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The Eleventh Step. . .It's One of the Twelve

When worked in combination with the other Steps, Step Eleven can teach us to live by God's will

WILL THE MEEK really inherit the earth? Probably not, say a number of scholars, who feel, this familiar quote is the product of an incorrect translation. In their view, the Greek word *praos*, which was translated "meek," should have been rendered as "trained" or "disciplined," which gives a totally different meaning to the sentence. This fits in with my experience in working the AA program, which brings disciplined direction to my life, resulting in greater simplicity and the ability to live each day more effectively.

I came into AA with no belief in anything, but battered so badly that the arguing and fighting had been knocked completely out of me. The members told me about "God *as we understood Him*" and emphasized that it was my privilege to approach God on the basis of my own understanding. A friend summed it up for me a few years ago when he said, "I was grateful to learn that no one in AA argued about whose Higher Power was higher."

After blundering around sober for a couple of years, I finally worked the first nine Steps, which, it turned out, are the prerequisite for effective use of Step Eleven. Before this, I was able to pray and had made sporadic efforts at meditation, but could never spend enough time quietly to get anything from it. Now, however, after working Steps One through Nine as thoroughly as possible, I was able to sit quietly and spend fifteen or twenty minutes in meditation.

Today, it seems clearly evident that we can pray wherever we are in the Steps, but we aren't able to meditate effectively until we have first cleaned out the debris of the past. This can be done only by carefully working One through Nine. Continuing, regular meditation on this foundation began to improve my life, which started to move in a more positive direction. I began to get results.

This, naturally, led to experiments in using prayer to get what I wanted. There's unlimited literature on such prayers. As I read widely, God began to take on the benevolent aspect of a Cosmic Candy Machine that would grant all my requests if I simply fed in the right combination of prayers and concentrated thoughts. My prayers became filled with requests for others, and I worked tirelessly--hand in hand with the Higher Power, of course--to help all these people straighten out their lives the way I thought they should. At the same time, these prayers included specific requests for what seemed necessary for me to grow into my destined spiritual stature. It was hard work, but worth the sacrifice, because it put me in a position of spiritual counselor, aiding the Higher Power in handling His myriad tasks.

Long after this period, I ran across a story about Beau Jack, the former lightweight champion of the world, whose slashing fists and relentless attack carried him from a job shining shoes at the Augusta Country Club to the title. A man of profound faith, he used to pray before each bout. One day in the dressing room, sportswriter Bill Heinz asked, "What do you pray for?"

"I pray that it be a good fight and nobody get hurt," replied Beau Jack.

"Don't you pray to win?"

"No," was the answer. "If I pray to win and the other boy pray to win, then what God gonna do?"

That was a remarkably simple and clear description of "praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out." Beau Jack was way ahead of me, although he certainly hadn't read all the books on prayer that I had and undoubtedly couldn't speak as articulately about subjects that, finally, can be understood only through experience, never through discussion or reading.

As considerable time passed, I learned that when we stop struggling for what we think we want, then and then only, we begin to get what we really want. To me, this does not mean praying for specifics; it simply means spending time each day using a phrase or a word that helps keep my thoughts turned to God. In my experience, there is a definite correlation between the amount of time spent in meditation and the degree of change. The quantity of meditation *does* influence the quality. If I double the amount of time spent in meditation, it seems to me that the results are not twice as good, but four times as good. It all comes from consistent practice and has nothing to do with talking, reading, or studying.

It takes some steady work with prayer and meditation to understand what they will do, and then it takes a substantial amount of additional work to begin to understand what they will *not* do. Step Eleven is only one Step of our Twelve Steps program, and it works most effectively as an integrated part of all the Steps. Continuing work with all the Steps enables me to change in ways that would be impossible through prayer alone.

Is Step Eleven an important tool in changing? Absolutely!

Is it more important than some of the other Steps? Absolutely not!

