

Living Inside Out

Living Inside Out

Learning How to Pray the Serenity Prayer

Jan G. Linn



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To my Mother
for who she is and
has always been



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Acknowledgments

This book has been in the making for a long time. The impetus for these thoughts on the Serenity Prayer was occasioned by an invitation several years ago from First Christian Church of Leavenworth, Kansas, to deliver a series of lectures whose focus would be personal renewal. I am grateful for the hospitality of that congregation, and its pastor, Bill Nowlan, and their positive response to the material.

In a curious way, however, after that series of lectures I felt the need to live with this material for a while in order to experience the transformative power of the Serenity Prayer in my own life at a deeper level. I needed to learn more about how to “pray” this prayer, and not simply say it, something the book explains in detail. As I did this, and as the result of many conversations with people struggling with very difficult personal situations, the truth of this simple little prayer became more evident. Its wisdom seemed to speak to any number of different circum-

stances that all people face. There is hardly a problem or personal struggle in life in which working the Serenity Prayer does not help.

Once I put the material into manuscript form I decided to use it in a class I teach on spiritual formation. I am indebted to those students in the class, and several not in the class, who read the manuscript and made suggestions that improved the practical application of the material significantly.

To my colleague, Loren Broadus, I want to express special appreciation for reading the material in its early manuscript stages and for providing several helpful suggestions. Once again, thanks also must go to my editor, David Polk, for his steadfast interest in the book, and for his wise discernment of the appropriate sequence for publishing the recent writings I have sent to him.

Finally, it is my hope that the reader will find in these pages a practical guide to learning how to live life in a new way, from the inside out. It is the truest way I know to a life of daily peace for which all of us long.

Jan G. Linn
Easter Week, 1994

Introduction

Psychiatrist Scott Peck begins his longtime popular book, *The Road Less Traveled*, with three simple words, “Life is difficult.” That much most people know very well. But Peck goes on to say that the mere acknowledgment that life is not easy is itself transforming: “Once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.”¹ Peck believes that the fact that life is always difficult means living rather than merely existing requires us to face difficulties with the discipline to overcome them. In other words, *meaning-full* living is possible only when we take ultimate responsibility for the quality of our living. No one else can make us happy. No one else can give our lives meaning and purpose or a sense of fulfillment. All of that, Peck says, comes from within.

We shall have more to say later about the central role we play in our own happiness. At the same time, though,

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the need to accept personal responsibility for ourselves in all circumstances should not lead us to minimize the harshness of the pain and struggle of trying to live meaningful lives. Life is not only difficult. Life is not only suffering.² Life is not only unfair. Many times life flies to pieces. Things do happen that devastate us, and when they do we can easily feel overwhelmed by the situation. In such moments it hardly ever helps to be told that we simply have to rise above circumstances. When life goes to pieces, the most urgent need of the moment is to know that we can survive. It may seem obvious to everyone else that one can survive the worst of circumstances. People have before. But to the person whose life is flying to pieces, survival doesn't feel so obvious, or even desirable. Only as the person recovers a sense of balance is one able to take responsibility for the quality of one's living.

There is no worse experience than feeling as if your life is flying to pieces. What is more, such a feeling is more common than many of us realize. We tend to think that a sense of desperation or the feeling that we cannot cope with the circumstances of our lives happens to someone else, but not to us. As one woman who came to talk to me said, "I don't get depressed." But she did. Such feelings come to all of us—to me and to you. Blue collar workers and company executives have them. Rich and poor, the wise and the foolish, the literate and the illiterate, the powerful and the powerless, the young and the old—all have them. No one is exempt from the possibility of facing circumstances that feel out of control, or from reaching a point in life when any meaning we once had in life seems to be gone.

