

Steps 8 & 9 On the Road to Recovery

Based on Genesis 32-33 & Matthew 5:23-24

A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on Feb 4, 2024

We've talked a lot about the all-important posture of humility as we've moved through the first 7 steps on the road to recovery. From admitting we were powerless over our addictions or sins in step one, to recognizing that only a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity in step two, to making a fearless and searching moral inventory of ourselves in step four, the need for us to assume a posture of humility is woven through every step on the road to recovery and wholeness. Steps 8 and 9, which we focus on this morning, are where the rubber meets the road where our humility is concerned.

Step 8 asks us to make a list of all the people we have harmed AND to become willing to make amends to them. And Step 9 asks that we take the even more difficult step of making amends to them, except in those rare cases where to do so would cause additional harm for them.

Step 8 is truly one of the most humbling exercises I have ever taken. When I made my list again just this past week, I saw in a hurry that pretty much everyone on my list was someone with whom I was in close relationship – my parents, a former spouse, my former step-children, students I'd taught or athletes I'd coached, and most painful of all, my very own daughter. The truth that the ones we love the most and the people with whom we are the closest are often the ones we hurt the most is so profoundly sad. And let's be sure to notice that Step 8 does not mention intent at all. In other words, the step doesn't say that we make a list of those we intended or meant to harm; it simply lists those we've hurt, even – and maybe especially – if we didn't mean to cause them harm. In his chapter on the 8th Step, Richard Rohr writes that "we learn to salve the wounds of others by remembering just how much it hurts to hurt." Steps 8 and 9 are so incredibly difficult because in them we must confront and own up to the pain we have caused others in our relationships with them, whether we meant to or not.

As we've seen with all of the other steps we've examined, Jesus's teaching in the New Testament is in complete accord with Step 8. In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus says, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift to God." It's almost as if Jesus is saying that we can't possibly have a good and

healthy vertical relationship with God *until* we've worked on and created good and reconciled relationships with our human brothers and sisters.

This truth is often what I think of whenever I see a crucifix – an image of Christ on the cross. As I've suggested to you before, the cross – at its most basic core – is two intersecting lines, one vertical and the other horizontal. Symbolically, the vertical axis can represent our relationship with God, while the horizontal axis can represent our relationship with our fellow humans. In his crucifixion, Jesus showed the importance of reconciling, healing, and restoring *both* of those relationships. Both of those relationships are given equal importance on the cross. It's almost as if the cross is a permanent reminder that if we follow Jesus, we must be equally attentive to both the vertical relationship between us and God AND the horizontal relationships with other humans. I've always believed that this is what Jesus was getting at, when the Pharisees asked him which was the greatest commandment. Jesus gave *two* answers instead of just one. He began by quoting Deuteronomy 6 – the Great Shema – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength...” AND, Jesus went on, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” As followers of Jesus, we don't get to just love God and be all spiritual and monastic in that endeavor. We also have to simultaneously attend to the ways we interact with all God's children. It is, of course, this very same truth Jesus affirmed in Matthew 25 in the parable of the last judgment, when he says to those surprised sheep, “for I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink; I was naked, and you clothed me...” etc. The sheep reply, “When did we ever see YOU hungry and feed you or see you thirsty and give you drink...” In Jesus's reply he totally intertwines the vertical and horizontal axes in our lives by saying, “When you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto me....Love the Lord your God...AND love your neighbor as yourself.”

The difficult and humbling actions spelled out in Steps 8 and 9 affirm these two axes on which we must always be living our lives. The 8th and 9th steps make it abundantly clear that we cannot be spiritually healed or in some wonderful place with God without *also* tending to the healing in our physical world, the world we share with our human brothers and sisters. I've seen this to be an indisputable truth in my own life. I've shared with all of you many times before about my swirling and obsessive thought patterns. When I have a broken or wounded human relationship in my life, when I've wronged someone else or our relationship is fractured somehow, it makes it virtually impossible for me to be in

a good place in my relationship with God. The two planes intersect...and they're meant to! That's how we are made, and that is what the cross teaches us.

