

## **STEP TEN: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE SELFISH**

We have seen several times in this study the simple structure for working Step Ten. All we do is to ask ourselves some simple questions: Right here, right now, what am I feeling? What am I thinking? What am I doing? What am I thinking about doing? And we continue to ask ourselves these simple questions throughout the day.

Most of us have encountered the reality that whenever we find a simple spiritual practice we can perform, it's usually not very long before our egos grasp hold of it and try and pervert it into something that is not a spiritual practice at all. Generally this happens along the following lines: Instead of performing some spiritual practice *because* of the *unconditional* love that God has for us, we perform it *so that* we will receive the *conditional* love that God hopefully *will* have for us.

Performing some act so that we will be "saved" is the oldest heresy of all. It underlies virtually all so-called "primitive" religions which rely on the pacifying of the gods through sacrifices of animals or even humans. This heresy lay at the root of the Canaanite religion which the Israelites sought to crush during the occupation of the Promised Land; it underpins much of the ancient Greek and Roman religions; it attempted to infect Christianity from the very beginning -- Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* is the definitive refutation of it, and James had another go at it in his Epistle; St. Augustine had to address it all over again in his attack on Pelagianism; and it even creeps into Buddhism, with the notion of acquiring merit for ourselves through good works.

Since the major religions of the world have to contend with this sort of heretical thinking, we are dreaming if we think our 12-Step programs are going to be immune to it. The practice of Step Ten is not infrequently reduced to an adoption of this heresy. In this scenario, it becomes a sort of moral scorecard, where we tot up at the end of the day all of the good and bad things we have done. Quite what the benefits supposedly are of doing Step Ten this way is never actually made clear -- which is scarcely surprising, since it's impossible to justify a heretical practice.

Enduring heresies always have a common characteristic: They are invariably as close to the truth as you can get while still being totally false. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions," as the old proverb says. Our egos are far too smart to try and pervert our spiritual lives by telling us that bad is good, or that black is white. Instead, they attempt to persuade us in our practice of Step Ten that we have become so enlightened, so well versed in the practice of the spiritual life that we are able not only to tell the difference between

good and bad but to direct our own lives based on these moral principles that we are now able so clearly to discern.

Let's compare three sections of text, two from the AA Big Book and one from AA's *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, to see if we can distinguish the true from the not-so-true when it comes to our ongoing practice of inventory. We begin with the Big Book:

*When we retire at night, we constructively review our day. Were we resentful, selfish, dishonest or afraid? Do we owe an apology? Have we kept something to ourselves which should be discussed with another person at once? Were we kind and loving toward all? What could we have done better? Were we thinking of ourselves most of the time? Or were we thinking of what we could do for others, of what we could pack into the stream of life? But we must be careful not to drift into worry, remorse or morbid reflection, for that would diminish our usefulness to others. After making our review we ask God's forgiveness and inquire what corrective measures should be taken.*

We see that, in our examination of the day that has passed, we determine whether we might have done things differently -- in fact, we are performing that part of Step Ten that suggests "... when we were wrong, promptly admitted it." But "wrong" here does not have a *moral* overtone, but a *selfish* one. A "wrong" action or thought is an action where we were thinking entirely of ourselves -- where the thought or action was not accompanied by the Step Ten exercise of asking ourselves what we were thinking, feeling, or doing. In the AA Big Book, a "wrong" action is simply a selfish one -- no matter how "right" it may look from a moral point of view.

This distinction between actions that are *morally* wrong and actions that are *selfish* is explored in the Big Book way back in the treatment of Step Three. The critical phrases are underlined:

*The first requirement is that we be convinced that any life run on self-will can hardly be a success. On that basis we are almost always in collision with something or somebody, even though our motives are good. Most people try to live by self-propulsion. Each person is like an actor who wants to run the whole show; is forever trying to arrange the lights, the ballet, the scenery and the rest of the players in his own way. If his arrangements would only stay put, if only people would do as he wished, the show would be great. Everybody, including himself, would be pleased. Life would be wonderful. In trying to make these arrangements our actor may sometimes be quite virtuous. He may be kind, considerate, patient, generous; even modest and self-sacrificing. On the other hand, he may be mean, egotistical, selfish and dishonest. But, as with most humans, he is more likely to have varied traits.*

The underlined phrases refer to thoughts, feelings, or actions which may be quite desirable strictly from a moral point of view. But the Big Book is not interested in our notions of morality. *Many of us had moral and philosophical convictions galore, it reminds us a little later, but we could not live up to them even though we would have liked to.* And the fact is that we will never be able to live up to them. The last three Steps, and Step Ten in particular, are not about leading a *moral* life. They are about leading an *unselfish* life.

