

# The Gospel and the Twelve Steps

FOLLOWING JESUS  
ON THE  
PATH OF RECOVERY

Martin M. Davis

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To Sara,  
my wife and partner in the ministry of writing



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# PREFACE

The original version of *The Gospel and the Twelve Steps* was published in 1993, with the subtitle, *Developing a Closer Relationship with Jesus*. Many “Christians in Recovery” groups in churches throughout the United States have used the original edition. I have received encouraging letters from pastors and others in such diverse locations as Florida, New York, and Oregon. In addition, prison ministries in the United States have used the original version to help the spiritual growth of those in prison. This was an unexpected bonus, for I had originally envisioned the primary readers of the book to be Christians in recovery who participated in Twelve-Step groups associated with their local churches.

A variety of denominations and traditions within the Christian faith have used the original version of *The Gospel and the Twelve Steps*. Evangelicals, Protestants, and Roman Catholics have found help and inspiration in its pages. That is as it should be, for the book is firmly attached to a solid scriptural foundation.

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Unfortunately, for reasons that had nothing to do with the book itself, the original version of *The Gospel and the Twelve Steps* was not reprinted after selling out its first printing. I have long believed that the book deserved a better chance to reach a larger audience, and I have wanted for some time to republish it. I delayed republishing, however, for two reasons. First, I have spent much time the last few years writing another book, which I have only recently completed. Second, during the last decade, my own spiritual journey has taken many unexpected twists and turns, and it has taken me a while to regain my spiritual bearings. Since I have told that story elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> I will simply say here that, while I do not claim to be a better man, I am a spiritually deeper man than I was over a decade ago.

To be sure, my own spiritual growth has compelled me to revise several portions of the original version of my book. In the revised edition of *The Gospel and the Twelve Steps*, subtitled *Following Jesus on the Path of Recovery*, I have made specific improvements. For example, I have rearranged much of the material, especially in the first half of the book, to make the text more coherent. Moreover, I have improved the writing in the revised edition, largely because I am now a much more experienced author. Finally, the revised edition is more “church-friendly” than the original version. I am well aware that the Church, as an institution, has its fair share of inadequacies and shortcomings, and I mention some in the Introduction. I no longer think, however, that a book like this one, written largely for those new in the faith, is the proper place to air the dirty laundry. Perhaps now that I am fifty-five years old, I am simply more mellow than I was in my more fiery younger days. Without doubt, I am more compassionate.

Today, many books are on the market that purport to integrate the Twelve Steps with the teachings of the Holy Bible. That is not a particularly difficult task, because the Twelve Steps are firmly rooted in biblical principles. Many Twelve-Step books

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for Christians, however, merely list a step, make brief comments about it, then add various scriptural references that may, sometimes in very oblique ways, relate to it.

By contrast, *The Gospel and the Twelve Steps* weaves many passages of scripture directly into the text and relates them to each step with particular attention to their *relevance* for those in recovery from addiction. Moreover, this book integrates not only my own commentary on each step, supported by many scriptural references, but also profound, biblical commentary from several widely known, beloved authors whose wisdom has stood the test of time. These include C.S. Lewis, George MacDonald, William Barclay, and others. Even as I reread my own book, I remain profoundly impressed to see how relevant these teachers' words are to the Twelve-Step program of recovery. Finally, I have shown that the process of *surrender* that begins particularly at Step Three is a recurrent theme that runs throughout the Twelve Steps. For me, surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ is the essence of true spirituality. In fact, I believe that, as Christians, our *primary goal* in life is *to move from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness*. The Twelve Steps will help us do exactly that! By following Jesus on the path of recovery, we may experience the true spirituality described by the apostle Paul, so that we, too, can say, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). The combination of ample scriptural references, thoroughly integrated into the text, along with highly relevant commentary, makes *The Gospel and the Twelve Steps* unique among books for Christians in recovery.

I pray that God will use this book to reap a spiritual harvest among those who struggle with addiction and compulsive behavior. I have plowed and worked the field God has given me; the harvest is in his hands.

Martin M. Davis  
Jackson, Mississippi  
Summer, 2004

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### THE TWELVE STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

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12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

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# INTRODUCTION

The Twelve Steps, and the various organizations that have sprung from them, have become an important social force in today's society. Originally conceived by Bill Wilson, a co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), the Twelve Steps provide the framework of a program of recovery from addiction and compulsive behavior that is practiced today by millions worldwide.

In addition to A.A., a variety of self-help groups have developed that practice the spiritual principles encompassed in the Twelve Steps. Included among these groups are Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Overspenders Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics, and, of course, Al-Anon, the original companion group of A.A.

