

## ***Steps 10 & 11 on the Road to Recovery***

Based on Psalm 1:1-3 & Matthew 26:36-46

A Message by Toby Jones Offered to the People of ChxUCC on 2/11/24

Today we proceed to Steps 10 and 11 on the road to recovery and wholeness. Step 10 asks that “we continue to take personal inventory and when we are wrong to promptly admit it,” and Step 11 instructs us to “seek through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understand God, praying ONLY for the knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry that out.”

If you’ve been paying attention to and working through these steps with me, you will notice right away that Step 10 sounds familiar. It sounds very similar to Step 4, which asked us “to take a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” I noted several times in the previous installments of this sermon series that the 12 steps are not thought of as linear by those in recovery groups. Instead, they are more circular or cyclical; we work the steps repeatedly, over and over again, as we move through life. So, clearly there is something inherently valuable about looking at ourselves openly, honestly, and, most of all, humbly, as we journey through our life as disciples. Steps 4 and 10 keep us focusing on and coming back to our own weaknesses and issues, so that we don’t have any time or energy left to turn the spotlight of judgment and evaluation onto others. People in recovery are humble enough to realize that we can and should spend a lifetime working on ourselves; there is no reason to take any inventories of others.

But it’s Step 11 that I really want to focus on this morning. Step 11 is the one that I believe followers of Jesus continually fail to grasp, much less actually integrate into our own lives. “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying ONLY for the knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry that out.” (repeat)

How conscious are you of your contact with God as you go throughout your day. Conscious...Are you connected with God consciously as you go about your day? You may remember that in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, Paul admonished us to “rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances, for THIS is God’s will for you in Christ...” This may be the clearest, most straightforward statement anywhere in the Bible of what God’s will for us is – that we “rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances.” But to do this, we have to be conscious of God’s presence with us – CONSCIOUS of God’s presence.

And Step 11 tells us how to do that, how to get there, how to have constant and conscious contact with God. It comes from completely altering and reorienting our understanding of prayer. We let go of asking God to do things for us, to work out difficult situations and problems for us, and instead, we turn to prayer AND meditation to provide us with one and only one thing: to improve our conscious contact with God. Prayer, in other words, becomes all about awareness. It's a complete paradigm shift. We are no longer at the center of prayer – God is.

Richard Rohr's 11<sup>th</sup> chapter in *Breathing Underwater* is incredibly insightful when it comes to the 11<sup>th</sup> step. He says that most of us are stuck in what he calls the "calculating mind" when we pray. The calculating mind is the default setting of our minds, where we are always in control. "This first mind sees everything through the lens of its own private needs and hurts, angers and memories. It is too small a lens to see truthfully or wisely or deeply." Rohr concludes that prayer out of this calculating mind easily becomes "a pious practice or exercise that with that same old self-centered position...something you did when you otherwise felt helpless," but it never "widened your lens for a better picture, which supposed to be the whole point of prayer..." In calculated mind prayer, "You simply decided to invite a Major Power in to help you with your already determined solution."

In other words, such prayer generated in the calculating mind is not really prayer at all, but a selfish and self-serving exercise aimed at getting what we want. So, Rohr advocates that in prayer we must leave the calculating mind behind and put on a completely different thinking cap. We must download a brand new processing system. We move from a calculating mind to what Rohr calls a "contemplative mind." What is a contemplative mind...? It's clearly spelled out in the 11<sup>th</sup> Step: "improved conscious contact with God...praying ONLY for knowledge of God's will and the power to carry that out." Prayer from the contemplative mindset or processing system shifts the focus away from the self and what the self desires, and reorients the mind around *God's* will and what *God* desires. In short, 'Not my will but thy will be done, O Lord.'

This is the step of growth that I would argue 95% of Christians never get around to taking. The vast, vast majority of us just keep praying out of that calculating mind, trying to sound holy, but really what we're after from God is to get our wants, our needs, and our desires met.

That's why I return again and again to Matthew 26 and Jesus's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is the place where we witness what true prayer is and how it really works. This is the night when Jesus is going to be betrayed, denied, captured, and tortured. His road of suffering is becoming clear to him. He

is scared; he is confused; and he is beginning to sense a big difference between what he wants and what God wants. So, in this critical moment, Jesus goes into a quiet, peaceful, secluded garden, and undertakes Step 11. He “sought through prayer and meditation to improve his conscious contact with God as he understood God, praying ONLY for the knowledge of God’s will and the power to carry it out.”