The fact is, most of us are subject to a wide variety of mood swings that affect how we feel about life. Researchers have found that only 2 percent of people are in what can be considered a cheerful mood every day. Five per cent of people have bad moods four or five days a week, and three days of bad moods out of ten is about average. Moreover, people cope with bad moods and sadness and melancholiness with varying degrees of success. Most revealing is the fact that the average person's ability to cope

with anger, which is a primary cause of depression, is less effective than coping with daily mood swings.³

Mild mood swings, however, are hardly all most people have to confront. Indeed, the number of people today trying to cope with serious personal problems is staggering. The high divorce rate, the number of people in therapy, the rapid growth of Twelve Step programs, and the increasing occurrence of family violence and violent crimes in general all tell us that we are a people who are in large measure just trying to keep our heads above water. To one degree or another we are a people who struggle with finding meaning in the face of sometimes feeling like we've reached "the end of our rope."

What most of us have heard we should do at any moment we feel this way is to tie a knot and hang on. On the surface tying a knot and hanging on sounds like a good thing to do. The truth is, though, in any difficult situation, momentary or long-term, tying a knot and hanging on is the worst thing we can do for ourselves. As strange as it may sound, we in fact need to do just the opposite. We don't need to hang on. We need to let go! Hanging on makes things worse. It intensifies the frustration, desperation, panic, or sense of things being out of control we may be feeling. The reason it does is because it perpetuates the illusion that we can control the very circumstances that have created those feelings.

Letting go does just the opposite. It takes us to a place deep within that calms us in the midst of the worst possible circumstances. It teaches us about real power and real control; about living authentically without arrogance; about the difference between self-care and self-centeredness; about surrender and victory. Letting go is the way to life, even abundant life! It is an experience that feels like we have been, to borrow a perfectly wonderful biblical phrase, "born again" (John 3:3, 7, KJV), as if we had never really lived before. It teaches us how to enjoy living each day we have because we learn that life is not a rose garden and doesn't have to be. Letting go is the step we take away from trying to control what we in fact

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cannot control at all. It is the only step that makes real sense, yet it seems to be the last thing we should do. Letting go does not mean we become irresponsible. It means we learn how to be truly responsible.

While I do not want to suggest that I model this kind of letting go, what is written here is rooted in personal experience. Learning how to let go has been the focus of my life for the last five years, and with considerable intensity. The learning has not come easy. I have kicked and screamed all the way. But I now know that it is a hard truth I needed to learn. Yet I doubt I would ever have learned it on my own. That is why I am grateful that I found a little group of people who knew how to let go, and were caring and patient enough to teach me. They did not even know me at the time, but they welcomed me with unconditional acceptance. They offered me no prescriptions or even direct advice. They simply talked about their own experiences of learning how to let go. All I had to do was listen. They spoke a language I understood. At times they seemed to know me better than I knew myself, without ever directly talking about the circumstances of my life. It was not long before I came to believe that a loving and gracious God was speaking to me through them. So I listened more intently, and I began to learn.

A common need is what brought this group together. It was the need we are talking about—to let go. Several of them had been working at letting go for many years. By their own admission, it is not something that one does once, never again having to work at it. But they did know more about it than the rest of us. As time passed I found that a prayer I had heard most of my life was at the heart of what they were talking about, and if I were willing to do what they called “work” the prayer, I just might experience what they had experienced. That prayer has come to be known as the Serenity Prayer. Next to the Lord’s Prayer, it may be the most universally known prayer in all the world. It was written by an American theologian named Reinhold Niebuhr in the 1930s. He prayed the

prayer at a small New England church he used to attend while vacationing from his teaching responsibilities at Union Theological Seminary in New York. As best we can determine, in its original form the Prayer read:

God give us grace to accept with serenity things
that cannot be changed;
courage to change things that should be changed;
and wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Living one day at a time;
enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardships as the pathway to peace.
Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as
I would have it.

Trusting that He will make all things right if I
surrender to His will.

That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.
Amen.⁴

One reason the Serenity Prayer has such wide appeal is because it speaks to the universal desire for inward peace. It touches us where we are, and at the same time where we are not, most of the time. It expresses the deepest needs we have—to live with serenity and face change with courage, yet calls us to confess that often we do not know how to do either one. The Prayer offers a simple and at the same time an admittedly difficult way to draw upon a power beyond ourselves on a daily basis. Indeed, its simplicity is so disarming that we can find ourselves saying it without recognizing the challenge of doing what it really means if we are willing to do it.

