



**Series Theme:** 12 Step programs and the Beatitudes

**Title:** Only Just Begun

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**Preacher:** Rev. Joyce Donigian

**Synopsis:** Following the steps to improve one's life, especially if those steps involve deepening relationship with God, can lead to feelings of exclusion or rejection. This can be characterized as mild persecution. Yet perseverance will bring good outcomes even if we fall or backslide. In the end, we never reach our final destination – until eternal rest – but continuing to strive toward Godly goals should always be our journey's end.

**THE FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON:** Galatians 6:1-5 (TLB)

**THE SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON:** John 15:18-27 (TLB)

**MEMORY VERSE:** “Blessed are those who suffer for doing what is right.  
The kingdom of heaven belongs to them.” Matthew 5:10 (NIRV)

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

We are coming to the end of our journey through the 12-step program popularized by AA. An image that comes to mind when I think of ending a journey comes from the helper we use when we are traveling to an unfamiliar location. We use an app called Waze. Maybe you are familiar with it. You enter your destination and Waze, which knows where you currently are, will guide you on the best way to get there. When you come to the end of the trip, Waze says, "You have arrived at your destination."

I hope this journey through both the 12-step program and the first 10 beatitudes has been as interesting a trip for all of you as it has been for us. So today we are going to look at the final step, step 12, which says: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

As Pastor Doug suggested last week, this can be problematic. And there are several reasons this is the case. These last steps have involved not only personal reflection and conviction but also making attempts to heal any damage done to relationships and individuals because of the problem behavior. It may be difficult to put into words how one's life has been changed through these 12 steps, first to oneself and then to others. Then, according to this 12<sup>th</sup> step, there is a hope and desire for this path toward success be shared with others who are struggling with a similar problem. That plan can meet with real resistance from anyone they try to influence, especially if that person is not ready to hear or if the message is brought to them in a way that is challenging rather than helpful.

Just think about the person who says, lost a lot of weight on a weight-loss program. You notice the results and comment on their success. Then that person launches into the reasons why you should sign up with that plan. They can become almost belligerent if you show some reluctance. They are on a mission and do not want to take "no" for an answer. The same scenario can be in place for countless other situations – what doctor you should visit (after all they had the exact same thing as you and this doctor was a miracle worker), or the right financial advisor (he/she helped make them millionaires), or the right school, college, restaurant, hair dresser, ways to plant your tomatoes, or even the right church. Everyone wants to be helpful, but not everyone can share help in the right way for the person they want to help.

This is when we need to remind ourselves that we are responsible only for our own behavior and no matter how much we see the need in others to change, we cannot change them. We can be there for them, support them, help them, listen to them, be a friend. But we can't make them do the things that are best for them.

This has been brought home to me in how we/I deal with our son, Joe, who lives in Colorado. Joe has epilepsy. He had his first grand mal seizure when he was 9 years old. He has suffered with seizures ever since. He has gone through periods where the seizures are under good control and also times when he has full seizures or other sorts of loss of memory. Today he takes significant medication, and he has had what is called a vagus nerve stimulator implanted in his body to help minimize seizures. He sees a neurologist regularly. But he still has some seizures and also episodes where he loses awareness of his surroundings for relatively long periods of time. For example, last week he told us he went out around 11:30 at night to get something to eat. He doesn't really remember getting the food, but he did finally become aware of where he was at about an hour later and miles from his apartment. He told us that he hadn't taken his meds before he went out. This isn't the first time something like this has happened to him.

Our previous response was to admonish him – Joe, you need to take your meds regularly and on time. You know how important this is to managing your condition. We have stopped doing this. We can't make him take his meds when he should. We hurt with him when he tells us he lost his glasses when he fell down in the snow on that late-night trip. But we have learned that he is the only one who can change the outcome of such a situation. No matter how much we want to help him, he is the only one who can make that change. We are still sympathetic and sometimes make suggestions, but we no longer say things like – you should have...

