

## ***Steps 5, 6, & 7 on the Recovery Journey***

Based on Hebrews 4:15-16 & I John 1:8-9

A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on 1/28/24

There is so much profound spiritual wisdom in the 12 Steps of Recovery. The more I examine them, study them, and use them in my own life struggles, the more convinced I become that God had Her hand upon Bill W. and all those who conceived and wrote the 12 Steps and the 12 Traditions.

Today we're going to dive into the middle steps, steps 5-7, which are at the absolute core of our recovery journey and the road to salvation. Here are steps 5, 6, & 7 in order:

"We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs...We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character...and We humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings..."  
(Re-read)

Step 5 sounds an awful lot like what Christians have called confession through the centuries, doesn't it? Confession involves fully owning up to our shortcomings, to what we have done wrong, to the things we have done that have hurt others or gone against what we know to be God's will. Those of us who have grown up in the Protestant tradition have lost a bit of the power of confession. We have turned confession into something that is strictly between the individual and God. We Protestants have grown up believing that we don't need any other people; that we can just confess silently to God and be forgiven. Our Catholic siblings in the faith practice confession differently, confessing their shortcomings to a priest as well as to God, which is a bit more in line with what the 5<sup>th</sup> Step instructs. Catholics do this in recognition of the fact that, while confessing to God is a good and necessary step in healing and transformation, there is an additional kind of accountability derived from sharing our sin with another human being. To admit some wrong that we've done out loud to another human being who is physically present with us creates a new kind of accountability. It adds a seriousness of purpose to our confession and desire to repent.

I think our Protestant understanding of confession is a bit flawed because of the lack of involving a brother or sister in our journey toward transformation. Step 5's insistence on a three-part confession more accurately reflects the fact that when we screw up, we are negatively affecting ourselves, our relationship with our Creator, AND our relationships with others. So, if we really want to

change our behavior, if we really want to get better in a sustainable way, we have to involve all three parties: self, God, and others, in our repentance and recovery.

Our two passages for the morning really reinforce the profound wisdom of Step 5. The first letter of John tells us that “if we say we have not sinned, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” We all struggle with something. We all, as Paul says in Romans 3, “fall short of the glory of God.” But the good news John gives us is that “if we confess our sins, God is faithful and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” John understands that there is power in the very act of confession. There’s value in the humility required to say, “I screwed up. I was wrong. I messed up, and I’m sorry.” There’s almost no way for us to grow or change if we can’t take this basic and necessary step. And while it’s a good starting point to confess our sins to ourselves and to God, the chances of us actually doing something about the mistake improve when we confess the mistake to another human being. I’ve seen this to be true in my own life and struggle against sins. Those sins that I keep to myself tend to just keep happening over and over again, whereas the ones I open up about with a trusted friend tend to get ironed out a lot sooner.

Now Step 6 is a deceptively difficult one in my opinion. It’s an easy one to fake, but it’s quite hard to truly put yourself in a position to take this step with integrity. Step 6 says, “We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character....Entirely ready....Entirely ready. What does it mean and look like to be *entirely ready* for God to remove our character defects? An alcoholic who wakes up hungover on his front stoop, locked out of his own house again by his wife, might *feel* entirely ready to change. But what about when the hangover wears off? What about the next Friday night, when his buddies invite him out to the bar again? *Entirely ready* is a serious commitment, right? *Entirely ready* suggests that there’s just no turning back this time. *Entirely ready* indicates a thorough familiarity with all that’s going to have to be given up and all that’s going to have to change. As Shakespeare once wrote, “the readiness is all.”

What does it look like to be entirely ready to behave differently in your relationship with your spouse...? What does it look like to be entirely ready to change your diet and your eating habits...? What does it look like to be entirely ready to commit to a new exercise regimen or to a different group of friends...? What does it look like to be entirely ready to be more generous with your financial resources toward the church and toward those in need?

