



“Staying the Course” **February 7, 2021**

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John 21:15-17
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You wouldn't be alone if you got to Step Ten and were a little disappointed. *Is this it? We were hoping for something bigger, some new wisdom or insight that would lead to greater enlightenment.* Instead, we find a rather pedestrian statement that seems more like a reminder than a next step, at least at first glance.

***Step Ten: Continued to take personal inventory
and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.***

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous suggest various types of regular assessments to ensure continued faithfulness to the 12-step process. Personal inventory features prominently as a “step,” underscoring the importance of staying the course on the path of recovery. And the verb *continued* highlights an important truth: *recovery is not a linear process*. It's often the repetition of small, right steps that leads to lasting healing.

You may be familiar with words attributed to Socrates: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” We can see the truth in that statement. If we don't regularly examine our lives and our conduct, we rely on habits rather than intention in becoming the people we want to be. That's not a reliable plan for achieving a life worth living. Without regular examination, we're more likely to fall into patterns of behavior that lead us away from God and our calling.

Richard Rohr notes that step ten encourages a *personal* inventory rather than a *moral* inventory. For Rohr, the difference is one of judgment versus observation. A moral inventory can be too self-critical, too self-absorbed. (Many of us have become pretty adept at beating ourselves up for our mistakes.) A *personal* inventory is more objective, taking note of successes and shortfalls without shame, and making the necessary course corrections toward continued development. It's hard to be objective when we look at ourselves, but that's exactly what Rohr is advocating. Rohr says that, rather than thinking of the personal inventory as an examination of *conscience*, we should think of it instead as an examination of *consciousness*. The greatest benefit comes from our awareness of what we have done and why, not a laundry list of inadequacies and guilt. By being fully conscious of our actions and the feelings and motives that lie behind them, we can be more aware of our progress on the journey of becoming.

A regular, personal inventory is an exercise in honesty and integrity. We can make that examination with peace in our hearts because we have the assurance of God's grace. We have already received forgiveness through Christ. God's grace is abundant and free. We need not fear what we will find when we examine our minds and our hearts, because we know God is already at work in us and that God's grace is equal to the task.

In the final hours of Jesus's life before his crucifixion, Peter was confronted three times by people who recognized him as one of Jesus's followers. Each time, Peter denied it. Though Jesus had predicted this would happen, Peter didn't believe it would – until it did. The gospel writers tell us that he “wept bitterly” when he realized what he had done, which is probably a colossal understatement. He was devastated at his failure. How could he so quickly surrender his faith and his loyalty to save his own neck?

In the passage from John's gospel that we read this morning, Jesus appears to the disciples after his Resurrection. As they sat together on the lakeshore around a charcoal fire, Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?”

Those words surely stung. Peter had been the most passionate, loyal disciple in all the time they spent together. He was the one whose confession of faith led Jesus to proclaim that Peter was the rock on which the church would be built. But now the memory of his denial remained with him, gnawing at his conscience, replaying his failure over and over in his mind. But Peter's love had never wavered. "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus replied enigmatically, "Feed my sheep."

Twice more, Jesus repeated the question, each time like a hammer blow to Peter's heart. How many nights had he lain awake, agonizing over his ill-fated words, his melted courage, his cowardice that felt like betrayal? By the third time Jesus asked, John tells us that "Peter was sad." Other translations read, "Peter was hurt" by Jesus's question.

"Lord, you know everything; you know I love you."

Of course, Jesus knew. But it was important that Peter had an opportunity to say so, to answer for himself. Three times, he had denied Jesus. Three times, he had the chance now to search his heart and to confess his love. Jesus could have left Peter to wallow in his guilt, forever stained by his moral failure. He could have skipped ahead, offering forgiveness without the examination first. But instead, Jesus invited Peter to reflect – honestly and openly – about what was in his heart. And each time, Jesus reminded him that, despite his failings, there was more for him to do for the kingdom of God. "Feed my lambs."

God's grace says there is more for us to do, as well. God doesn't call the perfect to kingdom work, but the imperfect. Far from disqualifying us from doing God's work, our imperfections lead to greater faithfulness and fruitfulness. We don't do great things because of *our* strength and wisdom, but place our trust in *God* to provide the strength and the wisdom that we need. That is, at least, if we practice regular, honest self-reflection.

Personal inventory as an examination of consciousness can raise our awareness of feelings we have buried or resentment we harbor below the conscious level. Have you ever flown off the handle about a seemingly minor infraction and been surprised by your own overreaction? I think we all have. That's because we often suffer from what alcoholics call "emotional hangovers," the negative emotions we carry around with us long after whatever caused them. By taking regular inventory, we can become more aware of excesses of negative emotion. Through careful practice, we can learn to deal with the past and the feelings it caused, not store them up like an overtightened spring ready to erupt at the slightest, often unrelated, offense.

