

“Being Transformed”

Theme: 12 Steps to a New Beginning, part 7
Psalm 103:1-12, John 3:3-6, II Corinthians 5:17



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Several months ago when Tom and I thought about doing this sermon series on the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, using these steps as a model for the Christian walk and as a helpful spiritual discipline, we wanted to share with you some of the excitement and spiritual growth we have discovered over the years in using these steps to strengthen our walk with Christ. We had no idea God would use these sermons to touch so many of you so deeply in your Christian walk and in your journey toward spiritual wholeness and healing.

Step 7 that we are looking at this morning and Step 6—the step that Tom explored last week—are two of the most spiritually profound steps of the twelve. Again, in Steps 6 and 7 we see the same kind of attitude and action pattern that we saw in Steps 4 and 5. In Step 6 we became ready to have God remove the defects of character which we have discovered about ourselves. This step involves a change in attitude—the emphasis is on becoming ready. The seventh step involves action. We humbly ask God to remove our shortcomings.

We all know from experience that it is one thing to make a New Year’s resolution and it is quite another to

keep it. It is much easier to think about doing something than to do it. It takes time, effort and perseverance to translate a mental decision like, “I’ll stop smoking” into a consistent behavior like, “I don’t smoke anymore.” Step 6 is a mental response. It is saying, “I don’t want to live in this destructive, unhealthy way any longer.” It is deciding to change. But *deciding* to change is not enough. That is why the New Testament couples repentance with faith. Repentance is choosing a new direction. It is an about turn. But faith makes it possible to go in that new direction. In repentance and in Step 6 say, “I want to leave this character defect behind.” In faith and in Step 7 we reach out to God to make this decision possible.

Steps 6 and 7 can be very hard for us to undertake. We are being asked to give up behaviors that have long dominated our lives. We can see how destructive these behaviors have been. Our character defects, our shortcomings such as our controlling tendencies, our blame of others, our resentments, our impatience, our un-forgiven and unhealed hurts, our impulsiveness, our use and abuse of others, our perfectionism, our low self-esteem, our prejudice and intolerance, our materialism that makes money, material things and pleasure the primary goals of life, our lack of generosity, our unwillingness to let go of our self-centeredness as well as our many addictions, none of these have been easy to live with. But still, when it comes to letting them go, resistance sets in. We discover how attached we are to these behaviors, these shortcomings. They are involved with our identities and have played their part in developing our characters and personalities. So when we ask God to remove our shortcomings, we are risking a change in our very identities.

Now this transformation of life through the removal of our defects of character is similar to a birth process. Both involve pain, but in pain there is gain. Jesus said

that unless we are born of water and of the Spirit, we cannot enter the Kingdom of God. One, the birth of the flesh, is of human origin. It is temporal in nature and it has a beginning and an end. The birth that involves the Spirit of God is of divine origin and is eternal in nature. Regardless of how this birth is described, born again, born anew, or born from above, it is a birth arranged and managed by God. It is not something we can accomplish in our own strength, by our own human power or intelligence.

Neither can we rid ourselves of our shortcomings by a sheer act of will. This is simply not possible. It is God who must do the transforming. Taking Step 7 then, for many of us, is the greatest act of authentic humility we have ever been asked to commit: to transfer control of our healing and recovery to God. Like much of what appears in the Bible, humility is not very popular today. It runs counter to the rugged independence, the upwardly mobile ambition, and the ability to stand up for ourselves that we are taught to so admire. Also, being humble has been given some false connotations like acting as if we are unimportant, inadequate and of no value.

Christian humility really has nothing to do with putting down ourselves or being put down by others. It does not equal low self-esteem. Humility has to do with understanding our worth before God. It has to do with seeing ourselves as we actually are: the good and the bad, the strong and the weak. It is facing the truth of our shortcomings, acknowledging their seriousness, and our powerlessness to change them ourselves.

Humility is also acknowledging how much we need God. It helps us appreciate the immensity of God’s power to transform our lives. To paraphrase a verse from the prophet Malachi, “Not by might nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts.” In asking God to remove our character defects and our shortcomings

we are saying to God that we are going to quit trying to shape our lives by ourselves. God is no longer going to be kept out of our lives by our stubborn resistance. God is the one who will be in charge of us now.

