

## **Twelve Tremendous Steps**

**John 10:1-10    1 Peter 2:19-25**

There was a remarkable man known to millions all over the world as Bill W. His full name was William Griffith Wilson, but most of the time he preferred not to use it because keeping oneself inconspicuous was so important in the organization he and a friend known as Dr. Bob had founded: Alcoholics Anonymous.

Bill W. was a tall, courtly man. To look at him you never would have thought he had been a hopeless drunk. When asked how the miracle of his recovery had happened he simply and vividly said, "I had reached the end of the line. I was powerless to save myself from an evil force that was stronger than I was. One night I went up on a windy hill and looked at the stars and cried out to God. I begged Him to let the great healing wind of His Spirit blow through me and make me clean once more. And He heard my cry. I never touched alcohol again." On this Pentecost Sunday, we give thanks for the gift of the great healing wind of His Spirit blowing through us.

Bill was an eloquent speaker. Once he was talking about heaven. Remembering his dismal days as a drunk, Bill said he would probably never get there. "Yes, you will," he was assured, "because you have lifted more people out of hell than any person we know." The great healing wind of His Spirit blew through Bill to others that he helped along the way.

The Twelve Steps that Bill W. and Dr. Bob came up with are what have given so many hopeless people victory over alcohol. As I reread these steps in preparation for this sermon, I realized once again that these steps are not only for alcoholics. They are packed with a spiritual power that can be tapped by any person wrestling with a power stronger than self.

Certainly alcoholism is a deadly evil. But what about people in bondage to other addictions? Gamblers who cannot stop gambling. Unfaithful marriage partners who cannot stop being unfaithful. People consumed by hatred or grudges they can't relinquish. Shoplifters or habitual thieves. Compulsive liars. Overeaters. The list could go on and on.

No matter what the evil, the truth is this: God becomes directly and actively concerned with us humans when we let him. When we open ourselves to the gift of His Spirit, He blows into us. The Twelve Steps can be a channel through which we can direct our appeal, our cries for help to the one Power that can lift the burden from us no matter what the burden is.

The Twelve Steps are printed in the bulletin. Let's take a look at them and try to find some key words or ideas that can be picked up and used by any of us, alcoholics or not.

Take the very first phrase: "We admitted we were powerless." Look at your own life carefully. What are you powerless over? I find myself sitting in a family room chair, Labradoodle puppy barking at my feet, my cell phone ringing with a call from our teenager to come pick him up from track practice, a wife arriving home from a long day at Valley Forge, and asking myself why I didn't stay at the office, but then I remember what the office is like. I look up to God and admit I am one helpless human being. I get up to go pick up Micah, get a quick bite to eat and head back to church for a meeting. It is the admission of helplessness that lets the power come through. We need the Holy Spirit. I need His Spirit blowing through me.

Or take the second step: "Come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us." This gospel text from John 10 is about a power greater than ourselves that can restore us if we follow Him. Listen carefully to the words of Jesus as he describes our situations as his sheep.

Jesus said, "I am telling you the truth: the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who goes in through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep."

Who and what are the thieves and robbers that have gotten into our lives? Is an alcohol, gambling, overeating, or sexual addiction stealing our life away from us? Does our best friend we spend the most time with lead us into temptation and away from our families? Who or what is the thief or robber we have let into our life that leads us astray? The evil must be named and confessed.

Then the gate must be opened to that power greater than ourselves that can restore us. "The gatekeeper opens the gate for Him; the sheep hear his voice as he calls his own sheep by name, and He leads them out. When He has brought them out. He goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow Him, because they know His voice. They will not follow someone or something else; instead, they will run away from such a person, because they do not know his voice."

"Come to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us." The self-surrender to the shepherd is terribly difficult. It may take years to rid our lives of all the thieves and robbers that have invaded it. The important thing is to decide to do it, to follow the true shepherd. "A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step."

The fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh steps involve deep and honest self-examination, admission of wrongdoing, and willingness to have God remove our faults and character defects. That willingness is absolutely essential. There's no use asking God to move some weakness or thief from our lives when deep down we really don't want the change to take place. We have to want to change. We have to want to get out of the pen and follow the shepherd.

In the fifth step, the requirement to admit our faults to a third person is very important. Once that is done, the guilty secret is out in the open where it can be dealt with. It's no longer locked in some dark area of our mind or heart. This is not easy. None of the Twelve Steps are easy. It helps to remember that the rewards down the road, the peace down the road, infinitely outweigh the present suffering and pain.

Remember the words from I Peter 2. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls." The rewards, the peace down the road infinitely outweigh the present suffering and pain.

Steps eight and nine involve making amends to persons you may have wronged or injured. Not just some of them. It says "all of them." This too takes great courage and determination. But when it is done, invisible chains fall away.

Hopefully all of us have at least one time in our lives gone to a person we have wronged or injured and apologized. Reconciled. We know that when we do it we often feel a great surge of Joy and relief sweep through us. We know that Jesus tells us to go and make things right with our brothers and sisters before we come to the altar. Yet it takes great courage and determination that only a power greater than ourselves can give us. Courage and determination that only His Spirit blowing through us can give us.

The last three steps are really a reiteration of the first nine, with the added injunction to share what you have learned spiritually with others. I was visiting with a couple of members of our 100 strong Monday night A.A. group. I mentioned that I was going to write a sermon based on the Twelve Steps of AA and that I was reviewing the big book.

One of them said and the other quickly agreed, that he didn't know much about what was in the book. What was important was the fellowship and sharing in the group. He said, "I finally realized that somebody cared about me."

A Christian is a person whose life makes it easier for other people to believe in God, to believe in and care about people, and to believe in and care about themselves. I continue to be convinced that anyone who applies these Twelve Steps to their life will become such a person, whether he or she is an alcoholic or not.

These Twelve Steps help us to realize that somebody cares about us. There are people around us who care about us and thereby we learn to care about ourselves. But most importantly, we learn we are cared for by the Good Shepherd.

So Jesus said again, "I am telling you the truth: I am the gate for the sheep. All others who come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever comes in by me will be saved; he will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief, the addiction, the disease, the evil one comes only in order to steal, kill, and destroy."

"I have come in order that you might have life - life in all its fullness." So if you have a problem you cannot master, a thief that will not leave you alone, be it alcohol or anything else, pray these Twelve Steps. Apply them to your own difficulty, remembering that each step is in a sense, a prayer. Many people over the years have found that when this is done humbly and sincerely, miracles happen. A miracle can happen to you and me. When we let the great healing wind of His Spirit blow through us and make us clean once more.

"I have come in order that you might have life - life in all its fullness."

May the peace of God . . .  
#703 - O God, Why Are You Silent