

“New Life Adventure”

12 Steps to a New Beginning - Step 10

I John 1:3-7; Titus 3:3-7



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It has been an exciting several months as we have journeyed together through the first nine steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. It has been exciting for me as your pastor to hear how you have been more fully committing your lives and your wills to God, and how Christ has been at work in you, removing those character defects that have prevented you from loving yourself, loving others, and loving God. We have already come a long, long way. Still, our journey toward spiritual healing and wholeness is not instantaneous. It is a process during which our old destructive patterns still cause problems and new ones arise, a life long process of learning how to walk in the light and how to turn away from the darkness of denial and self-deception.

Step Ten, that we are looking at today, calls us to a life of daily reflection. Step Ten gives us a concrete way to maintain and nurture that new life in Christ that we have been given. This step states, “We continued

to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.” Socrates once said that the unexamined life is not worth living. And indeed, as followers of Jesus, we are called upon to pay attention to how we live. We know that our natural tendency is toward self-destructive behavior and self-centeredness. We also know that one of the major delusions of the spiritual life is that we can “do it ourselves” without a daily contact with God or help from others.

But we also know, as Paul writes in his letter to Titus, that we have been gifted with rebirth and renewal in our lives. When we accept Christ as Savior and Lord, life begins all over again. There is a newness about life which can only be likened to a new birth. And the renewal which happens when we discover Christ is not something that is over and done with in one moment of time, but is something that repeats itself every day.

The aim of daily reflection is to help us receive that renewal of life each day and to prevent us from getting caught in negative, destructive patterns. In Step Ten we learn how to use the first nine steps as “spiritual tools” on a daily basis to keep our relationships with God and others healthy and growing. Step ten shows us how to keep our lives and relationships clear and uncluttered, and to keep expanding our awareness and our gratitude. It teaches us how we can face crisis in our daily lives without fully reverting back to our old destructive patterns. Someone once said doing Step 10 is like taking out the trash every day. If we want to keep our lives from becoming cluttered and stinky we take out the garbage on a daily basis.

At the heart of the reflection process in Step ten is the personal inventory. For those of us who have worked through the first nine steps, making an inven-

tory is a familiar process, for we did it in step 4 and again in step 8. In a moment I’ll share some thoughts on various ways to undertake Step ten inventories.

But first, I want to reflect on the value of using Steps 1, 2, and 3 on a daily basis. There are times in each of our lives when an emotional storm hits, and in our anger or fear we are vulnerable to moving back into our controlling ways of relating to people and into our compulsions and/or addictions. The first three steps can help us calm down and get out of the unmanageable emotional storm, and prepare us for some positive reflection.

Let’s say Kathy, a friend, gets mad at me, and I react by trying to convince her that she is wrong. I get angry and then Kathy defends herself and gets angrier, and then we’re into a “control or be controlled” situation. Right then I need to do the following “moves” to get back to sanity. When I realize what is happening to me, I need to stop, back off, and as soon as I can do the first three steps and continue to do them, maybe three or four times that day while in the emotional storm.

For Step one, I say, “I’m powerless over Kathy, and my attitudes to her are making my life unmanageable.” Then I move to Step two: “I’m so angry my face is red, and I’m acting as if I have the power to make Kathy think differently about this by showing her how wrong she is, which I know is a form of insanity on my part. God, I believe you can restore me to sanity.” And then Step three: “I am making a decision right now to turn my life and my will and the outcome of this encounter with Kathy over to you, God.” Almost always that process calms me and gives me some emotional space in which to deal with what’s really happening. It’s a great way to start working the tenth step and it prepares us well for the personal inventory which is the heart of Step ten.

