

# “A Hunger for Healing, Part 4”

The Twelve Steps as a Model for Christian Discipleship  
Luke 11:24-28; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 <sup>1</sup>

Preaching is most helpful and most effective, not when I try to impress you with big words and high-sounding phrases, nor when I talk about things of which I have little personal knowledge, but rather when I'm able to share with you those realities and those eternal spiritual principles that are making a difference in my own life. The Twelve Steps, originally developed by Alcoholics Anonymous, are such principles for me.

This morning we come to the end of our brief examination of the Twelve Steps, and I expect that at least some of us welcome the end of this series with a sense of relief. For some, this relief has to do with the fact that we've had a hard time relating to these ideas. For others, this relief has to do with the fact that we've finally understood what it takes to attain spiritual health and wholeness, and we're eager to get on with that work!

As I've mentioned every week, there is one addiction that every person in this room shares in common. *There are no exceptions*. This addiction damages every dimension of our lives and it pursues us everywhere we go. While God truly is able to heal us, our struggle with this addiction will have no end in this life. Sisters and brothers, you and I are addicted to SIN.<sup>2</sup>

John Fischer pointed out that there is something very right about realizing that our struggle with Sin is in many ways similar to an alcoholic's struggle with drinking. It's never over. "Sinners are never cured; they simply decide to stop sinning . . . and it's a daily decision."<sup>3</sup>

The good news is that God has provided us with the help we need, and the Twelve Steps provide an elegant summary of the Bible's eternal message of Hope for our addiction. These Twelve Steps are clear, concise, memorable, and powerful. Would you read them with me?

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";
3. "We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him";
4. "We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves";
5. "We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs";
6. "We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character";
7. "We humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings";
8. "We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all";
9. "We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others";
10. "We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it";
11. "We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and for the power to carry that out";
12. "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others and to practice these principles in all our affairs."

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on November 2, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> The Bible says that "If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth" (1 John 1:8).

<sup>3</sup> John Fischer in *Contemporary Christian Music*, September 1987.

This morning, our task is to be introduced to Steps 10-12, so let's look at them for a bit. The **Tenth Step** says that **"We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it."** If we've done the previous Steps carefully, by God's grace, then completing these steps has allowed us to finally make peace with our past. By working the first nine Steps, we've gotten clear of the "emotional hangover"<sup>4</sup> that clouded our minds, our hearts, and our spirits until we made our confessions and our amends.

While becoming "clean and clear" is our *essential* beginning, Jesus taught us in this morning's text that becoming clean can lead to even greater evil unless the place that Sin held in our lives becomes filled with God's power and purpose (Luke 11:24-26). One of the AA publications, known as "The Twelve & Twelve," says that "the wise have always known that no one can make much of his [or her] life *until self-searching becomes a regular habit*, until he is able to admit and accept what he finds, and until [she] patiently and persistently tries to correct what is wrong" (*Twelve*, p. 88).

Keith Miller put it more bluntly: "The reason [continued personal inventory] is so important is that the Sin-disease, with its denial and delusion, is always hovering 'just a decision away' to throw us back into fear and confusion. Its tactics are to convince us in various ways, 'You're "well" now and don't need a stupid program to lead a normal life . . . . One of the major delusions of the spiritual life is that we can 'do it ourselves' without a daily contact with God and a daily look at the reality of what is going on in our lives."<sup>5</sup>

"Continuing to take personal inventory" is really a lot like what the Bible calls "*praying without ceasing*" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). "Continuing to take personal inventory" means that all day long, every day, we do spiritual spot-checks to see how we're doing with maintaining a clear spirit with God and with other people. "Continuing to take personal inventory" means that at the end of each day, we look back over the day to see where Sin has gotten some of its countless hooks into us, and we humbly ask God to remove these hooks.

Just as importantly, "continuing to take personal inventory" means that we pay attention to the *positive* changes God is making in our lives and in our relationships, and we thank God for our healing. Nurturing and expressing an attitude of gratitude to God is one of the most healing things we can do each day.

And of course, whenever God reveals the need for making amends, we do so right away. Making apology and asking for forgiveness actually offers us considerable help in moving away from sin, because the pain of confession becomes a powerful deterrent to repeating whatever it was we had to admit (p. 174).

**Step Eleven** says that **"We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and for the power to carry that out."** Persons who work through the Twelve Steps find themselves moving from trusting in a vague "Higher Power" of some kind to inviting the loving Spirit of God into the deepest, most confused, most painful, and most practical areas of their lives. They find themselves increasingly in contact, not with a vague Power, but with a *Person*—a Person whom they sense is using His power to heal them . . . and a Person who is remarkably like Jesus, because it is He, after all (p. 180).

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<sup>4</sup>*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1981), p. 88. Future citations will be given as page numbers rather than as footnotes.

<sup>5</sup> Keith Miller, *A Hunger for Healing: The Twelve Steps as a Classic Model for Christian Spiritual Growth* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 164. Future citations will be given as page numbers rather than as footnotes.