But how does God remove our shortcomings? We do know that God does answer step 7 prayers. God does transform human life, as the witness of Scripture and the testimony of countless people confirm. But we also know that this does not happen magically, automatically, instantaneously or predictably.

For some people, shortcomings are dealt with slowly, bit by bit over time. For others, they wake up one day to discover a certain character defect diminished and then each day they reaffirm that they will not act out that defect again. Still others find that it is through the help of others, through small groups or concerned friends or counseling, that God deals with their shortcomings.

We also know that God chooses to use some very special tools in removing our defects. At first glance they don't look like much to the world. Some water, some words, some bread, some wine. Touched by God's special grace, however, these common and mundane elements become instruments of mercy. They are the channels through which the Holy Spirit leads us to the cross of Christ and works in us the forgiveness of sins, faith and new life. Our commitment, therefore, to Step 7 is also a commitment to renewed spiritual activity. It means for us a return to prayer and to the study of the Bible. It means for us faithfulness at worship and the Lord's Supper. It is through these commitments that the healing takes place in us.

I want to spend a little time looking more in depth at one of these tools: the power of prayer. Through prayer we can learn to hand our defects, our shortcomings, back over to God's care. Different people do this in different ways. For some, it's enough to do it verbally

in prayer saying something like, "Dear God, I acknowledge that there is a part of me that struggles with all kinds of fears. I hand my fears over to you for your care over the next twenty-four hours. Take them from me, relieve me of them."

For other people, words may not be enough and they may find a prayer of visual imagery helpful to them. For example, one person I knew imagined picking up her character defect as if it were a poisonous snake, putting it in a sack, and setting the sack on a conveyor belt going back to God. When the sack with the character defect later came back again, she would look in the sack, put it right back on the conveyor belt, and get back to what she was doing without engaging her mind with it. Pretty soon she could recognize the sack and she would place it back on the conveyor belt without even looking inside. After days, weeks and years, this woman discovered that some of her defects disappeared and others hardly ever showed up.

I also think it is important in prayer to be very specific about what needs to be changed and to focus on changing it just for one day. If you are really struggling with something you may need to work in even smaller segments of time. You may need to ask yourself, "What needs to be transformed within me for the next three hours this morning?"

I find we can be much more successful in giving God our character defects if we can break them down into small, manageable periods of time. A person who struggles with pressure might say, "God, I want to spend the first three hours this morning following a reasonable schedule instead of cramming more into it than I've actually scheduled." Or a person who struggles with chronic anger and resentment could pray, "Lord, help me to go to the office and to make it to mid-morning coffee break without slipping into my obsession about how unfair my boss is. Give me ninety minutes

this morning when I'm free from that." With this kind of prayer you are taking a lifetime problem and breaking it down into something you can work with only for the next three hours or 90 minutes.

Now if we open ourselves in these ways and let God remove our shortcomings and sins, we must choose something else, something positive, to put in the place of these character defects. We will need to develop new habits and disciplines. Dealing with personality and character defects is much like dealing with bad habits. We have to replace the old with something new. To change your behavior you will have to take positive steps over and over in order to get new patterns grooved in and allow for the old discomfort to slip away.

Finally, in working Step 7 we need to be patient with ourselves and to trust that God will remove our shortcomings in His own time and way. We need to recognize that we will continue to face the temptation of returning to our old ways, and that we will never be completely free from our sin-disease. No one is and no one can be. We will keep seeing "defects of character" that need changing. But if we keep reaching out to God to change us, we can trust that the grace of God can and will strike our life like a lightning bolt of loving energy and our enslavement to a particular character defect will be weakened and we will be empowered.

This change, this transformation is indeed a gift from God. We cannot control it or manipulate it. All we can do is open ourselves to God and when God does remove a life-long character defect, the experience is incredible, like being born anew. Paul summed up the hope of Step 7 and the hope we have in Christ when he said, "If any one is in Christ that person has become a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come." Thanks be to God who makes this all possible. Amen.