I think our experience with our son is similar to situations where we know someone needs to change – stop drinking, stop smoking, stop doing drugs, stop gambling, stop looking at pornography, stop shopping, stop – you fill in the blank. We all know such folks. But this 12<sup>th</sup> step teaches us that although we see the need for change, we have to let the person make the decision to change on his or her own. If we don't a kind of persecution can follow – we can anger the person we are trying to help, destroy the relationship, feel offended and hurt ourselves.

Max Lucado, who many of you may know from his books and video series – in fact the adults in the chapel are working through one of his books right now – Max tells a story about himself and what words can help in a situation. What he was doing is a little different but I think applies here:

Max says that once when he was younger, he decided to take part in a half marathon. He hadn't trained as much as he should have and so after the 1.2-mile swim and the 56-mile bike ride, he didn't have much energy left for the 13.1-mile run. Neither did the fellow jogging next to him. Max asked him how he was doing and he soon regretted posing the question.

The man replied, "This stinks. This race is the dumbest decision I've ever made." He had more complaints than a taxpayer at the IRS. Max's response to him? "Good-bye." He knew if he listened too long, he'd start agreeing with him.

Next he caught up with a sixty-six-year-old grandmother. Her tone was just the opposite. "You'll finish this," she said. "It's hot, but at least it's not raining. One step at a time . . . don't forget to hydrate . . . stay in there." Max ran next to her until his heart lifted and his legs were aching. He finally had to slow down. She waved and passed him by. Which of these two views was the most helpful? Which conversation had a desired positive effect?

There is a second way new 12-steppers can face persecution – and that comes from a most surprising group – those who know him or her best – family and friends. We all know that the family of a drug-addicted son supports that son giving up his dependence on drugs. But when the son goes into treatment, successfully completes that treatment, and then comes home, the family doesn't know how to act. Can they trust him again? Can they believe what he tells them? So many questions – things are now so different. Studies have shown that, even though the family wants their son to be clean, they do things that may actually encourage him to go back to his old behaviors – because when he's doing drugs, they know how to respond to him. It's easier to deal with the old, known behaviors than to try to figure out how to act in the new situation. You can imagine how damaging

this family dynamic can be to the one trying to kick the habit.

Friends are the same. Those who continue to do drugs or drink may encourage the new 12-stepper to – just have one drink – to celebrate the New Year, the marriage, the birthday. Just one hit with friends – just one won't hurt you. Or come shopping with us, we just want to look, we won't buy anything unless we see a really good sale.

When the person says no to these sorts of invitations, their friends may call them names, or refuse to call them at all. It's a hard place to be in – clean and sober – and friendless. But that is what we are called to do. We are called to be true to Christ, even if that means suffering for our convictions. So how do we follow step 12? We are to try to encourage others, especially those who are troubled by the same things that have troubled us, but not overwhelm them with our recommendations for overcoming their monster within. And we are not to lose hope in our ability to recover when others try to dissuade us from our healthy path. And – this is a big and – we are not to lose hope even if we fall. We can get up again and begin the steps from where we need to restart.

This is where the Serenity Prayer is so useful. It was written by Reinhold Niebuhr, a prominent Reformed theologian in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a mainstay of the AA 12-step recovery program and is equally beneficial to us:

God, give me grace to accept with serenity  
the things that cannot be changed,  
Courage to change the things  
which should be changed,  
and the Wisdom to distinguish  
the one from the other.

Some of you may know that there is more to this prayer. Here is the rest:

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.

So we have things to learn from this 12<sup>th</sup> step. The final step in the 12-step program. But it isn't like Waze tells us – "You have arrived at your destination." In fact, we have only just begun – to assume that we are finished when such a program is completed is kind of like feeling that once the marriage counseling and wedding are over, neither bride nor groom has anything more to add to the relationship. Working the steps means just that – working the steps – never finishing, always finding more ways to improve our lives. No matter how often those steps need to be revisited, we have only just begun. Let us pray.