Because of the rapid growth of these organizations and their success in facilitating recovery, most Twelve-Step participants have escaped the prison of addiction. Because of the emphasis these programs place on spiritual principles, many recovering persons have found their way into the Christian church. For

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many, including myself, the Twelve-Step program of recovery was the pathway that led first to God in general, then to Jesus Christ in particular. This should not be surprising, for the spiritual principles encompassed in the Twelve Steps are squarely founded in *biblical* teaching, as this book will show.

The growth of A.A. and other Twelve-Step groups has been phenomenal. From its beginning in 1935, with only a handful of members, A.A. alone has grown to a current worldwide membership of more than two million. Today, an estimated 100,000 A.A. groups meet in 150 countries.<sup>1</sup> Many other Twelve-Step organizations have also experienced rapid growth. The rise of Twelve-Step programs, especially in the United States, parallels the decline of the Christian Church as a meaningful influence in the lives of many. The decreasing importance of the Church as a spiritual force in our society has created a spiritual vacuum that the various Twelve-Step organizations are now filling.

Because of the abandonment of the historical Christian faith, the cultural Christianity that is often practiced today is a tepid, insipid mixture that lacks the power to invigorate us spiritually. While we thirst for living water (John 7:37–38), many churches increasingly lack the spiritual capacity to provide it. Many persons now satisfy their thirst in the meeting rooms of the various Twelve-Step organizations.

Inherent in Twelve-Step groups is a strong social bonding and camaraderie characteristic of people who share an important, common interest. Because of their mutual background of addiction—whether chemical, behavioral, or relational—members of Twelve-Step groups quickly form a bond of fellowship. As persons united against the common enemy of addiction, they form a strong social unit from which all members draw strength. The social cohesion of the group, combined with its underlying foundation of spirituality, creates a powerful entity that commonly becomes the major influence in members' lives. They

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practice the spiritual principles of the group in all their affairs. The Twelve-Step program is literally a way of life.

One of the many strengths of the Twelve-Step group is the acceptance enjoyed by its members. Twelve-Steppers are usually quite familiar with what Pastor John Keller calls “pain, brokenness, and human limitation.”<sup>2</sup> They have walked a common path that has led them, and often their loved ones, through the wilderness of sorrow, grief, and pain. Because of the commonality of their past mistakes and human failings, participants in Twelve-Step programs accept each other without judgment. Members are thus freed to be themselves, to be *real* rather than pretentious. They attribute their rescue from addiction not to their own efforts, but to the grace of God. They view recovery as a gift, not as something merited. Members willingly share their “experience, strength, and hope”<sup>3</sup> with any who wish to join them on their journey in recovery.

The Church can learn much from today’s Twelve-Step groups. Many Christians would do well to emulate the nonjudgmental attitude of acceptance practiced by members of Twelve-Step programs. The “attitude of gratitude” routinely encouraged in Twelve-Step meetings would benefit those who are heirs to the kingdom of God. The camaraderie and social cohesion, once part of the early Church, but now more typical of the Twelve-Step group, is a shining model for today’s Christian community. Those who would make Christianity a way of life do well to emulate Twelve-Step participants who practice spiritual principles in all their affairs.

On the other hand, the Church has much to offer those who follow the spiritual principles embodied in the Twelve Steps. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church is the historic guardian and interpreter of the Holy Bible, and the keeper of the Sacraments (or, Ordinances). The Holy Bible, God’s word in written form, and the Sacraments/Ordinances, the message

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of salvation enacted in ritualized form, provide the recovering person a foundation for true spirituality. Most important, the Christian Church proclaims the historic gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God. Only in him can one hope to live a life of true spirituality.

Today, many Twelve-Step practitioners are entering the Church. These persons wish to go beyond the vague, nebulous idea of a higher power, characteristic of many Twelve-Step groups, to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The Church can foster that relationship by helping new Christians to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18).

While this book is written primarily for Christians in recovery, it is not intended for them only. This book is written also for those who practice the Twelve Steps but who are *not* Christians. My prayer is that, through this presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, written within the framework of the Twelve Steps, those Twelve-Step practitioners who may be resistant to Christianity will find the familiar language contained herein a palatable means of coming to a spiritually vital relationship with Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, this book is a call to all churches with adequate resources to establish self-help groups for Christians in recovery. These groups may use biblical principles within a Twelve-Step framework to facilitate both recovery from addiction and the spiritual growth of their members. Perhaps they can use this book toward that end.

Finally, this book is a call to all Christians in recovery to share with the Twelve-Step community the good news about Jesus and his abounding love for us. By identifying our higher power as Jesus Christ, Christians in recovery invite further inquiry into the transforming message of the gospel. Christians in recovery are blessed to have a personal relationship with the

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true higher power, Jesus Christ. Let us use our unique position to share this blessing with our fellow Twelve-Steppers as the Holy Spirit leads.





