

DRY DRUNKS AND DRY CHRISTIANS

Not many of you are recovering alcoholics. At times I wish that more of you were. Today we know a cure for alcoholism. Many will not take the cure, but at least they have the choice. My grandfather died without knowing what was wrong or what to do about it. Some of your friends and relatives have too. That may sound strange to some outsiders, but then, lots of us do not know what to do about our sin. It always looks clear and simple when we are not in the throes of it – whether we are talking about greed, lust, gluttony, jealousy, or whatever. “It is hard to see the dragon that has swallowed you.” But that’s a different sermon.

Alcoholism has plagued human life since at least the time of Noah. But nobody knew what to do about it until 1935. Alcoholism is officially the number-three killer in our country, and if we added in all the alcohol-related deaths, it would be number one, hands down. But despite all the fancy sanitariums, counseling, shame, and admonitions, nothing touched the disease until Bill W. and Dr. Bob began a fellowship of recovering drunks in 1935, which came to be known as Alcoholics Anonymous. Until then, with very rare exceptions, alcoholism was hopeless. Consider the now-famous comment:

In my judgment such of us who have never fallen victim to drink have been spared more by the absence of appetite than from any mental or moral superiority over those who have. Indeed, I believe if we take habitual drunkards as a class, their heads and their hearts will bear an advantageous comparison with those of any other class. There seems ever to have been a proneness of the brilliant and warm blooded to fall into the vice – the demon of intemperance ever seems to have sucked the blood of genius and generosity. The victims should be pitied and compassioned, just as the heirs of consumption and other diseases. Their falling should be treated as a misfortune, and not a crime, or even a disgrace.

– Abraham Lincoln

Abe felt really sad about it, but he had no notion of what might be done about it. Anyway, sometimes I wish a few more of you were alcoholics. We know a cure for that problem. But it is not your fault; if you are not an alcoholic, you cannot very well be a *recovering* alcoholic, now can you? With time and patience and the grace of God, perhaps a few more of you will be recovering alcoholics before our story here is over. But that is not the subject of this sermon, either. Drinking is not a sin, by the way. And this is not a teetotaling church, in case any of you were wondering. Statistically, nine out of ten of you will not abuse alcohol more than an experimental time or two, and alcohol can be for you a pleasant and celebrative part of normal life. Sometimes I get so enthralled, however, by what I am seeing and learning through recovery from alcoholism – the parallels between the world of AA and the world of the church – that I cannot help wanting to share it with you.

There are endless corollaries between alcoholism and sin; between AA and the church; between sobriety and reconciliation. I do not really care if most of you learn more about alcoholism. But I do care that all of us learn more and more about the Christian Faith. I am only using the one to get to the other. Sometimes comparisons lift up things we have half forgotten through sheer familiarity, or sometimes neglect.

For instance, denial is the most difficult problem for the alcoholic. We prefer to do things our own way, claiming that we are in control and managing just fine, thank you very much. The notion that we need help, treatment, the fellowship of AA ... is irritating and repulsive in the extreme, sometimes for years. Nevertheless, without such help, an alcoholic will eventually lose everything and die.

Well, denial is also the most difficult problem for sinners. Sinners also prefer to do things their own way, claiming they are in control and managing life just fine, thank you very much. The notion that we need a Savior, a new WAY of life, the fellowship of the church ... is irritating and repulsive in the extreme. It's okay if we want it, on occasion; it's fine if we freely choose it, participating because it is good for society or our children or people in general. It is good and socially acceptable to kick in a few bucks to support the church so we can be baptized and married and buried there. Christmas and Easter are good times to attend; maybe Mother's Day too. And if the preacher or the music is especially entertaining, we might even go more often. But it is not a need. It is not a bone-deep conviction. It is not a matter of life and death.

Many of you do not have this attitude, but most of the society around us does. The notion that we ourselves need Jesus – that we will lose everything (die to everything that matters) unless we are part of His people, part of His church – is offensive and brings out strong denial in us sinners. Nonrecovering sinners want the church to be optional: a spectator sport; a parlor game; society’s mascot; something we can take or leave alone; something we can walk away from if anything displeases us. Do you know what happens to a drunk who thinks AA is optional?

