

“Sinners Anonymous: A Step of Faith”

Dear Friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

Today we're in week two of our Sinners Anonymous series. During this season of Lent, leading up to Palm Sunday and the events of Holy Week, (some of the final events of our Lord's life), we're working our way through some of the faith-steps (if you will) in our ongoing and (always developing) relationship with Jesus.

No matter who we are, it doesn't just happen (all of a sudden) that we go from not knowing and not understanding and not believing in who God is and what he has done, to all of a sudden knowing and understanding and believing in everything there is about God and what he has accomplished for us. There's a progression in the Christian faith. There are some natural faith-steps (we all take), even though the way (and maybe even the order) in which (each of us) take them might be a bit different.

Much like the twelve steps in an A.A. program, or in any of the (many other) support groups there are for people struggling with addictions, we're spending our time talking about the steps we take in the Christian life that can help us face and deal with the one addiction we all share: the addiction of sin, the addiction that caused our Lord Jesus to go to the cross. And the addiction, (if we're honest), that left unchecked, can and will destroy our lives.

For these weeks during Lent, we're turning this sanctuary into an S.A. group. I started (last week) with a personal confession, (with a testimony), much like you'd hear at the beginning of some of those other addiction-related support groups. If you weren't here, I'd encourage you to (go online) and listen. It's where it all starts.

I confessed my own addiction to sin and how it has had a hold on my life for as long as I can remember. As much as I want it to stop, it doesn't. As much as I want it to go away, it keeps coming back. The guard goes down, (even for pastors), and the Deceiver is right there. It's an ongoing struggle. It never stops.

But there is one who can stop it and his name is Jesus. There is one who can help us and his name is Christ. In this series, we're taking a close and (an honest look) at the reality of our addiction (to sin) and some of the steps that are part of our faith-walk, and of our ongoing and never-ending dependence on Jesus.

Take a look at the front walls for moment. We're not following these twelve steps as they are laid out in A.A., but we are following their progression as we talk about and (think about) how this all works.

These are an adaptation from the twelve steps in A.A. (We're paralleling these in our series.) Step 1 (where it all starts): We admitted we were powerless over sin – that our lives had become unmanageable.

Last week, we read the story of the demon-possessed man (in Luke chapter 8) who was set free by Jesus. He didn't have one demon, but had a legion of demons. He wasn't dealing with just one struggle (or challenge) in his life. There were multiple challenges and struggles.

His life was out of control. He was a hopeless and a helpless case. (He had been for years.) And it was not stopping, going away, and it didn't. Until Jesus came along and set him free...until Christ came onto the scene and gave him a new start.

We talked (last week) about the demons that can possess us. We might not call them demons, but they are. In the 21st century, they're just as real. The demon of hatred (for example), it's all around us. The demon of lust, it's (more often than not) found within us. The demons of power and prejudice and pride, and a long list of others; it doesn't help to pretend they're not real, because they are, and they can take control, and we're powerless to break their control without Christ.

Even if those ones (just named) are not your issue. It doesn't matter. We all have issues. We all have sins we deal with (every day). If we're honest, (often times) it's the same issue (the same sin) that keeps popping up.

That's what an addiction is. We think we can stop it, but we can't. We think we can end it, but it never ends. Sin is like that. It's an addictive force. It's a power we can't control, at least not on our own.

Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over sin – that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step 2: We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

That same story (from last week) about the man who was demon-possessed, (if you remember), it said that after Jesus had cast out the demons, “they found the man...sitting at Jesus’ feet, dressed and in his right mind...” Obviously, there was a major life-change that had happened. There was a power greater than what (this man) had in himself that caused it to happen.

Now, he didn’t know Jesus (before it happened), but he came to know Jesus (as it was) happening and after it happened. (There was no way he could have.) This was the first time Jesus had visited that region. There’s no way this man could have known. But he came to know this “power greater than himself,” and it changed his life.

Not to dwell on this too long, but it’s not much different in our world today. Most people in our world today have heard about Jesus. Certainly in this valley, the name of Jesus is well-known. But most people (in this valley) have never given Jesus a chance. And the reason they have never given Jesus a chance is because they’ve never been able to get past that first step.

They still (somehow think) that they have the power (in themselves) to deal with their sin, and to become right with God, and to make life work. They think they can do it (by themselves), but they can’t. They think it’s possible (on their own) without Jesus, but it’s not. There’s a progression in our coming to faith and it starts with recognizing and (being honest) about our addiction.

I don’t pray for people to have troubles in their lives and to feel out of control. (I would never do that.) I do pray for people to come to realize that (in themselves) they don’t have what it takes. (I do that all the time.) And sometimes, (what it takes) for them to realize they don’t have (what it takes) is some kind of trouble.

I’ve been doing this pastoring thing for quite a while. What I’ve seen, time after time, is people’s unwillingness to recognize their need...until something happens and there’s a real need.

A word from a doctor that was not what they were hoping to hear. A word from a spouse that was not where they (ever thought) their relationship would end up. A word from an employer that their job no longer exists, and on and on it goes. Something happens, and that’s when it happens. Something goes wrong, and that’s when they start considering what might help (and be needed) for it to go right.

We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. We came to understand that what we have (in ourselves) is not enough. It’s an important and (an essential) next step in our relationship with Christ.

And that brings us to our text for today and to the next step in facing and being honest about our addiction. Step #3: We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.