The “Twelve & Twelve” notes that “those who have persisted [in prayer] have found strength not ordinarily their own. They have found wisdom beyond their usual capability. And they have increasingly found a peace of mind which can stand firm in the face of difficult circumstances. We discover that we do receive guidance for our lives to just about the extent that we stop making demands upon God to give it to us on order and on our terms” (*Twelve*, p. 104).

The “Twelve & Twelve” reminds us that one of the greatest rewards of meditation and prayer is the sense of *belonging* that comes to us. We no longer live in a completely hostile world. We are no longer lost and frightened and purposeless. Once we begin to sense God’s will, once we begin to see faith, hope, and love as the only truly real and eternal things, we also find new Hope in the midst of life’s pain. We know that God lovingly watches over us. We know that when we turn to Him, all will be well with us, both in this life and in the life to come (*Twelve*, p. 105).

As these things become real in our own experience, our prayer becomes more and more transparent to God, and opens a river of sure power and effective guidance from God (*Twelve*, p. 109). As we become free from our previous delusions of grandeur and control, we become less and less interested in trying to tell God what to do, whether in our own lives or in the lives of those we love. Our prayer life becomes more and more an act of worship, as we simply bring needs, situations, and persons into God’s Presence and trust God’s loving response to them.

The **Twelfth Step** says that “**Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps we tried to carry this message to others and to practice these principles in all our affairs.**” This last Step is so important that it takes up much more space in the Twelve Step literature than any of the others (p. 196).

The Twelfth Step has three parts, each of which has a counterpart in the New Testament. The **first part**, “**having had a spiritual awakening**,” is anchored in 2 Corinthians 5:17, where it is written that “*if anyone is in Christ he [or she] is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold, the new has come!*” Or, as Paul put it in Romans 12, “*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will*” (vv. 1-2).

The **second part**, “**carrying this message to others**,” is like Mark 5:19: “*Go home to your friends*,” Jesus said, “*and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.*” One of the paradoxes of the Twelve Steps and of the Christian life itself is that you and I can remain spiritually alive, vital, and growing only by giving away what we’re receiving. And the **third part**, “**practicing these principles in all our affairs**,” is like the end of the Great Commission, where Jesus told us to tell everyone, everywhere, about him, “*teaching them to obey all the commands I have given you*” (Matthew 28:20).

Let’s go back to the first part for a moment, because that’s where I want to end our survey of the Twelve Steps. How would you tell someone what it means to experience a “spiritual awakening”? Here’s how the AA tradition describes such awakening:

- ☞ “When a man or a woman has a spiritual awakening, the most important meaning of it is that he has now become able to do, feel, and believe that which he could not do before on his unaided strength and resources alone.
- ☞ “[She] has been granted a gift which amounts to a new state of consciousness and being.
- ☞ “He has been set on a path which tells him he is really going somewhere, that life is not a dead end, not something to be endured or mastered.
- ☞ “In a very real sense [she] has been transformed, because [she] has laid hold of a source of strength which [had not been previously available to her.]

- ☞ “He finds himself in possession of a degree of honesty, tolerance, unselfishness, peace of mind, and love of which he had thought himself quite incapable” (pp. 106-107).
- ☞ “[She] somehow knows that God has enabled [her] to make a mighty beginning, and [she] senses that [she] stands at the edge of new mysteries, joys, and experiences of which [she] had never even dreamed” (*Twelve*, pp. 109-110).

This description is quite consistent with what the New Testament describes and leads us to expect when the Spirit of God becomes active in our lives. Does this sound like anything in your own experience? If not, wouldn't you like it to? Have you been there before, but aren't there anymore? Wouldn't you like to get back to that place, and beyond?

Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve teach us to live our lives in continual evaluation of our obedience, in living relationship with God, and as rushing mountain rivers of God's grace into the lives of others. Wouldn't you like for your life to really be going somewhere? Wouldn't you like to find yourself at the edge of new mysteries, joys, and experiences the likes of which you have never even imagined? *You can be*, if you work these Steps.

There are persons in this room this morning who are struggling with addictions that no one else knows about—or that we *think* no one else knows about. There are persons in this room whose lives are in turmoil and in pain. There are persons in this room who are struggling with the direction of their lives. There are persons in this room who are playing around with Sin. There are persons in this room whose heart relationships are unraveling. There are persons in this room whose vocational life is a wreck. There are persons in this room whose bedrock trust is in material wealth rather than in God.

There are also persons in this room who, if we asked those closest to us, and if they dared to answer truthfully, would be told that our lives are controlled by such things as selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, fear, jealousy, self-pity, greed, envy, depression and hatred. And as if that weren't enough, all of us are sinners—and desperate sinners, at that. ***Who are we to say that we do not need this message?***

The Bible warns us that God is going to judge every one of us according to our deeds.<sup>6</sup> That's bad news. But the Bible also tells us that if we choose to live “*in the light of God's presence . . . [then] the blood of Jesus, [God's] Son, cleanses us from every sin*” (1 John 1:7). That's Good News!

My friend, do you want to be clean again? The Bible says that “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 8:1). Would you say that with me? “***There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.***” How much condemnation? NO condemnation! “*Neither do I condemn you,*” Jesus said. “*Go, and sin no more*” (John 8:11).

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<sup>6</sup> Ezekiel 33:10-20; Hebrews 4:13