But aren't there times when anger is an appropriate response? Injustice, abuse, greed, callous disregard? Should we just passively accept attacks against our person or our character? Certainly not. Jesus said we should "turn the other cheek," but that doesn't mean that we should become doormats. Again, a key difference is awareness. Why am I angry? Is my anger appropriate in this situation? Is it proportionate to the stimulus that caused it? Ephesians 4:26 reads, "Be angry, but do not sin." Sometimes, anger *is* appropriate. But we need to be careful in *justifying* anger as a response. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* says that for many alcoholics, wrath is *always* seen as justified. Without careful, honest awareness, negative emotions can lead to devastating consequences. For alcoholics, self-justified anger can lead straight to the bottle. For all of us, little resentments open the door to bitterness and sin. If I can justify my negative feelings toward an individual or a group of people, it's a small step to justify my mistreatment of them.

I'm focusing on anger, though the same principle applies to other subconscious, negative feelings like jealousy, disappointment, unreasonable demands, self-pity, or hurt pride. But anger is so prevalent right now – exacerbated by increased isolation and the constant bombardment of political conflict – that it makes an excellent example from which to learn. Let me share some practical guidance we can learn from our friends in Alcoholics Anonymous:

When we feel anger start to bubble up, resist snap reactions, with the tongue or the pen. We all know the damage that can be caused by words hastily spoken in anger. And you've probably heard the guidance to wait before clicking send on that zinger of an email you've just spent the last 20 minutes composing. But we're

increasingly losing our filters, with vitriol instantly shared on high-tech communication devices always at our fingertips. We can throw gasoline on a fire in fewer than 280 characters. Instead, just pause. Breathe. There's plenty of time to respond if it's truly warranted. But there's a decent chance it isn't critical that the thing we're thinking or feeling at that moment needs to be shared, at least in that way.

Just refraining from reacting isn't enough, though. We're not doing ourselves any favors by denying or burying negative emotions. Unresolved anger can lead to silent scorn, which can be every bit as damaging – and longer lasting. Instead, take a step back. Take an inventory of your feelings and what's behind them. Honestly and prayerfully reflect on what is happening. Call a friend you can trust – not the one who eggs you on and loves to whip up conflict, but someone who will help you honestly process what you're feeling. If you're in addiction recovery, you already have that resource in your sponsor or spiritual advisor. For all of us, that person could be a pastor, a counselor, or an accountability group.

Remember, it isn't just about examining our *conscience*, but examining our *consciousness*. Awareness is the key. Being fully conscious of our actions and their underlying causes is like shining a light on things that have been hidden in the dark. Sin does its best work in the shadows. But when we learn to make a regular, personal inventory without fear, we let grace do its best work. God's grace is what allows us to confess without fear. We can practice the second half of step ten, *admitting when we were wrong*, without fear of judgment or being cast aside.

Confession isn't a sign of weakness, but of strength. Somehow, we've gotten the idea that admitting mistakes is a form of failure, something that renders us incapable of trust or credibility. We talked last week about insincere or incomplete apologies. I think insecurity in admitting our faults is where that comes from. If admitting mistakes makes us weak and untrustworthy, no wonder people are so reluctant to do it. But it shouldn't be this way. We all know that we learn more from our failures than our successes. The Bible is filled with people who made mistakes – sometimes terrible mistakes – who were essential to God's purposes. We're not defined by our failures, but by the grace that redeems us and makes it possible for us to confess and learn and grow. Admitting when we were wrong shouldn't be something that condemns us, but that liberates us. When we can be honest with ourselves and with God, we let God's healing power do its best work.

Recognize that this is a struggle for all of us. We're not alone. And in the same way we don't want to be judged by our mistakes, we should not judge others, either. We must learn to give grace as well as receive it. Especially as people who know the love of God in our hearts and the redemption that comes through faith in Jesus Christ, we have a responsibility to share that grace more widely with those who have not yet experienced it for themselves. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the followers of Jesus were known not for self-righteousness and judgment but for honest confession and grace? How might that witness change the world?

The Good News we live and proclaim is that God's grace is offered to all. Grace makes it possible for us to be honest in our self-reflection, to conduct a regular, personal inventory without fear. By practicing consciousness, we can learn to observe ourselves objectively, to admit our mistakes, and to grow in God's grace. Like Peter, flawed and imperfect as we are, God has need of us. There are sheep to be fed.

Let us pray: God, I know you want me to be honest in my prayers. But sometimes, I'm just afraid to examine my heart that closely. Help me to grow in faith, so I can learn to trust your grace and your unfailing love. Don't let me be satisfied with staying "just as I am," but to pursue the life you imagine for me. Thank you for reminding me that I don't have to be perfect to be useful or to be loved. And help me share that grace with others, too. Amen.