

Serenity Prayer

God, grant me the Serenity
to accept the things I cannot change.
The courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace;
Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is;
Not as I would have it;
Trusting that You will make all things right
if I surrender to Your will;

So that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely
happy with You forever in the next.

AMEN-

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Series Theme: Helps in following a 12-Step program by reflecting on the beatitudes .

Title: Next Steps

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Preacher: Rev. Joyce Donigian

Synopsis: Although it is difficult, forgiving others, forgiving self, and asking others for forgiveness are all necessary for healing and restoration of relationships with others and with God.

THE FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON: Luke 6: 27-36 (TLB)

THE SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON: Matthew 5:21-26 (TLB)

MEMORY VERSE: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” Matthew 5:7

Grace to you and peace from the One who is and who was and who is to come.

Over the past several weeks we have been looking at the steps in the 12-step program for Alcoholics Anonymous, steps that work just as well for dealing with other addictions as well as bothersome behaviors we would like to change. They work equally well for all of us in trying to live lives more in tune with God’s teachings. In previous weeks we have learned that the first step is realizing that we cannot fix ourselves by ourselves; we need help from a being greater than ourselves, a higher power, and with Christians, that is God. That is the second step.

The third step is actually accepting help from God by turning our lives over to God. Then comes a tough job – taking a hard look at ourselves and identifying the things that need to change, step 4. Steps 5 is admitting those shortcomings to God and then to another human being, putting our situation into words. Step 6 is to be ready to accept God’s help, through prayer and study as well as through others, to change our shortcomings into positives. And then step 7 is to ask God to remove all of our shortcomings.

Those last steps are hard, very hard, steps that have us being honest with ourselves about the things that we need to change, sharing those faults with God and at least one other. That kind of self-disclosure is really hard.

Now comes the next steps, and they are even harder. Step 8 is to make a list of all those who have been harmed by our behaviors and then be willing, within ourselves, to want to make amends. And step 9 is to actually try to receive forgiveness from those we have hurt, as long as it doesn’t hurt them. That is really hard. The first seven steps in any 12-step program – they are all about the person – they are all about getting things right within, getting right with God, getting right with self. Things change with steps 8 and 9 – these steps are all about getting things right with others.

One good thing to think about when looking at tackling these challenging steps is how many steps have already been mastered. Some may feel guilty about past behaviors and relationships, but those kinds of feelings are not the goal of these two steps. Rather these steps give a person a way to try to

make things right, to make things right with folks they have known and possibly even loved in the past and yet did not treat them that way. These people could be family members, co-workers, bosses, neighbors, even the drivers in cars on highways that a person might travel.

So the first thing to do in step 8 is to begin a list of those who might have been hurt or been challenged by one's past behavior. While making this list one should consider whether or not they are ready to make amends with that person. Then step 9 is to make plans on how to put this list into practice.

There are several categories of inappropriate behavior for those recovering from alcohol abuse, but I think they can be helpful to all of us. Some of these behaviors are:

1. A lack of control. This can mean being willing to lie, cheat, or steal, be late for appointments or forget them altogether.
2. There is also a tendency to engage in fewer social interactions, and relationships in general are less valued.
3. Duties and obligations can become less important than the addictive behavior. This could lead to losing a job, losing money, losing housing, losing relationships.
4. Lastly, and this is a big one – keeping secrets.

Sometimes making amends can be almost impossible because doing so could bring up painful memories to the one who was hurt in the first place. For example, if a partner was abandoned, cheated on, or lied to, getting back in touch with them might prove difficult as well as hurtful. This step is not intended to make the person asking for amends feel better, by doing the right thing. Rather it is truly to take the other person into account and try to do the things that most help that person.

Since we are looking at steps 8 and 9, this is truly a two-step process. First, making that list can be enlightening, making the person think about and remember those who were hurt by bad behavior. But there is more; the list needs to be made, but also the list-maker needs to be willing to make amends to everyone they put on the list. That can prove to be a stumbling block, since all of us are more than willing to spread the blame when things go wrong in a relationship. Whether the hurt party is completely innocent or in some way complicit, amends need to be freely given.

And making amends is not simply texting an “I’m sorry” or even a phone call or a letter saying the same. A person can be truly sorry for what happened in the past and also must be willing to pay the price to make it right. For example, perhaps you stole some money from an employer when you were a teenager. Making a direct amends would include both an apology and a willingness to pay back the money.

Although these are two steps, the 9th step really has three parts: admit the wrong, sincerely apologize without excuses, and then do whatever action is necessary to right the wrong. Each of these parts is hard, and putting them together is even harder, but the result is worth the effort.

Here are some examples of how making amends can change one’s life.

A woman, let’s call her Mary, remembered that when she was in second grade the woman who had been the school’s music teacher died after a long bout with cancer. Her daughter was a classmate. The other teachers and administrators told the children not to think or talk about this teacher’s death. The children were told not to feel sorry for her daughter, but instead let her get back to her schoolwork.