Matthew tells us that Jesus prayed for 3 hours, in 3 one-hour segments, and he didn’t say very much. All he said was “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me...Nevertheless, not my will but thy will be done...” The actual words Jesus articulated took no more than 10 seconds to say, and yet he “prayed” for an hour, which left over 59 minutes and 50 seconds to listen, to improve his conscious contact with God, to sharpen his knowledge of God’s will, and gain the power to carry it out. We know that this is precisely what Jesus did in his extended prayer time in Gethsemane – he sought only to know his Father’s will and gain the power to carry it out.

And if we carefully study Matthew’s account of this 3-hour prayer, we see how Jesus’s contemplative approach to prayer gently and gradually led him to both the knowledge of God’s will AND the power to carry it out. In the first hour of prayer, Jesus’s words were, “My father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me...yet not as I will but as you will.” In the first hour of his contemplative prayer, he is still hoping that it’s possible that God’s will might be to spare him from his road of suffering and the cross.” But in the second hour of prayer – after he has already improved his conscious contact with God and prayed only for the knowledge of God’s will – his words show a subtle but significant shift. This time, he says, “My Father, if it is NOT possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” Do you hear the difference? His hour of contemplative prayer - rather than calculating prayer – has already begun to bend Jesus’s will toward that of his Father...”Ok...if it’s not possible for the cup of suffering to be removed...thy will be done.” He’s now praying for the power to go through with the will of God that has become more clear to him. And by the time he gets through the 3<sup>rd</sup> and final hour of this contemplative prayer, designed only to align his will with his Father’s – and not the other way around – we see a strong and determined Jesus, return to his sleeping disciples to say these words... “The hour is near, and the son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go. My betrayer is at hand.”

If only we, as followers of the living Jesus, could come to understand that this is what true prayer – contemplative prayer – looks, acts, and sounds like. As

Richard Rohr puts it, “True prayer is not about changing God, but being willing to let God change us, or as Step 11 says, ‘praying only for the knowledge of his will.’” (BU, 96)

One of the incredibly profound points Rohr makes about Step 11 and this re-orienting of prayer, this complete rebooting of our operating system, is that its goal is to give us the very mind of Christ. This is how Rohr understands the truth of Jesus’s promise that “anything you ask the Father in my name will be granted to you.” The “in my name” part of this promise is anything we ask with the mind of Christ. If we’re praying contemplatively, asking only for the knowledge of God’s will and the power to live it, then our prayer is already answered; of course, God will do that for any of us. This completely upends our previous understanding of “answered prayer,” right? The prayer God always has and always will answer is the step 11 prayer – to have the knowledge of his will and the power to live it out.

I so appreciate the simplicity of Step 11 and how it strips prayer down to one essential thing: improving our conscious contact with God – seeing God in all things, being with God in all places, talking and walking with God throughout the day...and dialing into God’s will. I have found it incredibly freeing to no longer ask God to do things for me or to work things out for me or for those I love.

But the one thing I would warn you about as you move from a calculating mind to a more contemplative one in prayer is that such Step 11 prayer takes more time. It will slow you down and require a great deal of listening on your part. “What is your will for me in this situation, God...?” That’s not a question that is easily and quickly answered. But God can be relied upon to urge and nudge us in the right direction, if we are about the business of improving our conscious contact with God throughout the day. Rohr calls Step 11 prayer “an exercise in divine participation – you opting in, and God already being there.” (BU, 97) I love that – we’re joining God in what God’s doing – NOT asking God to join us.

One simple breath prayer I’ve been using lately, as I endeavor to work the 11<sup>th</sup> Step is this: “God, You are here; help me discern and participate in what you are doing here and now.”

We’ve talked a lot about humility as we’ve worked our way through these 12 steps, and that’s because humility is the only appropriate posture in our relationship with God. In Step 3 we made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God. In Step 11, our prayer life gets re-ordered similarly, so that we can join Jesus in saying “Thy will be done...” It’s YOUR will I’m interested in here God, not mine. Amen.