Now there are at least two kinds of inventories which can be used for the ongoing self-examination required by Step ten. The first is the “spot check” inventory. Spot checking is the process of stopping a few times each day and asking ourselves how it is going. We think about what we have thought, done and felt. We are alert to any warning signs of trouble. We watch for the presence of temptation, unsettled emotions, unhealthy thoughts, and troubling encounters with others. We check to see if we are slipping into old destructive patterns. This spot-check inventory can also be used during moments of crisis or discord. We immediately look away from the offending person or circumstance and focus in on ourselves, checking to see which old character defects may be reappearing in that moment.

Another favorite approach to doing a spot check is a technique that comes out of the oral traditions of many twelve-step groups. Using an acrostic built around the word “halt,” ask yourself: Am I hungry? Angry? Lonely? or Tired? Try saying “HALT” to yourself as you go through the day. The way you have been taking care of (or not taking care of) yourself may be showing up in what your body and your emotions are telling you. As we discover our character defects in action through spot-checking, we need to be patient with ourselves. Of course we are going to blow it sometimes. But we need to learn to tell ourselves that our spiritual growth has more to do with progress than perfection.

A second kind of inventory is taken at the end of each day. This is a daily review of what happened and how we dealt with it. We need to acknowledge what went well for us and what did not. We need to stay in touch with our successes and our failures. In first reading Step ten we may get the impression that

the most important things to acknowledge are our failures. However, Bill Wilson, one of the founders of A.A. wrote, “inventory-taking is not always done in red ink. It’s a poor day indeed when we haven’t done something right. Even when we have tried hard and failed, we may chalk that up as one of the greatest credits of all.”

Doing a daily inventory reminds us that each day we can focus on God’s power and watch God clear up the wreckage of that day. We can live in the present and go ahead and sort out the things we want to get rid of. Some people make a brief inventory of their day on paper every night. They list the character defects, sins, controlling behaviors they remembered from that day. Others do this in their minds. Next, they review the good thoughts they had that day and the good things they did.

Another thing some people find helpful is to make a checklist of their most common three or four character defects. Such a list might include: selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, fear, jealousy, self-pity, greed, envy, depression, or self-hate. Then each night they think about whether any of those defects have been operating.

The monks of the Benedictine order developed a very simple daily inventory that I have found really helpful. It is called the Examen. When I do the Examen I usually light a candle reminding me of God’s unconditional love. You can do whatever helps you experience unconditional love. You may imagine yourself in a favorite place with someone whose love you trust, such as a friend, Jesus or God. Then ask yourself two simple questions. First, “For what am I most grateful for today?” And second, “For what am I least grateful for today?” You could also address those same questions by asking, “When did I give and receive the

most love today? Or when did I give or receive the least love today?” Or “When was I the happiest today and when was I the saddest?” Or “What was the day’s high point and low point?” When we discover something we are not so grateful for, we need to name it, feel it, and appreciate the fact that we are not denying it and that God is with us in it.

No matter what form our self-inventory may take, the important thing is to stay in touch with what is happening in our lives. Healing occurs to the degree that we can accept all our feelings—the positive and the negative. In the past we have not done this. We have had trouble looking into our own hearts and seeing the truth about ourselves. We have lived in a darkness of denial. Our scripture reading from 1 John calls us to come out of the darkness and to walk in the light. We can’t afford to walk in the darkness of denial any longer if we are to maintain a healthy lifestyle and to grow spiritually. Walking in the light means asking God to help us with our daily inventories and allowing Christ to shed his light on all we do—The light of the world is the great reveler. Flaws and stains which are hidden in the shade are obvious in the light.

But the strength and courage we have to honestly face ourselves comes from the assurance that Christ can set us free from all that binds us and he can cleanse us from all our sin, and that we are loved by God unconditionally, the good and the bad. It is with this assurance that we do Step ten, knowing that whatever we discover about ourselves, whatever character defects or flaws we find, Christ can give us the power to overcome them. Now, will you allow him, day by day, constantly and consistently, to carry out the cleansing process in your life? And will you now, today, commit yourself to enter into that new life adventure he has set before you? Giving thanks to the God who makes all things possible? Amen.