, releasing a measure of emotional, spiritual, and physical energy, and causing us to become more and more alive.

While grasping this concept isn't particularly difficult, you already know that forgiveness is not easy to accomplish and comes with considerable cost. Indeed, the Cross of Calvary is eternal witness to the fact that *forgiveness is the most costly thing in the universe*.

The fact is that forgiveness represents the very heart of the Good News of Jesus, and forgiveness offered and received is central to Christian faith. Even so, I suspect that most of us know a lot more about standing in need of forgiveness than we know about the power to forgive. Forgiveness is difficult. It is not for the faint of heart.

While you and I know that Jesus told us to love our enemies and to forgive our offenders times without number, this is much easier to say or to affirm than it is to actually do. Professor Lewis Smedes, of Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, very wisely pointed out that forgiveness is really a

four-step process.<sup>4</sup> How long it takes to move through these stages is determined by many variables, chief of which is the depth of the wound. Smedes' four stages are HURT, HATE, HEALING, and COMING TOGETHER, or reconciliation.

Persons who have been offended are frequently advised—especially in religious circles—to move directly from stage one to stage four, from “Hurt” to “Reconciliation.” But far from producing forgiveness, such short-circuiting (which really represents denial and dishonesty) leads instead to avoidance, to distancing from others, and to creeping spiritual impotence. All four stages must be honored. Let's look at them briefly . . . .

1. **HURT** doesn't need much explanation. Hurt is the visceral experience of being wounded, intentionally or unintentionally. Sometimes the wound is physical, sometimes psychological or spiritual. Physical responses may include anger, hyperventilation, avoidance, flight, fight, etc.

2. **HATE** quickly follows hurt. Hate involves our nearly instinctual desire to hurt in return, the desire to inflict pain even beyond that which we have suffered. While it's not helpful to nurse our hate, it is necessary for us to acknowledge it and to allow it to speak, if real forgiveness is ever to follow. While final healing only comes through the release of forgiveness, we short-circuit the healing process if we avoid acknowledging the depth of the wound. Forgiveness doesn't work if it fails to penetrate the depth of the wound, and hatred and anger take us to that deepest place.

When we're in this stage we often ruminate about the offense. Indeed, we have a hard time thinking about anything else. We avoid the other person, and we may fantasize about what we'd like to do to them. When the offense comes into our minds, we feel anger. Our heart rates increase. We may clench our fists.

Healing must be powerful enough to deal with all of this intensity. Superficial statements of “it doesn't matter” or quick statements of forgiveness don't get to the bottom of the wound. If healing is to come, we don't *nurture* hate, but we do *acknowledge* it. This stage can last quite a long time.

3. **HEALING** is the longest stage. Forgiveness is not “acting as though it didn't happen,” because while trust is easily destroyed, it is not easily rebuilt. If our relationship with the offender ever returns to a place of trust, that restoration is significantly dependent on the offender's willingness to behave in trustworthy ways. Still, this requires that we grant the offender some limited opportunities to be trustworthy.

We don't let our guard down entirely, but we do let it down enough to permit small demonstrations of trustworthiness. When we're with the offender, we don't give him or her “the silent treatment,” but are as courteous and kind as we can manage. While we don't protect the offender from the natural and appropriate consequences of the offense, neither do we try to augment or supplement her or his pain.

Real forgiveness involves giving persons what they need, not what they deserve, just as God does for us. In this third stage of healing, we choose to forgo any reminding of the offender of the offense in question, and by God's grace, we act in kindness toward them whenever we can. As God's Spirit continues to work in us—sometimes over a period of years—we begin to see our offender through God's eyes. We begin to sense his or her own pain and brokenness, out of which our own wound was given. We begin to be able to pray just the tiniest bit for this person's

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis Smedes, *Forgive & Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (HarperOne, 1996).

healing. We begin to think of him or her with growing compassion rather than with anger or hatred. And as God continues to grant us the mind of Christ, we eventually find ourselves able to say with our Lord, “*Father, forgive them, because they don’t know what they are doing.*”<sup>5</sup>

As God’s Spirit continues to work in our hearts, we eventually find that we can “put our end of the rope down,” no longer feeling any need to tug or pull against the offender. We can walk away from the wound into the future, continuing to pray for God’s healing and blessing in the offender’s life. When such an attitude becomes possible—only by the grace of God—then forgiveness may be offered; when forgiveness is offered, it may be received, and reconciliation may follow. This is the primary work of the kingdom of God (2 Corinthians 5:19).

4. The truth is that this final stage of **COMING TOGETHER**, or **RECONCILIATION**, may or may not happen. Reconciliation has to do with spoken forgiveness, which we can offer with or without repentance on the other person’s part, even as Jesus did for us from the Cross. But sometimes the other person is dead by the time we ourselves get to this point. Sometimes they’ve become unavailable in other ways, such as through dementia or distance. Our own final release sometimes comes through writing a letter of forgiveness that we may or may not ever mail. Many people find it very powerful to burn or to bury such a letter as an act of sacrifice to God.

Once we have, by God’s grace, been able to release our hurt and to become *willing* to make amends to all of the persons on our list—and remember that this can literally take *years*—then we’re ready to take the **Ninth Step**, which says that “**We made direct amends to all of the people we have harmed wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.**”

“To make amends” is to correct or to put right, and our texts this morning remind us that such action is not only at the very heart of the Gospel, but is also at the very heart of what God expects of us. Jesus told us that “*If you are standing before the altar at the Temple, offering a sacrifice to God, and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there beside the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God. . . . Whatever measure you use in judging others, it will be used to measure how you are judged*” (Matthew 5:23-24, 7:2, NLT).

As was the case with our confession in Step Five, the more difficult an amends is to make or the more negative we feel toward a particular person, the more important it is to take this Step, and the more healing is likely to come from it. *Did not Jesus also tell us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us?* (Matthew 5:44-45). As Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin memorably put it, “**Peace is not made with friends. Peace is made with enemies.**”<sup>6</sup> That’s what Jesus was saying, too.

While more often than not, the process of making amends improves or restores relationships, it’s important to remember that when you make amends you may get some very negative or controlling reactions from family members, because your recovery and healing may threaten to break up the dysfunctional family system and leave them no longer in control (p. 158).

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<sup>5</sup> As a Jew wrote on a piece of wrapping paper before entering the gas chamber, “Lord, when you enter your glory, do not remember only people of good will. Remember also those of ill will. Do not remember their cruelty and their violence. Instead, be mindful of the fruits we bore because of what they did to us. Remember the patience of some and the courage of others. Recall the camaraderie, humility, fidelity, and greatness of soul which they awoke in us. And grant, O Lord, that the fruits we bore may one day be their redemption” (Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> *Newsweek*, September 13, 1993.

As we saw a few minutes ago when considering the process of relational healing, making amends doesn't mean caving in to others' efforts to control us. Control is a central dynamic of all Sin, and allowing other people to control us is not only damaging to us, but leaves them captive to Sin as well. Our offenders have their own journey of healing to pursue, and our Spirit-empowered amends for what we ourselves have done just may clear the way for their journeys to begin.

In any event, the purpose of Step Nine is to do all we can do *to clean up our own side of the street, to put down our own end of the tug-of-war rope, and we can do these things, no matter what the other person does.* In the end, Step Nine is about humbly taking responsibility for the things we've done, obeying Jesus' command to seek a clear spirit, and casting ourselves upon God's promise that "*if we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong*" (1 John 1:9).

Thanks be to God for this incredible gift!