But anyone who has truly prayed the Serenity Prayer, worked it, knows that saying the words is not enough. In order to experience its power, we have to move from saying it to praying (“working”) it. There is a significant difference between the two. Saying the Prayer reminds us of things we tend to forget. Praying the Prayer, on the other hand, connects us with the source of power to live by the words, to give ourselves over to the care of God, the one

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without whom we can never know serenity, courage, or wisdom.

This difference between saying a prayer and praying one was something I had heard before from Dr. Eberhardt Bethge, who was the closest friend and colleague of Dietrich Bonhoeffer during World War II. While serving as scholar-in-residence at a college where I was chaplain years ago, this giant of a man talked about Bonhoeffer's counsel to the students in the underground seminary of the Confessing Church of Germany to learn to pray the Psalms, rather than just say them. Saying them was nothing more than reading them. Praying them, he told us, meant allowing them to mold and shape their lives. It was in learning the difference between saying and praying the Psalms, Dr. Bethge said, that helped them survive those dark days. It was not until the experience in my group of sojourners that Dr. Bethge's comments began to ring true.

Not that praying the Prayer changes life overnight. It clearly does not. Common to most people is that it takes a long time even to work the Prayer with any consistency. Eventually, though, it does make a significant difference in the quality of our living. When I joined my group I thought I knew how to pray, and certainly how to take God seriously in my life. Yet with their support and guidance I began to reach a depth of experience with God I had not known before. At the same time living by the power of God in the specific ways the Prayer talks about is a journey that lasts a lifetime.

And that is not all bad. Recently I was sitting in a restaurant eating and reading a large book I had just begun. As I looked up for a moment my eyes met a man who was leaving. He looked at the book, then back at me, and said, "You have a long way to go." I replied, "Yes, but the beginning makes me think that it is going to be worth it."

That is what many people have experienced in praying the Serenity Prayer. Though the journey stretches beyond our sight, each day affirms that the effort is worth it. Years ago a friend described living by the power of God

as something that continues to get harder and harder and better and better. That says it precisely! Most of us have known the “harder and harder” part. The Serenity Prayer invites us to taste the “better and better” fresh every morning. Not that we are assured of the “better and better” for the future. It is a matter of receiving one day at a time as a gift. This is apparently the way God chooses to work in our lives.

This is precisely the lesson Israel had to learn early. God had promised Moses and the people he led out of Egypt that food and water would be provided daily (Exodus 16:9–31). All they had to do was to trust God to be God. It was not a task they found easy. So when they discovered the manna in the wilderness, they determined that they should gather as much as possible and store it for the next day, in case God failed to provide for them. Having taken things into their control, they learned an important lesson. On rising the next day they discovered the “bread” had been spoiled, and that it could not be stored. They were left to trust God would be God and would do what had been promised. They were called to a trust they found difficult to live by.

It is not so different for us. We are prone to taking life into our own hands, only to learn through bitter experience that we are not able to control life as we would like. Even then we often forget this hard lesson God teaches us. As I write those words I am asking myself why I never experienced the truth and power of the Serenity Prayer before now. Sporadically I probably had, but never on a consistent basis. Why did it take a problem that made me feel like I had reached the end of my rope to make me realize that I did not trust God as much as I thought I did? In retrospect I see now that it was the experience of becoming desperate enough to admit I had reached the limits of my own strength and power that led me to reach out to a strength and power greater than my own, truly reach out to it. Up until then I talked about God, but essentially relied on myself to get through the day. I believed in God, but lived as if I didn't. It wasn't a conscious thing. Quite the opposite, in fact. I was uncon-

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scious of how much I was trying to hold on to life in an effort to control it.

