

Learning Surrender

“I’m Cathy, and I’m an addict.” This is how people introduce themselves in 12-step meetings. It’s a simple formula: say your name, and admit you have an addiction—that something, some object or behavior, has compromised your freedom. That you’ve given it power over you, and you can’t seem to take that power back.

Listening to Paul’s frustration in our Romans reading, I’m reminded of this formula, and I picture him in a recovery meeting: “My name’s Paul, and I’m a sinner. I don’t understand my own actions: I can will what’s right, but I can’t seem to do it. Instead, I do the very evil I don’t want to do! It seems like evil’s always **right** there, close at hand, whenever I’m trying to do what’s good.”

What Paul’s describing is a universal struggle—a condition so common to humanity that he calls it the “law of sin.” And it’s a struggle that’s familiar—and particularly dramatic—in the lives of substance abusers. Though some of us may be quick to judge them, let’s be honest: they’re playing out, in extreme and visible form, a drama that we all know on some levelⁱ: the conflict between our desire to do what’s good, and our inability to stop doing what is bad—what’s destroying us, and separating us from God and others.

Of course, there are differences between sinfulness and addiction. But there are striking similarities, too. And I think that addiction and recovery can help us reflect on sin and grace—on Paul’s dilemma and our Gospel’s response. Moreover, these similarities are no coincidence, for the 12 Steps are built on the wisdom of the Gospel, as we see clearly today.

Plus, I’d add that from what I’ve seen, many churches could learn from the application of Gospel principles in 12-Step meetings—from their rigorous commitment to honesty and humility and surrender to the higher power that we call God.

In his book *Addiction and Grace*, psychologist Gerald May defines “**addiction**” as “a *state* of compulsion, obsession, or preoccupation that enslaves a person’s will and desire”—that “compels us to give energy to things that are not our true desires.”ⁱⁱ

Echoing St. Augustine, May believes we’re created with a deep longing for love and goodness, a longing that draws us to God because only God can fulfill it. Yet, rather than turning to and trusting God, we try to satisfy this longing ourselves, with things or methods or relationships we can control. And sometimes, we come to believe that we can’t live without them—without the

drink that calms us, or the accolades that feed our ego—the attention that makes us feel loved, or the anger that masks our vulnerability.

So the 12-steps start with the simple admission that we're not in control, and that we need help. Step 1: *"We admitted that we were powerless over our problems and that our lives had become unmanageable."*

Note that this step, like all 12 Steps, uses the first-person plural, "we," which challenges the delusion that *my* weakness is special or unique--that *I'm* the only loser on this earth, or in this church, who can't be as perfect or good or holy as I want to be.

And by making this admission aloud, "we," like Paul, invite others into our prayer for help—and ask them to be part of our healing.

The second step mirrors Paul's next move: his turn to God as the only way out. Step 2: *"We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."* Or, in Paul's words, "Who will rescue me from this body of death—from the evil that I don't want to do? Only God through Jesus Christ our Lord—thanks be to God!"

The lectionary ends here, but Paul continues with an explanation: "God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. Sending his own Son in the likeness of human flesh, just like ours, God **freed** us to walk according to the Spirit and the life and peace it brings." Paul knows that the law of sin is too strong for him. But he believes in a stronger, higher law--the law of life in Christ Jesus.

This brings us to the center of our Gospel today, which is at the center of the third step: *"We made a decision to turn our wills and our lives over to the care of god."* I see this step as a faithful response to Jesus' invitation in our Gospel, "Come to me, all that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

Now, I suspect that very few of us use a "yoke" on a regular basis. But it was an everyday object in Jesus' time: a "yoke," everyone knew, binds two beings together to accomplish a common good—but one of them must be in charge. Rabbinic writings of the time, which Jesus knew well, used this familiar object as a metaphor for God's guidance—for the Wisdom and way of God, especially as expressed in the Torah, or covenant.

This is the sense in which Jesus uses the term: since we aren't God, and aren't in control, we're going to be subject to something. The question is, to what? Will we be yoked to the values of the world, to the power of sin—to our egos, and the illusion that we're self-made and self-sufficient? Or will we be yoked to the freeing law of God?

This isn't about attaining freedom in the sense that many Americans understand it: absolute independence, to do whatever we want, whenever we want, however we want to it. In fact, it's the very opposite, as any recovering addict or regular church-goer or monastic can tell you.

It's the freedom that comes through obedience and humility--through willing submission to boundaries, discipline, and guidance. It's the freedom that comes from being yoked to God—from surrendering to God and God alone.

Just a few months ago, I sat in a 12-Step meeting and listened to recovering addicts—many of whom were still homeless—talk about this kind of surrender. They really seemed to know and live what they were talking about. For all their hardships, they'd found something precious, and I wanted it. So I asked: "How'd you do that—and how can I do it? How do I know if I'm doing it right—if I'm really surrendering to God?"

But these questions were feeding on my desire for control and virtue: my desire to grow spiritually, and to do even this "surrender" thing, on my own. On *my* terms, and *my* timing. Which isn't surrender at all.

Surrender to God releases us from this frantic striving and posturing, from trying to fix ourselves by ourselves. It loosens the grip we have on our dreams and fears, and frees us to put them in God's mighty, gentle hands. Surrender frees us to rest. And to tell the truth: "I'm a sinner, and I need God's help."

This takes a whole lot of trust: trust that God loves as you are, even in your weakness and sinfulness, trust that God cares about you, and your biggest and smallest problems—your work, family, health; your child's bad grades or broken heart; your sleepless nights or upcoming exam or stubbed toe.

Yet, for many teens and adults, trust doesn't come naturally. Trust, we know, can be broken, and that hurts. Trust requires that we relinquish control (and it's pretty clear that's not something we relish doing). So we may need to learn to trust again, which we can only do with God's help.

Still, prayer, and life in Christian community, can help us. Think about what we do every week in church: we share our burdens; confess our sins; lift up our

prayers to God; and approach the altar with empty, open hands. And then there's the big leap of faith that we're taking together into a capital campaign and building expansion, extraordinary opportunities to practice trust—both in God's guidance, and in each other, as we make decisions and share resources for the good of our community.

With these and other practices, we're doing what we can to relearn trust, and we're leaning in to surrender, bit by bit. And as we do, may we remember Jesus' gracious invitation: *"Come to me,"* Jesus says, *"my beloved, weary children, and give your burdens to me. Trust in me, follow me, learn from me, rest in me."*

ⁱ Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* (HarperOne, 1988 / 1991), 43.

ⁱⁱ May, 14 and 25.