

*Addiction, powerlessness and eternal life.*

*Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."  
(Mark 10: 21)*

I have been thanked recently for something I don't really think I deserve being thanked for! A group of people in recovery using the church for an act of worship, thanked the church for what we do for them. They were members of the Twelve Steps Programme, which enables people with addictions of all kinds to support each other in their recovery. The most famous group is alcoholics anonymous but there are many others: over-eating anonymous; sex and love addicts; narcotics anonymous and so on. As a church, we simply provide low-cost space and a welcome. To be honest, not much more. But the appreciation from this group of people was profound. They pointed to Hinde Street Methodist Church – the presence of the building itself – as the place which 'saved' them.

We often talk about being saved in the church – but do we ever really know what it means for us? This group of people were very clear how they had been 'saved'.

And they wanted to thank the church – me – it was humbling – I didn't feel I deserved the thanks.

On a separate occasion, I got into an interesting conversation with a member of one of these groups – also extremely grateful to the church for 'being there'. They very kindly gave me a book, by the theologian Richard Rohr called *Breathing Under Water*.

In it, Rohr explores the nature of addiction. The kinds of addictions common in the Twelve Step Programme, he says, are those which are obvious. But, he writes, 'We are all addicts. Human beings are addictive by nature.' The church has often called these addictions 'sins' or in earlier times, 'passions' or 'attachments'. Whatever you call them, we are addicted to them.

Rohr writes:

Christians are usually sincere and well-intentioned people until you get to any real issues of ego, control, power, money, pleasure and security. Then they tend to be pretty much like everybody else. We often gave them a bogus version of the Gospel, some fast-food religion, without any deep transformation of the self; and the result has been the spiritual disaster of "Christian" countries that tend to be as consumer-oriented, proud, warlike, racist, class conscious, and addictive as everybody else – and often more so, I am afraid.

So, Rohr in his book, suggests that the church has not always defined the addictions we all have, lumping them together in the word 'sin' without any real exploration. And he says, the church has not adequately filled the so called 'sinner' with spiritual food – the inner life of prayer and contemplation. And so, people have not properly addressed what it is they crave or lack; not discovered what they put in the place of what they genuinely need; not addressed why they turned to God in the first place.

The success of groups like AA and their cousins, he says, is due precisely to their recognising a need to be treated for both a clearly defined disease, and a spiritual need.

But here's the word of grace, which we all need to hear – because we're all addicted to something.

'The experience of powerlessness is where we all must begin.' It is the first of the Twelve Steps. Theologically, only when we admit to God, that we are in need of God's mercy and love – God's grace – in our seriously troubled lives and world, will we begin to build any spiritual life. Otherwise, we will perpetuate the anger, hurt and pain that already exists. Owning our powerlessness, our vulnerability, is the first step to healing ourselves. It is where we all must begin.

Enter the man who runs up to Jesus and kneels before him:

'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' (Mark 10: 17)

Perhaps this man was good at spending money to fix things? Perhaps he was a well-intentioned man who saw the problems with others and, paternalistically, wanted to help? Perhaps he was not aware of his own addiction? But Jesus spots it instantly.

To gain eternal life, you know what to do. Keep the commandments:

you shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother ... (Mark 10: 19)

The man has been religious; he has religiously kept all these commandments.

Perhaps he only asked Jesus the question to prove – in front of others – just how much he deserved eternal life? But if he was hoping to be justified – as another man was hoping to be, when he asked Jesus who his neighbour was – he is instead, confronted with the very thing to which he is addicted. The one thing he cannot do without.

His wealth.

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. (Mark 10: 21)

People often read this passage as a treatise against having money. Should I sell what I own: my car, my table and chairs – heaven forbid, my golf clubs; my euphonium! Would that make me a better follower of Jesus? But I do not think Jesus is specifically targeting people with money – or certain possessions.

Jesus has identified what this *particular* man is addicted to. Call it power and wealth and an accumulation of both. For this man to be truly living a spiritual life, to be free, to recognise his own need of love, mercy and forgiveness, he needs to become powerless, vulnerable, and accept that alone, he cannot save himself – or indeed others. He needs the love, mercy and forgiveness of God. Jesus perceives that the other things he is accumulating, are getting in the way of that.

If you had gone up to Jesus and asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life, the answer may have been very different.

In Hebrews, we hear that the

the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

In hearing such a word, we stand able to approach the throne of grace, 'so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.' (Hebrews 4: 16)

But in the Gospel passage, the man learns that he must take the first step – to become powerless, to rely on God, and that is what will save him from himself.

The man walks away shocked and grieving, because he had many possessions. I wonder, does that mean he went away because he had realised the extent of his addiction and wanted to change, or that he wasn't ready yet to take the first step? The ending is ambiguous.

But the first step is to realise that we cannot do it alone. Jesus says:

For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible. (Mark 10: 27)

Jesus provides the hope, that whatever we have to face – whatever our addiction – whatever is the hard thing to release, the reward will receive a hundred-fold – now – and in the age to come – in eternal life.

Richard Rohr writes:

As many teachers of the Twelve Steps have said, the first step is probably the hardest, the most denied, and the most avoided. So the whole process never takes off! No one likes to die to who they think they are. ... Letting go is not in anybody's programme for happiness, and yet *all mature spirituality, in one sense or another, is about letting go and unlearning.*

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