I absolutely love Genesis 32 and 33, the culmination of that incredible family saga of Jacob and Esau. We've studied this story before, the twin boys of Isaac and Rebecca. Jacob comes out of the womb grabbing the heel of his twin brother. Jacob goes onto rob Esau of this birthright and then of his blessing as the older son. As the years go by and the two become grown men, living far apart from one another, Jacob amasses great wealth, property, and family; his life in the material world seems to be pretty darned good. But Jacob has become deeply troubled, knowing the hurt he caused his brother over the years.

So, in Genesis 32-33, Jacob attempts to make amends. He travels with all that he holds dear – family, servants, property – and goes to his brother's land, knowing full well, that Esau may not forgive him and may, in fact, kill him. And in this story, once again, we see the way that the vertical and the horizontal axes intersect. On the night before this long-awaited, risk-filled human encounter with his brother, Jacob goes back to the other side of Jabbok, completely, without his servants, his family, his property. And he wrestles with God. Why is he wrestling with God on the eve of this critical encounter? I think it's because the only blessings Jacob ever really had were those he stole from someone else. He is wrestling with his identity, with his value, with who he IS underneath all the property, servants, and cattle. He is wrestling with who he is at his core, when everything else has been stripped away. 'Who am I – really?' In this incredibly intense moment, the spiritual world and the material world are about to collide for Jacob. Jacob realizes that his relationship with his brother and his relationship with God have both been negatively affected by his past – both axes of the cross.

In this wrestling match with God – whether it is literal and physical or metaphorical and symbolic - Jacob demands a blessing of his own. He wants to be blessed properly for who *he* is. He has lined up everything that he holds dear, everything that has value for him, and put it on the other side of the river – his brother's side of the river. And he comes back to God without any of it – without any of the comforts or trappings of his life. Jacob is in the process here of taking steps 8 and 9. There's no turning back now. Messengers had already been sent to his brother Esau, telling him that Jacob was coming. And in this incredible moment, Jacob also wants his relationship with God to be set aright. The blessing he stole from his brother isn't good enough. He's finally ready to return that ill-begotten one; and what he wants is one of his own. He wants reconciliation and a clean slate in both the vertical and horizontal planes in his life. Jacob is going all

in. In a sense, this is Jacob's crucifixion moment, the time when he's being pulled apart and stretched beyond measure in both directions.

Now, you may have noticed that step 9 – the actual making of amends with those we've hurt – has an unusual clause tacked onto its end. We make amends with those we have hurt "EXCEPT when to do so would injure them or others." This is a fascinating piece of Step 9, for it really causes us to examine our motives for making amends and to put others' needs above our own. Often, we seek forgiveness so we can feel better about something we've done. But there are some occasions when our need to be forgiven does not justify the other party's need not to be dragged back into pain and mess we caused them.

I think of this as the "compassion clause" of Step 9, where the person seeking recovery stops and thinks about the other person, finally putting that other person's needs above his/her own. Would it be better for her if I wrote my apology and sent it to her rather than show up on her doorstep? Should I ask through an intermediary whether she is open to an apology correspondence from me? How do I discern and put her needs above my own recognizing that in the past, I made decisions and acted only on my own best interests.

So, what do we take away from this message as Christ followers, seeking to be more like Jesus today than we were yesterday? First, we have to understand and affirm that there is no relationship with God that is somehow separate from our relationships with other human beings. We can't love God if we aren't honoring, loving, and being genuinely good to the real, flesh and blood people in our lives. As Jesus put it, whatever we do to the least of these, we do to Jesus.

Second, making amends or making things right with others, as scary and as difficult as it may be, is one of the hugest and most transformative blessings we can experience in this life. Working toward and receiving forgiveness, as Jacob did with his brother Esau, is a glimpse of God's kingdom itself, which is why, when Jesus taught us to pray he said, "Forgive us our sins to the extent that we forgive others when they sin against us." When we pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth," the number one way we bring that kingdom here, that we enact "thy will be done on earth," is through the process of forgiving each other, even when it would be easier to hold grudges, to hold onto the hatchet instead of burying it. Steps 8 and 9 give each of us the keys to the kingdom.

So, what are we going to do with those keys? It's all about asking for and working toward forgiveness when we've done wrong; *AND* it's all about working toward and bestowing forgiveness when we are the wronged party. You want to be more like Jesus and see his kingdom on earth? Start than forgiveness. Amen.