Two weeks after my recent shoulder surgery, I had another appointment with a back surgeon to go over the results of an MRI. That MRI showed a

significant narrowing of the vertebrae around L5, just above where I had my back fused just four years ago. The back surgeon said that I need another back procedure to alleviate this pain and problem. I'm not entirely ready to have that done, though I certainly know I'm not going to be able to put it off forever. What's probably going to get me entirely ready for more back surgery is a whole lot of pain, something I don't want.

But true change and transformation in our lives – even if it is in the form of healing – requires a genuine readiness in our lives, because change – even in the is not easy. Remember when Jesus came upon that man who had been lame for 38 years by the Pool of Bethesda? Jesus asked him, “Do you WANT to be healed?” This is what Step 6 asks of us...Are we truly ready...?

One of the things we have going for us as followers of Jesus on this journey toward health and wholeness is summarized beautifully by the writer of Hebrews. It's been such a powerful passage for me over the years, that I memorized it: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way. just as we have, but did not succumb to sin... Therefore, let us, approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we can receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” Wow! That's Hebrews 4:15-16...pretty awesome, huh?

In my mind, this passage from Hebrews makes taking Steps 5 and 6 a whole lot easier. “We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs...We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character...” I am infinitely more comfortable taking those steps knowing that, in Christ, our ‘high priest’ is *not* unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. Jesus has been tempted in all the ways that we have...” So, as we take these difficult steps in our own battle with sin, repentance, and change, we can do so confidently, approaching God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we can receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

You know, as I was writing this sermon earlier this week, I got a text from a dear friend who is going through some cancer treatments, and she shared with me this description of her doctor that's published in the provider information she received. It began by listing Dr. So and So's credentials and background, where he got his various degrees and did his surgical rotations. Then it says this: “Having had many operations himself, he understands that surgery is an anxious time. By recognizing and knowing those fears, he desires to remove that fear of the unknown by clarifying the path leading up to surgery, which can maximize short and long-term recovery.” It was that paragraph that sold my friend on this doctor.

And now for Step 7: “We humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.” In Step 5 “we admitted to God, ourselves, and one other person the exact nature of our wrongs.” In Step 6 we got entirely ready for God to remove those wrongs and shortcomings. And in Step 7, “we humbly ask God to remove them.”

Now, if you’re listening carefully and really paying attention here, you probably have some questions. Like, ‘is it God that’s going to do all this work, change, and healing for us? Don’t we have to do anything?’ It’s a fair question, but we’ve got to remember that these 12 steps are heavily based on humility. Recovery requires a ton of humility from start to finish. Remember that in Step 1 we admitted our powerlessness over something and the fact that our lives had become unmanageable, right? In Step 2 we came to believe that only a power greater than ourselves could ever restore us to sanity. That same humility is woven throughout steps 5, 6, and 7. We’re not going to change our lives on our own. We’re not going to magically start managing what we couldn’t manage before. We’re not going to bring about our own healing and restoration by ourselves, any more than that lame man by the Pool of Bethesda did.

Once again, Father Richard Rohr is immensely helpful here. In *Breathing Underwater* he writes, “To ask for your daily bread is to know that it is being given” in the first place. (Repeat) “We ask not to change God but to change ourselves. We pray this way to form and sustain a living relationship...God has to radically change the central reference point of our lives,” from self to God...from self to God. That IS humbling, isn’t it? Our brokenness IS humbling...our chronically sinful behavior IS humbling...The fact that there are so many things we *still* can’t get right in our lives after all these years *is* humbling.

But the amazing thing is that we are still loved and still treasured by this forgiving God who wants nothing more than our healing and our restoration. And so, we partner with God on our journeys toward recovery and salvation, knowing that “we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every regard has been tempted as we have...”

We don’t need to be afraid as we admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs...We don’t need to be afraid as we get ourselves *entirely ready* to have God remove all our defects of character...And we don’t need to be afraid to ask this amazing God to remove our shortcomings. All we need is a little humility, support from our community, and a whole lot of compassion for everybody else in this world, who, in one way or another, is going through this very same journey toward restoration and wholeness that we are. We are not alone. Amen.