

“Are You Stuck in the Spin Cycle?”

Luke 15:11-24

Series: Finding Your Way Back to God Week 3. Awakening to Help

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I recently caught a video which shows a young guy in a human washing machine. At first he runs along at a good clip, keeping pace with the spinning contraption. But then he slips and starts to swirl around like a Sheriff Woody doll stuck in the spin cycle. He can't get his footing and he can't stop. He is so out of control that it actually dumps him on his head. Round and round he goes. The only way out is for some outside help to stop the machine.

Ever had a week like that? How about a life like that? You race to keep pace. You can't stop for a minute because a pause will throw you into a tailspin. You can't catch up. You can't catch your breath. Maybe it's more than this rat race that's taking you for a ride. Maybe it's not the Spin Cycle but the Sin Cycle. You start off with a little bit of the seven deadly sins: an outburst of anger, a look of lust, an episode of envy, a guzzle of gluttony, a pause for procrastination, a head puffed up with pride, some grasping with greed. Then the sin cycle starts speeding up and before you know it you are stuck and cannot get off. The only way out is for outside help to stop the cycle.

What do you do when you need help, when can't resolve a problem on your own? We can be a proud people. We don't like to ask for help. "I can do this on my own! I got this!" Sometimes it can be comical with no harm done. But then there are times when the stakes are higher and the damage is incredibly severe.

We're in the middle of a series on the 5 Awakenings that show us how to find our way back to God. In week one, we talked about the "Awakening to Longing." We all have a longing to be loved, to find purpose, to understanding the meaning when life doesn't make sense. These God-given longings are supposed to lead us to Him. But often we look to satisfy these longings in other places. Like the prodigal son in Jesus' story, we set off to find fulfillment on our own terms and wind up stuck in a sin cycle. This leads us to our second awakening, the "Awakening to Regret." At this point, many of us get stuck in the "Sorry Cycle" - an endless cycle of longing and regret. For Melissa this cycle played itself out in affairs as she bounced from one relationship to another. But the "Sorry Cycle" can be lived out in countless other ways.

- In the casino as we bounce from one slot machine to another.
- In the mall as we slide our credit cards in one store after another.
- In the bar as we throw down one drink after another.

It can be food, prescription drugs, work or pleasure. We get caught in a continuous pattern of searching for fulfillment and finding disappointment; thinking "this time it will be different" and then falling once again into regret. Most of us have taken a spin or two in the "Sorry Cycle."

We can get caught in this cycle even when we are followers of Jesus. The 5 Awakenings are not limited to the first time we find our way back to God. They are awakenings we visit again

and again. It's similar to the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. A person trying to break free from an addiction goes through the 12 Steps over and over. When they reach step 12 they return to step 1. What's the first step?

1. We admitted that we were powerless over _____ that our lives had become unmanageable. In AA you fill in the blank with alcohol. In NA it's drugs. In other 12 Step groups it might be lust, food, gambling, anger, spending. In Al-Anon, family members of addicts will say they are powerless over the addict in their lives and it's making their lives unmanageable.

Now contrary to what many think: AA and the other 12 step groups are not self-help groups. In fact they discover when it comes to addiction self-help is no help. Will power does not work. The point of the first step is to surrender, admit defeat and say, "I can't do it on my own. I need help." The next two steps are:

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.

In essence, in the first three steps an addict says: 1. I can't, 2. God can, 3. So let Him. That's what it means to find your way back to God. The founders of AA discovered 80 years ago what Jesus taught 2000 years ago in the parable of the prodigal son: We can all get out of the spin cycle, the sin cycle, the sorry cycle if we are willing to admit defeat and ask for God's help.

Asking for help isn't easy. During Preschool drop off or pick up I see many parents and grandparents and Preschoolers pass through our doors. Occasionally a 3-year-old will make it known that he wants to open the door by himself. He reaches high above his head, grabs the handle, and puts everything he has into opening it. He applies his tiny toddler muscles until he realizes he's pushing when he should be pulling. Then he flexes his muscles again and pulls but it still won't budge. Meanwhile, his adult stands by and watches. It takes several offers of assistance before the child finally relents and accepts her intervention. Then the huge back-up of other parents and kids can start to flow.

Maybe today you're tired of tugging on a door that just won't open. Maybe today you're ready to break free from the "Sorry Cycle." Today we discover the "Awakening to Help." In the third awakening we can change the course of our future. A crucial turning point in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son comes when he decides to break out of the Sorry Cycle and go home.

When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father. (Luke 15:17-20)

This passage reveals there are two things which prevent us from asking for help.