Ironically, becoming desperate can turn out to be an unexpected blessing. Someone once told me that desperation can be an ally. It is when we feel desperate that we are willing to try anything to make the situation better—even God! No one likes to feel desperate. Yet when we do, we are usually more open to giving up control, to letting go, rather than trying to tie a knot and hang on! Desperation can be the moment of confronting the reality of limitations and the trustworthiness of faith.

But we don't have to be desperate to learn how to let go. Often a crisis leads us to turn to God, but we can learn to trust God before such a crisis happens. Here is where the Serenity Prayer offers genuine help. Learning to pray the Serenity Prayer is a step-by-step process of giving up the illusion of control. It is a practical way to begin thinking in a new way about ourselves and those we love and those we have to work and live with. It is like putting on new lenses, or seeing things in focus for the first time. The Serenity Prayer works no miracles, but it can make an enormous difference in the quality of our living. It teaches us how to live in a new way.

Part of the appeal of the Prayer is that it simply makes sense. What makes more sense than giving up trying to control what is beyond our control? What makes more sense than focusing on gaining the courage to change what is within our power to change? What makes more sense than seeking wisdom that helps us distinguish which is which? What makes more sense than spending less time trying to keep life under control and more time living it? In a real sense, the Serenity Prayer is preventive medicine, showing us what to do before we reach the desperation point of being at the end of our rope, before we reach the point of discouraging desperation. The Prayer teaches us how to take care of ourselves in healthy ways and how not to try to take care of everyone else. It leads us to be responsible *to* others without feeling like we are responsible *for* them. That is what freedom in God is all about.

The pages that follow are intended to help the reader move from saying the Serenity Prayer to praying it. It is a process of learning how to live inside out, learning how to act rather than always reacting. The Prayer begins with God, and that is where our discussion begins. The chapters on serenity, courage, and wisdom naturally follow. But they are not the whole story. The Serenity Prayer invites us to listen to our feelings, truly to feel them, perhaps for the first time. That is why the chapter on feelings is included.

In searching for a way to describe what happens inside us as we work the Prayer, the metaphor of “dancing” fit perfectly. It captures the essence of the spiritual energy we experience each day we live inside out. To be able to dance is finally to be free. Freedom is the goal toward which the Serenity Prayer leads us. The theme of freedom, therefore, is an appropriate conclusion to the formal discussion of the Prayer.

An Epilogue is included in order to help the reader in the actual praying of the Serenity Prayer. While personal needs and circumstances will shape the way any of us works with the Prayer, there can be value in having specific suggestions that may help us live deeply into it. One practical way to help ourselves do this is to form a small group that will work seriously with the Prayer. Some principles for how such a group can function are suggested. For each chapter, questions that a small group might use are provided in the hope that they might facilitate the process of each person learning to pray the Serenity Prayer and living inside out on a daily basis.

1

God

“God give us...”

It is not just that God can make a difference in a person’s life. It is the fact that what we believe about God, who we believe God is, can and does make a difference in our lives. In her book *Will the Real God Please Stand up*,⁵ Carolyn Thomas describes the negative effects of what she calls “dysfunctional images” that some people have of God. She is convinced that unnecessary pain and anguish are caused by these images because they keep people from knowing the real God, whom she describes as a faithful God who loves us regardless of our response, a God who never stops forgiving and nurturing us.

This little book makes an important point for us to think about as we begin to work the Serenity Prayer. What we believe about God can have serious consequences when we take God seriously on a daily basis. It is not enough just to believe in God. What we believe about God also matters.

The Serenity Prayer inherently affirms God is good, that God cares about human beings, that God wants the

best for people, that God wants us to have inward peace and effective outward actions. The Prayer reflects belief in the kind of God Carolyn Thomas claims in her book to be the real God, a God who loves us no matter what and never stops forgiving and nurturing us.