# THE JOURNEY BEGINS

**Step One:** We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

The First Step is difficult for many people entering a program of recovery from addiction. To admit that we are powerless and that our lives have become unmanageable is a distasteful chore.

The values of our culture make this step more difficult. Our society glorifies the rugged individual. Throughout our history we have sung the praises of the self-made person who boldly charges forth to carve civilization from the savage wilderness: The explorer, the frontiersman, the railroad magnate, the cattlebaron, the corporate mogul, the high financier, the golden-haired goddess of stage and screen, and the seven-figured sports star have all represented the heroic icons of American culture. Thus, we have hardly begun the Twelve-Step journey before we stumble headlong onto the distasteful ideas of powerlessness and unmanageability. In a society that values competence and success, the First Step is a medicine that is not easily swallowed.

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Besides our cultural values, three false assumptions make the admission of powerlessness even more difficult. They are embedded deep in human nature and present from birth. According to Pastor John Keller, a minister who has worked with alcoholics for more than thirty years, these incorrect assumptions are:

1) I am in control or ought to be in control of all that has to do with my life; 2) I am at the center of the universe; 3) everything and everyone ought to be spinning around me so I can have what I want and life will be the way I want it to be.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Harry Tiebout worked with alcoholics in the early years of A.A. This psychiatrist observed that the essence of these false assumptions is expressed in a sense of egocentricity and omnipotence embedded deep in the human psyche. Following Sigmund Freud, Dr. Tiebout called this innate egocentricity and sense of omnipotence “his majesty the baby.”<sup>2</sup> According to Dr. Tiebout:

There is that within us that tenaciously wants to remain on the throne of our lives, our sense of omnipotence and egocentricity. In our words, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors we can hear the infant, “his majesty the baby,” inside sometimes shouting, “I want it my way. I want what I want. I want to be in control of all that has to do with my life, and I will prove that I am.”<sup>3</sup>

To admit powerlessness runs contrary to the demands of our egocentric, omnipotent natures. Few of us willingly surrender our desire to be in control of our lives; we wish to remain at the center of our personally-constructed universes. The inner tyrant, “his majesty the baby,” does not abdicate readily. Usu-

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ally, we require “a sufficient degree of pain” to expel this arrogant king from his throne.<sup>4</sup>

### WHAT POWERLESSNESS IS

Since the admission of powerlessness runs contrary to our natures, the First Step may become easier if we gain a clearer understanding of what powerlessness is.

*Powerlessness* is the inability to exert effective control over people, places, events, and things. Regarding chemical dependency, powerlessness is the inability to control the use of a substance that threatens to destroy our lives. As for addictive behaviors such as compulsive gambling or overspending, powerlessness is the inability to control the compulsive behavior. Regarding relationship addictions, powerlessness is the inability to control one’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors concerning another person.

In a much broader sense, powerlessness is the inability to control many aspects of our personal, social, and physical environments. We cannot control the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of other adults; we cannot control the economy; we cannot control political events; we cannot control the weather; we cannot even add a single hour to our life spans. The world simply does not spin according to our wishes. Therefore, the admission of powerlessness is the *recognition* that we are not the center of the universe; that life is not the way we want it to be; that, in fact, we are largely unable to control people, places, events, and things.

On the other hand, the desire to exercise control is inherent in human nature. Mastering the environment to a developmentally appropriate degree is an early task of childhood. In many situations and conditions, however, mastery and control are either inappropriate or impossible. For example, attempting to force another adult to behave as we want is inappropriate. The

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desire to control the behavior of a significant other is a definitive characteristic of a behavioral syndrome known to mental health professionals as *codependency*. A lesson learned by those entering Al-Anon (one of the first Twelve-Step programs) is that we cannot control the behavior of another adult. For example, we cannot prevent a loved one from abusing alcohol or drugs if that person is determined to do so. While varying degrees of control are necessary in a complex and dangerous world, the desire for control in inappropriate or impossible situations indicates a problem.

When, finally, we are willing to admit that we are powerless, that our lives have become unmanageable, we are in a position similar to that of the apostle Paul. He, too, was acutely aware of his powerlessness. He found himself unable to do the good things he wished to do; in fact, his human nature often compelled him to do the sinful things he did not wish to do. He writes, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24)

The phrase, “body of death,” has various meanings. Some biblical scholars view it as a reference to one of the most horrible and sinister forms of criminal punishment used by the Roman government of Paul’s day. To punish those criminals guilty of the highest offenses such as murder, the authorities chained the victim’s body to the perpetrator’s legs. Criminals would spend their remaining days dragging the putrid, festering remains of their victims before they, too, died—often from the corpse’s disease and decay. Thus Paul laments, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” The body of death is his own sinful nature, the same egocentric, omnipotent nature that plagues us all (Rom. 7:18). At Step One, we are like Paul: we are chained to a destructive, addicted lifestyle. In the First Step, we recognize that the chains that have bound us to the old way of life must be broken.

