

“Sinners Anonymous: An Ongoing Recovery”

Dear friends, greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

It's a pattern that often repeats itself in life. I would imagine (in differing ways), we've all experienced it. You come to the close of one chapter and finish it out, only to realize that if you don't stay with it, you'll quickly lose what you previously gained.

It's like what happens when you graduate from college (or trade school) or whatever field you're pursuing, after years of hard work and study and finally moving on to a career. If you don't stay up on the necessary skills and ways of doing things that your (new career) requires, all of your study and hard work will ultimately be for naught.

It's like returning to the gym after years of letting yourself go and finally getting back into shape. If you don't stay with it and (keep it going) even after you're in shape, it won't be long before you're back to where it all began.

In a similar way, the Christian life is not much different. You never fully arrive as a believer and get to the point where you can (stop working at) the things that are essential to following Jesus. It's a daily challenge (in the Christian life) to stay on top of the things that are needed. It takes an intentional (and ongoing) effort to stay with the things that keep us going in our faith-walk with Christ.

And it doesn't matter who you are or how long (or not) you've been connected to (the faith) or to the church. If we don't stay with the things (we know) we need to stay with, it won't be long before we start falling back from the things that count.

As a pastor in the church, I'm as susceptible to lapses in my faith-walk efforts as anyone. If I don't stay disciplined (in my life) in the things I know I need to be doing, it doesn't take long before the things I know I (need to be doing) are no longer part of my discipline.

I find myself (each week) having to work at not allowing my work to get in the way of my relationship with family. I find myself (each day) having to stay focused on the priorities I know that matter, and allowing the things that I know (don't matter) to get set aside.

If we don't stay with it in the Christian life, it doesn't take long before we're not (with it) in the Christian life and other parts of our life take priority. And when other parts of our life take priority (and that happens), then the things that need to happen and (be the priority) no longer are, and we're back to where it all began.

So it is in our faith-walk relationship with Jesus. We need to stay on top of the things that count, if they're going to continue to count. And so it is as we come to the final week in our Sinners Anonymous series. We need to keep working at the things that have brought us to where we are, if we're going to avoid falling back into where we were.

Over the past four weeks, we've been working our way through a number of stories (in the Bible) that help us face and deal with and (come to grips) with what it means (for us) to be addicted to sin. We've been following some of the steps taken in (a number of) the support groups that are out there, like A.A. and N.A. (and others), and tracking what happens in those (recovery programs) with what's happening in our series.

Now, in those recovery programs, there are twelve steps designed to lead people to a healthy and a stable and a manageable approach in (dealing with) their addictions. In our series, we're only (in this) for five weeks, so we haven't had much time (to spend) with each. But we have (in our series) been following the same progression and, as a result, we do come to the same concluding thoughts.

I don't want to go through all of (the steps) again, here today. You can go online and listen to where we've been. I do want to set this up, (like we did last week), by touching briefly on some of the more broad-stroke ideas we've been dealing with in this series.

In a twelve-step program, in terms of the broad-strokes, it goes from an admission that we need help (in step one), to a recognition that there is help (in steps two and three), to an honest assessment and admission of

our sin and guilt (steps four and five), to a desire and willingness (in steps six and seven) to come clean before God and ask for his help in turning this all around.

From there, (in steps eight and nine), it leads to a point where we begin taking some real (and concrete) steps in our relationships with others to identify those we have hurt (as a result of our addiction) and to actually make things right (with those same people) by making amends (wherever possible) and in whatever ways we can.

Where that brings us (and leads) us (in this final week) and where we are today, is to the close of the one chapter (dealing with our addiction), to the beginning of another in which we are challenged to make sure that what we have gained (along the way) is not lost as we continue. Today we're dealing with the ideas found in steps ten, eleven, and twelve of those same recovery programs.

In this final week of our series, under the heading of "Sinners Anonymous: An Ongoing Recovery", what I'd like to do today is to talk (for just a few moments) about each of those final three steps, one at a time, in an attempt to make sure we understand not only what is involved in this recovery from sin, and to make clear who it is that needs to be involved for this recovery to work, but also to make sure we do not miss what this means for our lives. And I want to do so by tying those last three steps (in recovery) to each of the three readings we shared today.