The appeal of Thomas' book lies in the fact that she speaks to a general experience of people who have grown up in the church. In its own need to try to control people, the church has for centuries presented "dysfunctional" images of God rooted in fearing God. This fear has been the power the church has used to coerce people to obey its teachings. Many of us have grown up in this kind of church environment. We were not taught about a God who never stops loving and never stops forgiving. We learned, instead, about a God who expects us to get our act together and to keep it together to be acceptable. Not that God's love was not discussed. Only that getting and/or keeping God's love is always dependent upon how "good" we are.

This kind of God is pretty hard to please, and, therefore, we must always watch our step. Of course God doesn't want to reject us or send us straight to hell, but God won't blink an eye in doing it if we fail to straighten up and fly right. "Flying right" means, of course, doing "good" things and not doing "bad" things.

Thank God that most of us now know that this picture of a God who loves conditionally is wrong, all wrong, and always has been wrong. Fundamental to a personal relationship to the God who hears our prayers "yet while we are sinners" is the experience of grace, of love without conditions. The trustfulness of God's unconditional love is made poignantly clear in that most winsome parable Jesus told, the one we call the prodigal son. Yet the way we read this powerful story about a father who loves without conditions, who accepts his sons without them first needing to be acceptable, has itself been conditioned by the picture of God described earlier. Consequently, the parable is often read without our ever hearing its message of grace. Follow me through an extended and careful study of this story to see how its message has been missed—and even

distorted—as it has been interpreted through the lenses of the dysfunctional images of God so prevalent today.

The parable is usually understood as a story of a father who accepted his wayward son back home when the boy, having reached the end of his rope, repented of his foolish ways. Meanwhile his older brother, being the jealous type, resented the fact that his father not only let his brother come home, but fully restored him back into the family. The message we hear in reading the parable this way is that God will accept us, as the father accepted the prodigal son, only if we repent of our foolish ways and come back home. In other words, we think of this parable as a call to repentance and the loving response of God when we do.

That we should not live irresponsibly, wasting our inheritance as children of God on that which ultimately destroys us, is not in question. But the Serenity Prayer begins with an appeal to grace precisely because grace is never dependent upon the recognition of this fact. The parable of the prodigal is, I suggest, a clear statement that proclaims the startling and even unsettling good news that grace is present before we ever have the chance to make a turnaround in our lives, and that is the reason we have hope in whatever circumstances we face in the first place. This is the story of a father who was willing to risk that love was the strongest force in the world. It is a story that dares to say that God is willing to risk trusting the power of unconditional love with us; that God loves us before we ever love God, and always will; that nothing we do will cause God to withhold forgiveness. It is a story about God giving us what we do not deserve—grace instead of justice, and that is why we can dare to pray.

Am I putting words in Jesus' mouth? I think not. Allow me to lead you through the parable from this perspective so that you decide for yourself. See if you hear the message of grace anew.

The place to begin is to ask the question, "What did the younger brother do the next day?" Perhaps he went to work on the farm? Or is it more likely that he started think-

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ing about how he could get enough money to take off again? He may have come home only long enough to get a night's rest, some food, a few dollars from his overly generous and loving father, and then leave the next day. This is speculative, of course, precisely because the parable is deliberately ambiguous about the boy's real motivations. On first reading verses 17–20a in Luke 15, for example, the prodigal seems to see the foolishness of his ways and, therefore, makes a decision to go home:

But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father.

Yet if we are honest with ourselves we must confess that many times our actions that are, on the surface, good have a hidden agenda behind them. Was that not possible, if not probable, in the case of the prodigal? Is this an example of genuine repentance, or is the son simply seeing the stupidity of his ways that has gotten him into a bad spot? He has spent all of his money, is working with a hog farmer doing the dirtiest job to be done, is hungry and tired, perhaps discouraged, certainly disgusted with his plight, and then he decides to go home. By his own admission the first thought he had after "coming to himself" in the circumstances he had made for himself was that he knew where he could get food without wallowing with hogs. Rather than assuming repentance here, the best thing that could be said about the son at this point is that he had sense enough to know when, so to speak, to eat "humble" pie.