Pride. Despite his penniless, shoeless, pig-slop covered condition, this young boy still kept his pride intact. He constructs a carefully prepared speech. He hits all the right notes: confession of sin, recognition that he is no longer legally a family member, finished with an application for a job. New Testament Scholar Ken Bailey points out the word he uses for “hired servant” is not a servant who lives in the house as part of the family. He’s an independent contractor. He wants to earn his way back into the father’s good graces. And the phrase “*make me like one of your hired servants*” is almost as demanding as his original request “give me my share of the estate.” Even though he is still stinking from the pig sty, this boy is still giving orders. His pride won’t permit him to ask for help.

Pride is a powerful obstacle when it comes to asking for help. We Americans pride ourselves on our pride. We are taught and trained from early on to earn everything – goals, grades, good jobs. We love stories of people who pull themselves up by their bootstraps out of the pig sty to become self-made men and women. We are not the only ones. I find at the core of every religion around the world is the requirement that we must prove ourselves worthy of God’s love by performing rituals and obeying rules. It’s our prideful human attempt to earn our way into God’s good graces. And it’s our way to maintain control. Okay God, I will believe in you, but I will only give you a sliver of my life, a portion of my attention, a corner of my heart. I will determine the terms of this relationship and I will prove to you I can do it. And I don’t need any other Christians to help me. Pride is a powerful thing.

The other obstacle to asking for help is **Fear**. I remember when we moved into our house twenty-two years ago this month and it was time to take my daughter Kristin to her first day of kindergarten at her new school. She was so excited. “When are we going to go? Are we going to go now? Is it time to go?” Finally, it was time for school. I took her hand and we started walking to our neighborhood school. As we walked, I noticed something. The closer we came to school, the slower her steps became. Excitement turned to fear. How will the new kids treat her?

I imagine the prodigal son’s steps slowed as he approached his village. And he had good reason to fear. In Jesus’ day, a boy who insulted his father, demanded his inheritance and squandered it among the Gentiles would not be allowed back in the village. If the villagers saw him coming, they would intercept him before he entered the village and perform a ceremony called the ‘qezazah.’ It literally means “to cut off.” With everyone watching, a spokesperson takes a clay pot and smashes it in front of the boy. Then, speaking for the whole community, he says: “You have broken our community, you have broken your father’s heart. You are cut off from us, you cannot come back.” This is the reception the son expects. Maybe this is the reception the son deserves.

Yet the gathering mob holds off when they suddenly turn to see a crazy sight: the father of this young sinner is running towards them. In ancient societies, the elders of the community do not run. Imagine how awkward it would look for this revered citizen to pick up his robe, expose his legs and sprint. When Pope Francis came to Philadelphia last fall we didn’t see him dash down Ben Franklin Parkway. Important people don’t run. Yet this father runs and his boy and everyone assembled assume this cannot be good. The villagers prepare for a classic confrontation. The old man is going to give the boy what he deserves. The boy covers his head and prepares for the slap.

But then he feels arms enfold him, tears fall on him, kisses planted on his cheeks. While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” (Luke 15:20b)

The boy is overcome and undone. His father’s face is smudged with the pig stained mud. His father’s embrace takes all the shame off his shoulders. The father deliberately ran to save his boy from the humiliation of the qezazah ceremony. But there’s more. Before the whole village, the father takes upon himself the sin and disgrace of his son. In fact, in the face of such an overwhelming love, the speech the boy prepared for his job interview becomes his confession.

The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ (Luke 15:21)

There is no prideful attempt to earn his way back into acceptance. There is no fearful defense against the rejection of his father or the villagers. Love breaks his pride and fear. Love breaks him down. Love breaks through.

This is the message of the Cross.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8)

This is third awakening: the Awakening to Help and it is a game-changer. It’s in this step that we stop trying to fix things ourselves, stop trying to prove ourselves, stop trying to find fulfillment by ourselves, stop spinning in the sorry or sin cycle. In this awakening we realize: “I can’t do this on my own. I need your help God.” When we admit “I need help,” God comes running to you. Not the God who holds up a broken pottery piece and condemns us. It is the God who meet us with open arms of acceptance, kisses of love, and tears of joy.

The whole reason Jesus tells the Story of the Prodigal Son is to help us find our way back to God. The reason he knows so much about finding God is because he is God. He’s not a distant God, a stand-offish God, a condemning God, an indifferent God. He is a God who longs to be close to you, a God who unconditionally forgives you, a God who wants to help you, a God who runs to you. You see, when you “Awaken to Help” and decide to come to Jesus we find:

- A loving God who will never leave us.
- A gracious God who will never condemn us even when it’s deserved.
- A humble God who bends down to care for our needs.
- A sacrificial God who gave His life to save us because we were helpless.

What kind of God is waiting for us when we come back to him? The God we see in Jesus.

I want to say as clearly as I can today you can come home. There is a God who is scanning the horizon, watching for you. He took the shame and humiliation of your sin on himself on the cross, who longs for you to return. If you choose to come home today, he will run to you. He will welcome you with open arms. You will find that help has a name and it's Jesus. He is the way out of the spin cycle.