To recover, an alcoholic must come to recognition: “My way is not working. My need is absolute and without equivocation. I must get help or all is lost.” Many people come to AA but cannot make this admission, so they drift back out again – to die. Many people come to the church but cannot make the admission of their sin, so they drift back out again. Neither AA nor the church is designed for people who can “take it or leave it alone.” Both are for people who have “hit bottom,” who have come to “Point Zero” – who are willing to turn their lives and their wills over to a Higher Power. Some call it “surrender,” or “turning it over,” or “conversion,” or “being born anew.”

Perhaps you do not know it, but some AA groups get ingrown and stale. The members stop working the steps; stop growing in the program; stop trying to help other alcoholics to recover; forget their reason for being. Such groups lose their power and dwindle away. Their members must either find another group or go back to drinking. As I said, the parallels are endless.

There is no such thing as a *recovered* alcoholic. There are only alcoholics and *recovering* alcoholics. There is no such thing as a *recovered* sinner either. There are only sinners and *recovering* sinners. A Christian is a recovering sinner. If this awareness is lost, all is lost. There is no recovering from alcoholism without the help of a Higher Power. There is no recovering from Sin without the grace and presence of God. All the creeds and rituals in the world will not help the alcoholic or the sinner if either one tries to go back to living their own way. Getting and staying on the program – whether you like it or understand it or not – is the only hope there is.

Perhaps we should take a moment to clarify terms. An alcoholic who has merely stopped drinking is not in recovery. We call him a “dry drunk.” None of his inner attitudes or goals or purposes have changed. A recovering alcoholic is one who seeks *sobriety*. Sobriety is a special word in AA. The closest approximation in Christian language

is the word “peace.” Sobriety is a different quality of life – everything is seen in a different light. No alcoholic who has experienced sobriety *wants* to return to the drinking days. There are no white knuckles; it is not about willpower. It takes months, sometimes years, on the program before sobriety becomes real and strong enough to replace the old ways. But as it grows, the old life has less and less appeal. The new life grows and thrives. As I said, the parallels are endless.

A sinner is one alienated or separated from God. A sinner who merely tries to control unhelpful behavior patterns is like a dry drunk. For a “dry Christian,” lust and greed and self-centered living still seem really appealing. The object is to avoid the punishment and repercussions of doing what one really *wants* to do. But it is sheer discipline and white knuckles to keep from doing it. And in this mode, we secretly feel we should get huge rewards and endless approval for being such moral giants that we do not do what we wish we could do so badly. In this mode, our anger toward those who misbehave is huge, since they get to do what we deprive ourselves of doing. It is a very strange mindset, but very real. The dry drunk wants to take a drink very badly, but will not let himself do so. Yet his mind still says it would be wonderful fun. The dry Christian says inside: If only I could lie, cheat, steal, kill, screw, do anything I want whenever I want to, I would be so happy, so fulfilled. Often such a person is actually angry at God because they blame God for keeping them from such a wonderful life. “God just doesn’t want us to have any fun,” they mope. Fun? Do you have any idea how much “fun” it is to be a drunk? I can barely stand the memories. Yet I used to think it was really wonderful. Denial is a truly weird phenomenon.

A recovering sinner has seen past many of Satan’s shell games. Reconciliation with God – even the slightest touch of a real relationship with the Living God – is worth infinitely more than all the golden calves our world so loves to worship. Everything that contributes to distance or alienation from God is abhorrent. A different quality of LIFE is sought, to the core of all inner attitudes, values, and purposes.

It is a wonderful day when this distinction finally breaks through our thick resistances – our denial. I stopped drinking lots of times, but nothing changed that I could detect. It did not improve anything. Why stop drinking – why maintain such a rigid discipline – if nothing is improved? And I hear many people say, “Why go to church or pray or study Scripture? It doesn’t improve anything.” I stopped drinking but nothing on the inside changed to match. I was just a dry drunk.

So, convinced that I had tried the “other way” and found nothing of value, I kept going back to my own way. Perhaps if drinking had been landing me in jail or in traffic court, I might have sensed a clearer improvement. But I’m not so sure. Denial is stronger than most people know. It is certainly strong enough to ward off the scorn of a few prudes and self-righteous ticks. Sinners who do not get into serious overt trouble because of their alienation from God have the same difficulty. Why worry about self-will or a life that avoids God’s purpose and authority if it is not causing obvious and serious problems?