Starting with Step Ten (it says): We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it. (We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.)

The story we read today from John's gospel is one of those stories that in the process of convicting a woman caught in adultery (of her sin), it's also a convicting story of us all in ours. By the time it's over, after Jesus had spoken to the woman who had (obviously sinned) and to those who had brought her to Jesus who were obviously (more than ready) to condemn her for what she had done, there was not only nowhere (for any of those involved) to hide, but (when all was said and done) there was no one from any of those who (were involved) who was left.

It's an insightful story when it comes to sin, because it's so typical of the way it so often (in our world) plays itself out. It's easy to identify sin when we see it. It's easy to name it and to (call it out) when it's there. It's even easier when it's seen (and there) in someone else.

I couldn't tell you how many times (and how easily) I've seen the sin of others (and called it out), and how few times and how hard it is to identify that same sin in myself.

It's the teaching of Jesus (in his Sermon on the Mount) about being able to see the "speck" in someone else's eye and not being able to see the "plank" in our own. "First take the plank out of your own" (Jesus says), "and then you'll (be able to) see clearly to remove the speck from that of your neighbor."

In the story, no one argued with the sin in this adulterous woman's life. (It was clear to everyone what she had done.) And no one disagreed with the charge (and accusation) that was being offered and made by those who were bringing the charge. Even the Law of Moses said (in no uncertain terms) that such an offense was deserving of nothing less than death.

At the same time, no one raised an arm (or a rock) when Jesus (simply stated) that "whoever is without sin should cast the first stone." The final verdict was clear. The last and only judgment in the story was made. And it wasn't just the woman who was called out for hers, but the rest of the crowd (including us) for ours.

This new life we have in Jesus is not the old life we had before. Still sinners? Without question. Still struggling with an addiction we cannot break? (There's no doubt.) Until we reach the other side (in heaven) and see our Lord (in person) face-to-face, it's an ongoing struggle, even for the Christian. In this life, (as long as we're here) we'll never finally (and fully) get past the reality of the things we face.

But there is one who was willing to face them (for us) who was (without sin), and who could have rightly accused and condemned and leveled a charge that no one (including us) could refute. But he didn't. Instead, he chose to take the stones himself, carry our sin to the cross, and offer his life as a sacrifice that you and I might have ours.

Where this all leads, if we're serious about our recovery and even more serious about not (falling back) into where we've been, then we need to take this tenth step to heart: We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

That leads to Step Eleven: We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood him, praying only for knowledge of his will and the power to carry that out.

Our first reading today was from Philippians, chapter three. It comes from a section in the Apostle Paul's letter where he's laying out all of things he had done (in his life) that, if we could somehow make ourselves right with God, that these would be the very things to which he would point.

You look at Paul's life and it's an impressive list. I look at Paul's life and there's no way I'd measure up. And yet, his bottom line (in all of that) is that it's all worth nothing. He says, "It's rubbish. It's worthless." In terms of getting it right with God, it's not enough. "I consider everything a loss" he says, "compared to the passing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

In other words, the goal in the Christian life is not a matter of simply (doing the things) in life that Christian people are supposed to do in life. The goal in the Christian life is to build your Christian life around and in and upon the one after which it is named.

"I want to know Christ" (he says). I want to understand Christ. I want to open myself to having a relationship with Christ. I want to live for Christ. I want to be guided by Christ. I want Christ to be seen and heard in everything I do and say.

For Paul, knowing Jesus was everything. For the apostle, living the Christian life was all about Christ. And it was all about Christ because (he had come to realize) that it was only in Christ and through Christ and because of Christ that (he or you or I) or anyone else (who has ever lived) would ever have any hope at all of being saved.

And so he says, "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...Forgetting what lies behind (he says) and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on to win the prize (in heaven) for which God has called me in (His Son)."

My friends, this whole "recovery from sin" challenge in life, this whole "pressing on to win the prize"? The only way it happens is in Jesus. The only way it's possible and we'll (ever make it) is in Christ.