Moreover, even if he did genuinely "come to himself," in the sense of repentance, it is certainly not an uncommon experience for such a repentance to be short-lived. Conversions sometimes occur at very opportune times, only

to fade once conditions change. My own experience in moments of desperation suggests to me that the son's confession of his sins to his father *after* he has reached bottom is the key in understanding the power of the parable's radical message. It is not stretching the parable itself to suggest that at the very least the meaning of the son's "coming to himself" is ambiguous, and is so intentionally.

This ambiguity is underscored in the story's next scene. As the son approaches home, his father sees him from a distance and runs out not just to meet him but to welcome him back into the family (verse 20). The father's attitude toward the prodigal is one of love and acceptance. What is more, the father's greeting of the son comes before the son has a chance to say anything. He does not know why his son has returned home, what his motivations are, what his attitude will be in the future. The father lets the son know that he is still a son without knowing anything about his "conversion" experience. When the son tries to make a confession the father really does not take the time to listen:

But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!

verses 22–24

The father's response focuses on his own joy, not on the son's intentions or motivations. Coming home is like being lost and then being found, being dead and then having life again. That is cause for joy. This is a response that speaks less about the son than about the father. What the father does in the story is not based upon what the son does or will do in the future, but upon who the father is. What became clear to me as I read this story, in light of my own needs before God, is that at stake here is sonship, and the father's response makes clear that the boy's sonship was never in jeopardy. He is still a son, as symbolized by the gifts the father gives him (verses 22–23).

These gifts are expressions of unconditional love. They are gifts of grace.

Certainly repentance is central in the divine/human relationship. But I submit this parable does not speak about repentance. It speaks of grace. It is not about a wayward son, but about a loving God. I think Jesus wants us to hear it as a story about the father, not the son.

The actions of the other son in the story (verses 25–32), and the father’s response, also serve to underscore the unconditional nature of the father’s love. In many ways the older brother has, in a manner of speaking, gotten bad press. He has been accused of jealousy and lacking a forgiving spirit. But those who understand the brother this way have obviously never been a brother to a prodigal. A truer picture of this brother is one that recognizes that his reaction to the way his younger brother is received back into the family is based upon well-founded suspicions of his brother. He knows that a rebellious spirit is deeply rooted in his brother’s heart. The fact is, he knows what he thinks his father does not want to admit, that his brother has some real problems. He thinks his father is being taken in by a son who will end up breaking his heart again, and so he refuses to be party to what he suspects is a charade by the prodigal.

At the end of the story the father goes out to ask him to come to the party. We do not know for sure what the older brother does, but we are left with the impression that he refuses to honor the father’s request. His mistake is in not understanding the father’s request. All the father asks him to do is to accept the father’s freedom to welcome his brother home. But the elder brother is unable to accept the father taking the risks unconditional love sometimes requires.

The actions of the older brother, as those of the prodigal, can be understood to function in the story to reveal the nature of the father’s relationship to his children. It is one of grace. But neither one of the sons understood this. In his own way, each misunderstood his own sonship. The younger son thought being a son entitled him to an inher-

itance that he received at the beginning of the story. When he squandered it he naturally thought his father would reject him. That is why he decided to tell his father to treat him as a hired servant rather than as a son. What he did not understand is that sonship is not something one loses. It is not even something one is supposed to earn or be worthy of. It is simply the nature of the given relationship between the father and son. One can abuse sonship, but one does not cease to be a son. He was the father's son while he was throwing away his life, just as he had been before he left. Coming home had the potential of changing the son's relationship to the father. It did not change the father's relationship to the son.

But the elder brother did not understand the nature of sonship any more than the prodigal did, even though he had remained close to the father while his brother had strayed. He thought he deserved what the father would give him because of his faithful labors. He did not think, as did his brother, that by birthright he deserved his inheritance. He was willing to work for his. Therefore, he interpreted the acceptance of the prodigal back into the family, and possibly a renewed inheritance, as a rejection of his labors, and, indirectly, of him as a son (verses 28–30).