Drinking is not the real issue. Sobriety is the real issue. Sobriety is far more than just “not drinking,” but if you are an alcoholic, you cannot have sobriety unless you stop drinking. Well, sin is not the real issue either. Peace with God is the real issue. But if you are a sinner, you cannot have peace with God unless you stop sinning.

Morality is not the real issue either. Life in harmony and communication with God is the real issue. So I could “not drink” forever and no good would ever come of it. Like some people “don’t lie, steal, commit adultery, etc.” forever and no good comes from it. No harm either, but you can say the same about any fencepost. No fencepost drinks or steals or commits adultery. Big deal! We have risen to the stature of fenceposts? Abstinence from drink is not sobriety. Abstinence from bad deeds is not the Christian Life or reconciliation with God or joy or love. Dry drunks and dry Christians – do you see it? It is the bane of life. A real sinner may repent. A real alcoholic may hit bottom. But what do you do with a dry drunk or a dry Christian?

The most appalling story I have run across so far is about a man who stopped drinking for twenty years. He did not get help or get treatment or go to AA; he just stopped drinking. He was about to lose his job and family and he had young children to raise, so he decided he had to stop drinking. And he did. He worked hard, became successful, provided for his children. He was also a grim, joyless man who made no friends and had few if any pleasures, and he never learned to relate much, not even with the children for whom he had stopped his drinking. Is that sad or what? At the end of the twenty years, with his children raised and his retirement secure, he said, “That’s over, now I can go back to drinking.” Six months later he was dead. The disease had gone right on progressing through the twenty years. Mere abstinence has no effect on spiritual issues. Only a changed inner life does. There is a distinction between a dry drunk and a recovering alcoholic. There is a difference between a dry Christian and a person finding reconciliation with God.

Life's real principles have a way of repeating themselves again and again throughout every area of life. The Designer was cagey that way. If you find an authentic truth, no matter where or how or in what area, you can find it repeated endlessly in all other aspects of life. When we skip or miss an essential lesson, it keeps plaguing us wherever we go, no matter what the circumstances or whom we are with. Hence the saying that expresses the positive side of it: "If you can learn to make a perfect cup of coffee, you can reach Nirvana."

Some people know the joy of work, and others put in time for a paycheck. They are dry laborers. Some students find the true fascination of seeking knowledge, and others spend time making grades. They are dry learners. Even if they become teachers, they are still very dry – as we can all attest. There are dry marriages, dry parents, dry friendships, and dry Christians. The form without the passion and purpose is dry.

What I am trying to say is this: Between two ways of life, between every dimensional breakthrough, between wherever we are and where we need to go in life, there seems always to be an arid place, a neutral zone, a limbo, a kind of "no man's land" – a place that looks like the improvement we seek, but it is arid, lifeless, a stuck place, a trap. Whenever we try to improve things our own way, we get stuck in this "place in between." Too aware to stay where we are and too frightened or stubborn to surrender our lives to God, we get stuck in between.

This strange buffer zone is everywhere. Some of you have seen it with your children: They do okay in school, but somehow you know it is not clicking. They do the work, but somehow you know the power is cut. They put in the time and say they study as hard as they can, but it is grim effort. Then one day, as if by magic, they find a whole new level. Performance triples, effort seems almost to diminish, and they say it's easy and fun; they don't know why it seemed so hard before. Of course, they still work at it, probably more, but it is no longer grim.

Inventors, artists, athletes – all of us – experience this phenomenon in some fashion. Why don't we learn to expect it and refuse to get stuck in the desert places – the places in between?

Perhaps more than in any other area of life, we humans get stuck in the dry places between the secular life and the spiritual life – weary and discontent with secular reality, but unwilling to let it go and move on through to the spiritual life. Why do we call it "faith" when we choose to walk a spiritual path? Because it seems so uncertain and scary.

So instead, we go dry. Usually we stay there until, totally discouraged, we go back to the sad and empty pleasures we knew before. Only now, they are far worse than they ever were before. It is Satan's idea of a reward.

It is very hard work to be a dry drunk. It takes constant effort. It is never pleasant or flowing or natural. The desire to go back to the old way is persistent and powerful. It is not hard at all to be a recovering alcoholic. More and more it flows and feels natural and gets better and better. That is always the way when we finally get past one of the dry places. It is called GRACE. And yet, standing in the dry place, we would swear that the journey was impossible – that one more step would be unbearable. What we cannot see or know from the dry place is that one more step is breakthrough! That is also why they call it “faith.” There are some places the mind cannot go – only the feet can. Nobody sings about a closer *thinking* about God. We only sing about a closer *walk* with God.