Years later, while visiting a class reunion website, Mary found the daughter’s contact information. She contacted her and told her how much everyone liked her mother and how bad she herself had felt during all the intervening years for not telling the daughter how special everyone thought her mother was. The daughter wrote back and said she was very grateful to hear these comforting words. Up until this contact, she was not aware of the “gag order” and thought that nobody cared about her mother or about her. There were 40 intervening years, but once amends had been made, friendship bloomed.

Even though the hurt was deeply felt by the daughter, Mary was only a child listening to the misguided advice of adults. Yet as the years passed, Mary still felt that something should be done to make amends. She felt compassion, some could call it mercy. She wanted nothing from the teacher’s daughter, only to tell her the truth that had been hidden from her all those years ago.

The beatitude regarding mercy seems to be at the heart of this making amends. Mary carried guilt? Sorrow? Remorse? All these years. Finally she was able to let go of all those negative feelings and allow peace and fulfillment to flow from her giving compassion, sharing mercy.

Here's a second story that will be familiar to many.

On the morning of October 2, 2006, Charles Carl Roberts barricaded himself inside West Nickel Mines Amish School. After murdering five young girls and wounding six others, Roberts committed suicide. It was a dark day for the Amish community of West Nickel Mines, but it was also a dark day for Marie Roberts, the wife of the gunman, and her two young children.

On the following Saturday, Marie went to her husband's funeral. She and her children watched in amazement as Amish families — about half of the seventy-five mourners present — came and stood alongside them in the midst of their blinding grief. Despite the horrific crimes the man had committed against them, the Amish came to mourn Charles Carl Roberts as a husband and daddy.

Bruce Porter, a fire department chaplain who attended the Service, was profoundly moved: "It's the love, the heartfelt forgiveness they have toward the family. I broke down and cried seeing it displayed." He said Marie Roberts was also touched. "She was absolutely, deeply moved by the love shown." That love was compassion, mercy.

Here's a final story that gives us another view of compassion. It's a story from a nurse in her words. I'm exhausted. My work has worn me down, and so I came up this hill today to take a break, to get some fresh air, to look out over Boston from up high. And when I got here, there was a crowd already here. I wonder who this guy is, the one who's talking, and what he has to say.

My name is Lisa, and I'm a nurse. I've been a nurse at a nearby hospital, in the psych unit, for eighteen years. I work with profoundly mentally ill people on a locked unit. Some of our patients have been hospitalized most of their lives by this point. A lot of

them are physically sick too. And lots don't have any family or friends who ever come to check on them. And the abuse so many have suffered — it breaks my heart. It just breaks my heart, over and over again, to see how broken humankind can be. Is.

My job is dangerous. I've been assaulted twice in less than two years. Most of my coworkers have been hurt too, because we just don't have enough people working to keep the angry and aggressive patients calm. It's just so hard in so many ways.

So why do I do it? Well, because I love it. I hate a lot of things that go along with it, but I love taking care of people who really need it. I try so hard to see the person who's inside, who's underneath all that craziness, and sometimes I do get a glimpse. Not always — I'm no saint. There are some patients that I really dislike and some days when my heart feels completely hardened. But when I try to stay open, and I see the hurting person in front of me, it's then that my heart pours out to them, and I feel such love that it takes my breath away.

And so, day after day, I take a deep breath. And I forgive the patients who get out of control, because I know that they're even more out of control inside and it kills them to feel the way they do. And I try to forgive myself when I can't be as compassionate as I want to be.

“Blessed are the merciful,” I hear the man on the hill say, “for they will receive mercy.” Maybe the mercy and compassion I show my patients is worth a lot more than it sometimes seems. And is God merciful too? Maybe somewhere in all of this, not only am I blessed as I go about my work, but God is blessing my patients too? Blessing me as I go to work and try to bring compassion to my patients? Mercy and blessing, all around us, even in these broken and dangerous and frightening and...such very human experiences. What a wondrous thing. Thanks be to God.

Steps 8 and 9 carry with them the additional benefit of showing mercy. These steps are the first steps to reach outside of self. Looking at the past behaviors from an outside perspective in order to see the damage and hurt they have caused. Moving past these old behaviors, being able to make

amends, does lift spirits and help one feel lighter and less burdened. But also there is a completely other experience. Showing kindness and compassion to someone who may not deserve it. Mercy is a physical action, not just a fluffy good vibe. It requires physical activity, either toward another to make amends, or if that's not yet possible, to try to make a list of those who may have suffered hurt or harm because of another's bad behavior.

We all have addictions, or at least things we want and need to change even if they are not yet addictions. The 12-step program can help us all become better followers of Jesus Christ, which is what the word "Christian" means. Followers of Christ, doing what Jesus would do. And in doing these things we will be blessed, just as the beatitudes tell us. Let us pray.

Thank You, God, for showing us the ways we can become better followers. You give us help and guide us as we try to find our way away from harmful behaviors. Thank You. Amen.