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In his inspired wisdom, the apostle Paul encapsulates the first three steps when he writes:

What a wretched man I am [Step One]! Who will rescue me from this body of death [Step Two]? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord [Step Three]!  
(Rom. 7:24–25)

### WHAT POWERLESSNESS IS NOT

The discussion of powerlessness in relation to substance abuse and compulsive behaviors inevitably raises questions about the nature of these dysfunctions. Are these aberrant behaviors diseases, or are they merely weaknesses of the flesh springing from a lack of willpower?

Most mental health professionals view alcoholism and other chemical dependencies as bona fide diseases. Many scientific studies contribute to the disease model of chemical dependency by showing a genetic link to these disorders. Children of alcoholic parents, for example, are far more likely to become alcoholics themselves than are children of nonalcoholic parents. Studies show that the cross-generational transmission of these disorders cannot be attributed solely to environmental factors. Clearly, a genetic component is involved.

Social factors also contribute to the abuse of alcohol and other drugs. Among these is a history of familial dysfunctions, lack of self-esteem, peer pressure, experimentation (curiosity), cultural influence, parental drug abuse, and a lack of moral and spiritual values.<sup>5</sup> While these factors do not cause addiction, they may facilitate its occurrence.

Some Christians, however, view the disease model of addiction with skepticism. They see alcoholism as sin; that is, they believe practicing alcoholics are simply weak willed and unwilling to change their aberrant behavior. Yet, to attribute

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alcoholism and other addictions to moral weakness or lack of willpower is to oversimplify complex neurological, behavioral, genetic, and spiritual issues.

Essential to recovery, and to self-esteem, is the understanding that powerlessness is not a lack of willpower, nor is it a lack of strength or determination. Moreover, powerlessness is not a lack of ability or talent. As we shall see in the following pages, even persons of extraordinary strength, ability, and talent have found themselves powerless over people, things, and events.

While many mistakenly relate powerlessness to a lack of willpower, powerlessness and willpower bear no relationship to each other. Comparing these two ideas is like comparing apples and oranges. Willpower is tight-jawed, teeth-grinding determination; in contrast, powerlessness is the inability to exert effective control, even when accompanied by our most tenacious efforts.

Many persons who are addicted to alcohol, drugs, food, or compulsive behaviors have tossed and turned with white-knuckled determination through endlessly sleepless nights before succumbing again to the power of their addiction. Many have remained abstinent for a year, or even longer, by doggedly exerting the force of their wills before they were caught again in the overpowering grip of addiction. These persons must exert tremendous willpower to sustain a prolonged period of abstinence when every cell in their bodies screams for a fix. Yet even after colossal efforts to maintain abstinence through the sheer power of will, many finally succumb again to the overpowering demands of addiction. As those in recovery know, hope springs to life with the admission of powerlessness.

Finally, the admission of powerlessness is not failure. Failures throw up their hands and say, "It's no use; it's hopeless; nothing can help me." Those on the path of recovery throw up their hands as well and honestly admit that desperate attempts at abstinence avail nothing. Yet there is a *crucial* difference: upon

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admitting powerlessness, those who travel the path of recovery begin to look outside themselves, to a power greater than themselves to help them. Then, the hope is born that there may be a way after all! Like the phoenix rising from the ashes, their eyes turn heavenward with renewed hope that a power greater than themselves can restore them to sanity.

### OUR RESPONSIBILITY

As stated earlier, the disease model of chemical dependency and addiction has gained wide acceptance in the mental health field. Occasionally, however, some use the disease concept as an excuse for aberrant behavior; they say, "I have a disease; I can't help it." Fortunately, the disease concept of chemical dependency has undergone important refinements. On the subject of alcoholism, Dr. Sandra D. Wilson writes:

The disease concept has been refined in recent years to correct the false impression that alcoholism can be treated in such a way that alcoholic individuals do not have anything to do for themselves. This refinement views alcoholism as a chronic illness wherein the alcoholic is not the passive recipient of a cure, but instead is an active participant who assumes major responsibility for managing his or her own illness.<sup>6</sup>

Those who were irresponsible under the influence of active addiction now have the responsibility to actively pursue recovery. Those in recovery must not use powerlessness as an excuse to avoid the responsibility to make appropriate choices. Recovering alcoholics must *choose* whether they frequent bars; recovering overeaters must *choose* whether they go into ice cream parlors; compulsive gamblers in recovery must *choose* whether they go to casinos.

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Thus, powerlessness is not an excuse for failing to take personal responsibility for the management of illness. We accept responsibility by recognizing that, while we are powerless over addiction, we are *not* powerless over *recovery*. We assume active responsibility for managing our illness by learning and practicing the spiritual principles of the Twelve Steps.