Well, in twelve-step recovery programs, they say you cannot just talk the talk; you have to walk the walk: get on the program and stay on it, work the twelve steps, keep coming to meetings, turn life over to the Higher Power, and do not drink between times. They got that straight from the church, of course, and it works for everybody who does it. My question is: Why has the church forgotten?

A similar comparison came to mind the other day. I found myself trying to picture what it would be like if a twelve-step group went on a “membership drive” the way a lot of churches do. All the members would be out saying to people, “Hey, it doesn't matter if you drink or not; it doesn't make any difference if you want to go on drinking; it doesn't matter if you work the program; you don't have to care about sobriety – just come and join our group. You will find a lot of nice people there, and we serve refreshments after the meeting.” Can you imagine what would happen to a group if it started caring about attendance records instead of about sobriety? How very bizarre!

Actually, a twelve-step group puts tremendous emphasis on attending meetings. Even an old-time traditional church looks flabby by comparison. Twelve-step people tell each other, “If you stop coming around, you will be drinking again.” That's twelve-step language for, “If you don't come to church regularly, you are going to go to Hell.” It makes me nervous how so many of us ministers take poor church attendance as an inevitable reality we can do nothing about. In twelve-step recovery, however, the point is never that “we wanted a big turnout”

or “we hoped fifty people would show up but only thirty-five did.” People do not think or talk like that until they have absolutely lost sight of their purpose and no longer know what they are doing or why they are doing it.

I have been a conscious participant in the life of the church for most of my life. For most of my life, I have watched the dry Christians, though I did not always have that name for them. Except for isolated incidents, I have no anger or animosity toward them. I have, more than a few times, been one of them. I have frequently had cause to be grateful to them, for they often work hard and do tasks that serve the church on mundane, survival levels. But I also have a great sorrow for them and about them. They do not feel part of the faith family. They have technical membership, but they never seem to realize that they *belong*. Therefore they never truly realize that others belong or are truly loved by God. They have no personal relationship with God, though they are deeply convinced that God expects certain kinds of behavior from them. They do not ask God for personal favors or for personal guidance. There is little affection between them and God. They feel very little gratitude. Can you imagine waking up in the morning and feeling no gratitude, no thankfulness toward God? No amazed appreciation because God is real and present and loves you? How do people make it through the day?!

If dry Christians serve on the church’s committees, it is an obligation, not a joy; it is not because they love the faith family. If they give money to the church, it is a duty, not a heartfelt gift; it is an obligation, not a gratitude that flows from the heart. They are in the middle of the church’s activities, yet they are always on the fringe of its life, the in-between place – the dry place. There is no fire of the soul in transformation; no feeling of genuine enthusiasm; no flow of joy and gratitude and rejoicing because God is here, we are God’s people, and God is leading us home.

It makes me sad because dry Christians miss out on the joy of the discipline and hard work they put in. That makes me sad for them. But it also makes me sad for the church because dry Christians obscure what the church is for and what the church is about. They make it difficult for those outside the church who are eager or desperate for the Christian Life to see what the church is about or that the church has anything to offer. In fact, if you talk to dry Christians, they talk only of problems and complaints, without even seeming to realize that these are the by-products of opportunities and challenges that we are indeed fortunate to have.

In gratitude to Christ and in love with the Kingdom, we tithe, we pray, we study the Scriptures, we love the faith family, we keep coming to meetings and gatherings, we try to help other sinners who want to be recovering.

Sometimes maybe we do not want it that simple. Maybe we want something more grand and glorious – not humble and true. Or maybe it's back to that first step: we cannot admit that our own need is great enough to keep us on the program. As long as that is true, the church will be full of dry Christians. That means all the work and discipline, without the joy or the love or the grace.

Some of you think I make the Christian Faith sound hard. All of life is hard, in its way. But the Christian Life is far easier than any other life – because of the presence of Christ. Yet that will never seem to be so until we get through the dry place. Dry drunks and dry Christians are in limbo, caught halfway in between two worlds. Go back or go on. Do not stay in limbo. Nothing good comes from limbo.