If we now look back to the Big Book's treatment of the review of our day in Step Eleven, we'll see that its recommendations do not cross over the dangerous distinction between the unselfish and the moral. The Big Book's recommendations are not a self-examination that uses a moral scorecard. They are the genuine and legitimate practice of Step Ten -- even though they appear in the section on the Eleventh Step.

Now let's look at our third text.

AA's *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* was published several years after the AA Big Book. There are some good things in the *Twelve and Twelve*, but its treatment of our review of our day is, alas, not one of them:

*When evening comes, perhaps just before going to sleep, many of us draw up a balance sheet for the day. This is a good place to remember that inventory-taking is not always done in red ink. It's a poor day indeed when we haven't done something right. As a matter of fact, the waking hours are usually well filled with things that are constructive. Good intentions, good thoughts, and good acts are there for us to see. Even when we have tried hard and failed, we may chalk that up as one of the greatest credits of all. Under these conditions, the pains of failure are converted into assets. Out of them we receive the stimulation we need to go forward.*

It's clear, based on our discussions so far, that something has gone badly wrong here. What was outlined as a spiritual exercise in the AA Big Book has now become some sort of a moral scorecard. The identification of our feelings, thoughts, and actions in terms of their selfishness -- a practice begun in the Big Book's outline of Step Four and continued in its treatment of Steps Ten and Eleven -- seems somehow to have disappeared. Instead, we have apparently attained a level of spirituality where we can console ourselves that "inventory-taking is not always done in red ink." We rarely have days where "we haven't done something right." And the idea that any act performed for selfish reasons, no matter how well motivated, is still a selfish act -- an idea so boldly outlined in the Big Book's treatment of Step

Three -- has vanished without trace. Instead, "[e]ven when we have tried hard and failed, we may chalk that up as one of the greatest credits of all."

The treatment of the review of our day in the Big Book presents a complete contrast to its treatment in the *Twelve and Twelve*. The Big Book asks us to determine where our thoughts, actions, and feelings are *selfish* -- which is pure Step Ten. The *Twelve and Twelve* seems by contrast to be suggesting that we are capable of discerning, and then doing, what is *right*, while avoiding what is *wrong*. Based on our discussions so far, this would seem to be a dubious thesis at best.

In previous sections of this study, we have talked about the practice of Step Ten beginning and ending with watching our thoughts, feelings, and actions. We do this solely to determine whether they are selfish or not. When we place that small distance between our thoughts and feelings and the actions we take as a result, we find that God is able to direct us -- *through some agency which we shall never understand and which can never be reduced to some system like a scorecard* -- to the action which is unselfish. This doesn't always happen, of course, and it never will. But our ongoing attempts to work Step Ten continuously move us into a sphere of existence where increasingly we find that we do what is unselfish.

A man once called Jesus good, and Jesus' reaction was interesting. "Why callest thou me good?" he asked. "There is none good but one, that is, God" (Mk. 10:18). It is God's business to determine what is good -- our job is merely to be unselfish. And there is an extended version of the conversation we have just looked at. In Luke 10:25-37 Jesus has an encounter with a lawyer who wanted to know how to inherit eternal life. When Jesus challenged him, it turned out that the lawyer already knew. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself." Correct, Jesus told him. But the lawyer could not be content with that reply. Like us, when we attempt to determine how well we have done each day, he wanted a scorecard. " But he, *willing to justify himself*, said unto Jesus ...."

And that is what lies at the heart of the heretical practice of Step Ten we have just discussed. When we use a moral scorecard, we want to justify ourselves. We want to show ourselves -- and hopefully others -- just how spiritually advanced we are. But self-justification is no part of Step Ten. Instead, it is the humble attempt to determine, moment by moment, whether we are thinking selfish thoughts, feeling selfish feelings, and performing or about to perform selfish actions, together with a retrospective review of our likely selfishness at the end of the day. Moral judgment has no role in Step Ten. We can never justify ourselves before God. But we can invite God in,

moment by moment, to direct us away from selfish actions. And when we do this, as we have already seen, we are completely and fully in the presence of God.