For a number of years, I read everything available on prayer, mysticism, Vedanta, Buddhism--all the literature that can be loosely classified under the heading of "spiritual." The ideas were interesting, but eventually it became increasingly apparent that none of this provided the sharply outlined blueprint for continuing change to be found in our Steps. This was where it was at, I realized. And this is where it remains. By "our Steps," I mean *all* of them, not just the last three.

For several years, I belonged to an Eleventh Step group that met once a month. We talked about what we were reading and what was happening with our prayer and then said the Lord's Prayer and had refreshments. As time passed, everything but the refreshments became stale, and it finally became evident why. There just isn't that much to talk about. There's a great deal of steady effort required, but conversation and reading are not what does it. The reading and the talking are particularly attractive for anyone who has, as I have, a strong tendency to worship at the shrine of his own intelligence.

Thomas Aquinas provided an illuminating commentary on the role of the intellect in the spiritual life. Probably the most gifted of Christianity's theologians, he studied and wrote and researched for several decades. Then he had an experience of God that was so moving, so transforming, that he closed his

books and never opened them again, saying, "What I have seen makes all of this as straw." Certainly, he spoke from living knowledge on the uselessness of trying to read or talk or reason our way into divine awareness. The mind has extremely limited usefulness as a tool for experiencing reality.

It's been helpful for me to use the Twelve Steps as a base for meditation by going from One through Twelve and briefly checking where I am with each one at the beginning of my meditation. From there, I try to concentrate on a phrase or a sentence such as "Thy will be done" or "God is love," and simply keep turning my thoughts back to this. When the mind wanders, bring it back. Gradually, the mind slows. With this slowing, the vagrant thoughts are replaced by quiet, calm, and direction.

Another method that has worked for me is to sit quietly and watch my thoughts--not battle them, not try to control them, but just sit and watch them drift by. The result? The process of watching causes them to become slower. Finally, the result from this, too, is growing calm, peace, and direction. One of Laotzu's sayings sums it up: "Muddy water, let stand, becomes clear."

Along with aiming for regular periods of meditation, it's necessary for me to do other things like exercising regularly and eating properly. It's supremely important for me to get to bed early enough that I will have time to start the next day by freeing my mind from, distractions and that everlasting internal dialogue.

After years of working consistently with Step Eleven, I can point to some specific benefits from the practice. These don't stem from specific requests, but come from regular work with this Step, "praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out." The benefits include greater stability, improved memory, better health, increased energy, absence of hurry, and ability to work more effectively.

Memory is largely a matter of cataloguing and knowing where to go in the mind to retrieve information. Regular practice with Step Eleven, combined with all the other Steps, improves my inner integration, which, in turn, enables me to find facts and information when needed. This improved integration is also reflected in greater order in all areas of my life.

For example, in 1956 and 1957, I worked at the airport in Pt. Barrow, Alaska, during the construction of the Distant Early Warning Line. We had a small airport with a 5,000-foot landing strip and extremely limited facilities for parking and servicing aircraft. About ninety percent of our air traffic arrived between 10:30 AM and 2:30 PM, and it seemed there was no way in the world I could get passengers on and off, cargo unloaded and loaded, planes gassed and turned around without my being constantly harried and behind schedule.

There *was* no way, I found--unless I was careful to get a sizable slice of prayer and meditation each morning before going to work at the airport. With this as a foundation, I was busy, but not hurried. Everything got done, and it was done without rushing and without strain. My life is a reflection of my inner condition, which is determined by the degree of my persistence in working the AA program. This has proved to be true again and again.

Men and women who have gotten somewhere in the spiritual life are invariably adamant when they speak of the trap of seeking special gifts and special powers. They point to these as egotistical blind alleys, ending in danger for the seeker. Today, in my view, the spiritual life has nothing to do with these "specials" and everything to do with a growing ability to work consistently and effectively where God has put me.

There's no cheap grace. Reality is not given; it's mined, like gold. The basic lesson today seems to be that I'm free only when I'm willingly doing God's will--that the finest prayer is simply "Thy will be done." The ability to pray this with wholehearted commitment is markedly increased through persistent work with Step Eleven in combination with all the other Steps. Each one is equally important.

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