In no uncertain terms, Paul says, stop trying to make up for your past and start trying to build your life for the future. (He says), stop trying to keep your eyes off of your sin and (instead) start working to keep your eyes more regularly on Christ.

That's what this step eleven is all about. It's about continuing to practice the disciplines we've learned (in our recovery) and trusting that (as we practice them) that God can (and will) do in our lives the things that need to be done.

Paul says, "Fix your eyes on Jesus and your eyes will be in the right place." He says, "Take your eyes (off of Jesus) and wherever you look and whatever you see and what you (try to do) along the way, it'll never be enough.

And don't think that your life is the exception. One of Satan's greatest ploys is to convince us that what is true for everyone else is somehow and in (some way) not true for us. It's not true. You're not the exception, and neither am I.

That's why this eleventh step is so important: We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood him, praying only for knowledge of his will and the power to carry that out.

And that leads to the final step in our recovery. Step (number) Twelve: Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to fellow sinners, and to practice these principles in all of our affairs.

As we come to the close of this series, it's appropriate that we close with a passage that reminds us (in our recovery) of the importance of staying with the very things that we've been doing (along the way) that have enabled us to make it this far. These twelve steps (we've been following) are not just random steps that we take in hopes of somehow and in some way (on our own) figuring it out. These steps (we're taking) are ones that put us in a place where the one who has already figured it out (for us) has already walked.

It's also appropriate that we close this series with a reminder that this whole "recovery from sin" and its addiction is not only a recovery for us, in and of ourselves, that somehow (and in some way) by the grace of God we might become right with him. It's also a recovery that enables us, if not empowers us, to be about the very things for which we were created.

In Peter's first letter, chapter two, it's a passage that could become a series in itself. There's so much in these first twelve verses (of that chapter) that we could be here (on just these) for a long time. We're not going to do that; at least not today.

But there are three little phrases I do not want us to miss. And these are the ones with which I'd like to close. Verse 3: "...now that you have tasted." Verse 9: "...that you may declare." And verse 12: "...that they may see." ("...now that you have tasted." "...that you may declare." "...that they may see.")

Verse 3: "...now that you have tasted (in your recovery)...that the Lord is good" Now that you've come to know (in your addiction) that there's a better life available in Christ. Don't stop living in it. Don't stop growing in it. Don't stop doing what needs to be done to keep it going in your life. "Now that you've tasted that the Lord is good...don't ever fall back on what you've come to know.

Verse 9: "...that you may declare...the praises of him who called you of darkness into his light." That you may tell the world what a life in Jesus is all about. That you may use your life and spend your life and (make the most) of your life, by committing your life to him. "That you may declare...what the rest of the world needs to hear." That's why you're here and that's what you're called to do.

And verse 12: "...that they may see...your good deeds and glorify God." That they may see the change in your life and want to know him in theirs. That they may see what the rest of the world does not have (and you do), that your life might (in spite of your sin) lead others to a life-giving faith.

Three little phrases, as a summary and as a closing to our series: "Now that you have tasted...that you may declare...that they may see." (Say it with me.) "Now that you have tasted...that you may declare...that they may see." (Say it again.) "Now that you have tasted...that you may declare...that they may see."

My fellow sinners, thanks for these weeks (we've shared) and for walking with me through these twelve steps in facing our addiction. We're in this together. We're making progress. We've come to know the One who can help.

It's an ongoing recovery. Don't fall back. There is hope...in Christ. Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank you for the love you have for us and the commitment you have made to us in your Son, Jesus Christ. We thank you for the answer we have to our sin and to the addiction with which we struggle in this life.

Lord, help us to continue doing the things in life that keep us on track, to stay on top of the things that can keep us moving forward in our faith-walk with Jesus. Help us to be honest with ourselves about the ways we come up short, the things in life in which we need to work; and even more honest with ourselves in the need we have (each day) for Christ.

Now that we've tasted that the Lord is good...help us to declare (through our lives) the things we have come to know...that others might see and be drawn to a living and a life-giving faith in him, in whose name we pray. Amen.