Neither son realized that sonship is a gift. Neither realized that the inheritance the father was willing to give was also a gift neither of them deserved. Neither of them understood the father's relationship to both of them was based upon the father's heart, not their behavior. Neither of them understood the father's grace.

Many people today continue to think like the two brothers. They have not grown beyond the image of an angry God whose judgment is swift and whose punishment is everlasting. Recently I was speaking at a church gathering with other speakers on the program. By design or mistake another speaker was given the same text I had been given. Each of us was to deliver three lectures, and our different perspectives created an unintended point/counterpoint arrangement of presentations. My colleague was convinced that I was not putting enough emphasis on the judgment

of God in my lectures. For him the love of God always needs balancing with God's judgment, else we fall into "cheap grace," meaning we live as if God will tolerate anything.

This colleague in ministry is quite right in saying that the judgment of God is taken quite seriously in scripture, and is always a factor to be reckoned with in human affairs. But the message of scripture is, I believe, equally clear that God's love not only is unconditional, but has to be for us to have any hope of living in communion with God. Moreover, it is apparent that the early Christians had as much trouble as many Christians today do in accepting the fact that God is willing to take such a risk. In Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, he responds to the kind of criticism by asking the question, "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means!" (Romans 6:1). Obviously some of Paul's critics thought he was talking about grace too much and God's judgment too little.

Paul's response was to say that grace produces the kind of freedom that gives birth to genuine gratitude for such divine unconditional love that one lives a life worthy of discipleship (Romans 6:2ff). Indeed, Paul was convinced that encountering this kind of divine acceptance would lead one to allow the Spirit to bear the fruits of righteousness in one's life, rather than leading to one giving in to carnal desires (Galatians 5:13–25).

But the church has found it hard to trust God's unconditional love. Consequently it has preached a God whose judgment is swift and whose punishment is everlasting. This is not the kind of God to whom a person is apt to pray to very often, and certainly not a God to whom one is likely to pray to with much honesty. I am convinced that the church has succeeded in convincing people God's judgment is real, while failing miserably at helping them to trust in a loving God whose grace is steadfast and whose faithfulness is not whimsical. Believing in this kind of God is where prayer begins.

Once we believe in God's unconditional love, we are ready to learn the difference between "saying" and "pray-

ing” the Serenity Prayer. What happens is that praying this prayer moves us to take the leap of faith that involves trusting our very survival into God’s care without the need to be “good” before we do. We may believe in a God who cares about us, loves us, and wants nothing for us except what is right and healthy. But moving beyond belief to experiencing a sense of divine presence in the circumstances of our lives, a presence that does not leave us, is the effect of praying the Serenity Prayer. In praying the Prayer is, in fact, an affirmation that we believe in a good God, and that we are willing to trust ourselves into this God’s unconditional love. This act opens us to experiencing being accepted by God for who and what we are—children of God who desperately need to be received by grace. Paul Tillich once described the sense of being accepted by God unconditionally this way:

A wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.”⁶

Believing we are accepted by God without conditions opens the door to our risking to pray to God in complete honesty. As long as we believe in a God before whom we must constantly “measure up,” we will never feel the inward freedom to pray openly and honestly. In our unconscious mind will be the hope that what is “out of sight” will be out of God’s mind. Honesty with God is how we have the courage to be honest with ourselves. Unless we can do both, we will not get very far in working the Serenity Prayer.

It is also true, I think, that believing we are accepted by God unconditionally helps us to trust that God is always with us. Believing in a God of conditional acceptance

keeps God at arm's length. It is difficult to trust that someone is always with us, and can always be counted on, when we feel it is necessary to keep our guard up around them, when we are never sure whether or not they are going to accept us. The same is true in our relationship to God. A God around whom we have to walk on eggshells, so to speak, is hardly one whom we will trust always to be with us. It is when we can trust that God unconditionally accepts us as we are, where we are, that we will trust God to be with us daily.