Let’s talk (for a moment) about our story. From Acts chapter 8, it’s the story of the apostle, Philip, who was preaching in Samaria, and who was instructed by the Lord to “go south on the desert road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza.” As he was going (it says), he came across an Ethiopian man, on his way (back himself) from Jerusalem, where he had been worshiping, sitting in his chariot, reading from the book of Isaiah the prophet.

You remember the story. He was reading from Isaiah 53, “Like a sheep led to the slaughter, and like a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he opened not his mouth.”

Philip asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The man says, “How can I, unless someone explains it to me?” That’s when Philip began (it says) “with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.”

You know, it’s interesting in this story, what we know and what we don’t know about that conversation that took place between these two men. Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, doesn’t tell us what Philip said to that Ethiopian. All he tells us is that Philip told him about Jesus. He didn’t know about Jesus. Philip told him about Jesus. He didn’t understand what he was reading. Philip explained (to him) what (the good news) of Jesus was all about.

Now, let me ask you a question. (They were sitting in a chariot.) Let’s pretend (for a moment) that this sanctuary is that same chariot in which Philip told the Ethiopian man about Jesus. (Let’s pretend.) If this is the chariot (this sanctuary) and (you and I) are one of those two (the Ethiopian or Philip), you tell me. Which one of those two are you? Which one of those two (in the story) best matches you (at this point) in your own life story?

Are you like Philip, understanding the (good news) of Jesus and are ready to tell it to someone who doesn't? Or are you that (someone who doesn't), like the Ethiopian, who still needs to hear it (for yourself) before you can start (living it) and telling it to someone else?

Let me tell you the good news about Jesus. The good news about Jesus is that God loves you more than anything else in this world. He values your life more than anything else there is of value.

He loves you so much that he was willing to send his Son Jesus to become your Savior. And not just to send him, but to allow him to take your sin and to put it death on the cross. Jesus died for you, because he loves. Jesus gave his life so you could have yours.

And he not only gave his life, but he came back to life. God raised him from the dead. And in raising him (from the dead), he made a promise that when you die (through your faith in him) and what's he's done, it's not the end.

Now, I don't know if that's what Philip said to that man from Ethiopia. (It doesn't matter.) What matters is that he said what he knew to a man who didn't know. He told what he had come to believe (about Jesus) to a man who (at this point) in his life, didn't know (what to believe) about Jesus.

And so, which one are you? Are you more like Philip who already knows and who's ready to tell? Or are you still not knowing and need to be told?

Here's the bottom line. It doesn't matter which one (of those two) you are. It makes no difference where you are in your life in relation to the good news. What matters is what you do (in your life) with the good news you've heard. What makes a difference is how you respond (in your life) to the good news you have come to know.

Philip or the Ethiopian or someone (somewhere else) in between. If you've heard it (and know it) and can tell it, then you need to do that. If you haven't (and you don't) and you're not ready, then you're not. Either one is fine.

What's (not fine) is to do nothing with what you know and to say nothing about what you've come to believe. It doesn't matter which of the two you are. What matters is that (as one of the two), you need to respond to what it is you've heard.

That's what this third step is all about. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him...to turn our will and our lives over to God.

This sanctuary is not a chariot. (Stop pretending.) It's an S.A. group. It's not Philip and a man from Ethiopia. It's you and it's me and (if we're honest), there's one thing we all have in common. We're addicted to sin. We're powerless over sin. You can't do it and neither can I. But there's one who can and (who has), and he's the only one who can help. And that's good news we need to hear.

If you're going to recover from your addiction, you need to take this next step. Turn your will and your life over to God. Turn your will and your life over to the one who knows your life, who understands your life, and who values (and loves) your life more than anyone else.

Stop doing it on your own. You'll never do it on your own. You'll never get past your addiction, never be right with God, without trusting in the good news of what God has done and accomplished for you in Christ.

That's what happened in our story. Philip told that man from Ethiopia the good news. And that man from Ethiopia, when he heard the good news, began to trust and he began to let go.

He was baptized. He came to faith. The Spirit of the Lord was at work and it happened. And when it happened, (they came up out of the water), two powerful (and important) things happened.

One, Philip was gone. It says, "The Spirit of the Lord suddenly took him away." The next thing you know, he's in another city (still preaching the good news) until he comes to Caesarea. We don't what happened or (how it happened), but it happened. It's a powerful and a dramatic ending to the story.

Even more powerful is the second thing that happened. In one of the most powerful verses in the entire chapter (at the end of verse 39), it says (Philip was not seen again), he was "taken suddenly" by the Lord, but this man from Ethiopia "went on his way rejoicing." He went on his way rejoicing.

Something powerful had happened. He didn't know the good news, but he heard the good news. He didn't know who Jesus was, but he came to know who he was and what he had done. And (as a result) he took that next step. He was willing in his life to let go. And his life, as a result (of letting go), would never be the same again.

What's standing in the way for you? What's the next step (in facing your addiction) God is calling you to take? There's one who can help and his name is Jesus. There is one who has helped and his name is Christ...Let's pray...

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the work you have accomplished for us on the cross and for the calling you have given to each of us to place our faith and our trust in you. Lord, we know our addiction and we know that (on our own) it will never stop. Help it to stop. Help us to let go and to turn our will and our lives over to your care. Strengthen our faith, guide us by your Spirit, and work in us that we might leave (this day) and live every day rejoicing in what you have done for us on the cross. In your name we pray. Amen.