Trusting that God is always with us means in practical terms that we act on the belief that God will help us in whatever circumstances we confront. How God helps us is not easily defined or identified, for the ways of God are mysterious. At the very least, though, trusting that God will always help us means being open to experiencing a strength that goes beyond what we have previously known as our own. The Serenity Prayer calls upon a power greater than the one who is praying. In the Prayer the presence of God is the power of God being offered to human beings. We pray not only to tell God what is going on in our lives. Praying expresses the anticipation that the God who accepts us unconditionally will help us. The Serenity Prayer calls us to a radical trust in God because it is rooted in the conviction that God is a love relationship that is never at risk. This conviction moves praying beyond appealing to a God who needs to be appeased to turning one's life over to a God who is absolutely trustworthy.

Some people learn early in childhood what it means to be accepted unconditionally. Some learn this even if some parts of their childhood hurt and injured them. Unconditional acceptance is being loved when we don't deserve it. It is being loved when we ourselves do not act very loving, or even show reckless disregard for the feelings and well-being of those who are loving us. As children we are selfish. The world exists to meet our needs. Growing up means becoming mature enough to have the good sense to realize that this is a distorted way of looking at the world. It takes some of us longer to mature than others. For some

people it seems like it takes a lifetime. But however long it takes us to mature, until such time that we do mature we need a lot of unconditional love, undeserved love—love that overlooks our selfishness and keeps on loving.

Parental love is just this kind of unconditional love. Even when conditions seem to be attached to our parents' love for us, down deep the love is really without conditions. They feel it even when they do not always show it. In this age of growing awareness of the damage done to so many children through various forms of abuse, it is important for us to remember that not all parents were or are abusive. Many are long-suffering with their children. Some are even abused themselves by their children, yet they keep on loving. It is in the persistence and stability of parental love that we most often see what unconditional acceptance and love really mean.

The way many children love their parents also demonstrates the human capacity for unconditional loving. The resilience children have in loving parents who have not been good parents at all, who have neglected them, hurt them deeply, and at times have abused them emotionally and sexually is almost an enigma. It is the kind of love that no one deserves, but, then, that is why it is a graceful love. Some parents do not deserve to be loved by their children, yet are anyway. It is one of the most winsome forms of unconditional love that we ever see.

But even when we do not learn this kind of unconditional love from others, the Serenity Prayer can help us to experience it in our relationship to God. Working the Prayer opens us to the presence of one who always loves us unconditionally, one who desires for us inward peace and effective outward actions. God is where the Serenity Prayer begins. It quickly moves to what we must do for ourselves. But it first calls us to pause and ponder the God who will give us the strength and power to do what we have to do to take care of ourselves. The Prayer begins with God so that in working it we might see God more clearly, love God more dearly, and follow God more nearly, day by day. When we can do this, we not only discover

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that we are in the presence of a good God, we also discover that we are home:

When we walk into the unknown it's like walking into a dark tunnel. We do not know what is at the end of the tunnel unless...

By faith we can believe that we will walk into a new beginning, filled with light and hope....

In our changing world there is one who is willing to walk with us through the difficult changes in our lives. In Isaiah [God] says, "Don't be afraid, I am with you. When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fires of oppression, you will not be burned. The flames will not consume you. I am the Lord. Your God. Your Savior."

Over the years I have had one hope that I can always count on. God will not desert me. When I'm worried about my children and I don't know what to do to help them, I have someone greater than myself to turn to. When people scorn, mock or turn against me, my self-esteem is not destroyed because I am [God's] child, loved deeply and forgiven for all my shortcomings. When my job is like a raging storm, unstable and insecure, I have a promise that the storms will not overflow me and I will stand in the midst of the storm. When my health is broken and I feel weak and broken, I have one I can turn to for strength, power and hope. [God] renews my strength causing me to mount up like the wings of eagles, to run and not be weary.

I have a choice. I can let the situations of this world guide my emotions causing me to live on a roller coaster of feelings. I can be happy when things are going well, and filled with fear and worry when things are not. Or, I can live by faith. Faith that no matter what happens, God is with me.⁷