

Lesson 2

Powerless

Principle 1: Realize I'm not God. I admit that I am powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing and that my life is unmanageable.

"Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor." (Matthew 5:3)

Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over our addictions and compulsive behaviors, that our lives had become unmanageable.

"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out." (Romans 7:18)

Introduction

In Principle 1, we realize we're not God. We admit we are powerless to control our tendency to do the wrong thing and that our lives have become unmanageable. As soon as we take this step and admit that we are powerless, we start to change. We see that our old ways of trying to control our hurts, hang-ups, and habits didn't work. They were buried by our denial and held on to with our false power.

Tonight we are going to focus on four actions: two things we have to *stop* doing and two things we need to *start* doing in our recoveries. We need to take these four actions to complete Principle 1.

Four Actions

In Lesson 1 we talked about the first action we need to take.

1. Stop denying the pain.

We said that our denial had at least six negative effects: It disables our feelings, wastes our energy, negates our growth, isolates us from God, alienates us from our relationships, and lengthens our pain.

You are ready to accept Principle 1 when your pain is greater than your fear. In Psalm 6:2–3 (TLB) David talks about a time when he came to the end of his emotional and physical resources: “Pity me, O Lord, for I am weak. Heal me, for my body is sick, and I am upset and disturbed. My mind is filled with apprehension and with gloom.” When David’s pain finally surpassed his fear, he was able to face his denial and feel the reality of his pain. In the same way, if you want to be rid of your pain, you must face it and go through it.

The second action we need to take is to

2. Stop playing God.

You are either going to serve God or self. You can’t do both! Matthew 6:24 (GNB) says, “No one can be a slave to two masters; he will hate one and love the other; he will be loyal to one and despise the other.”

Another term for serving “ourselves” is serving the “flesh.” Flesh is the Bible’s word for our unperfected human nature, our sin nature.

I love this illustration: If you leave the *h* off the end of flesh and reverse the remaining letters, you spell the word *self*. Flesh is the self-life. It is what we are when we are left to our own devices.

When our “self” is out of control, all attempts at control—of self or others—fail. In fact, our attempt to control ourselves and others is what got us into trouble in the first place. God needs to be the one in control.

There are two jobs: God’s and mine! We have been trying to do God’s job, and we can’t!

On the flip side, He *won’t* do our job. We need to do the footwork! We need to admit that we are not God and that our lives are unmanageable without Him. Then, when we have finally emptied ourselves, God will have room to come in and begin His healing work.

Let’s go on now to the third action we need to take:

3. Start admitting our powerlessness.

The lust of power is not rooted in our strengths but our weaknesses. We need to realize our human weaknesses and quit trying to do it by ourselves. We need to admit that we are powerless and turn our lives over to God. Jesus knew how difficult this is. He said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

When we keep doing things that we don’t want to do and when we fail to do the things we’ve decided we need to do, we begin to see that we do not, in fact, have the power to change that we thought we had. Life is coming into focus more clearly than ever before.

The last action we need to take is to

4. Start admitting that our lives have become unmanageable.

The only reason we consider that there’s something wrong, or that we need to talk to somebody, or that we need to take this step is because we finally are able to admit that some area—or all areas—of our lives have become unmanageable!

It is with this admission that you finally realize you are out of control and are powerless to do anything on your own. When I got to this part of my recovery I shared David’s feelings that he expressed in Psalm 40:12 (TLB): “Problems far too big for me to solve are piled higher than my head. Meanwhile my sins, too many to count, have all caught up with me and I am ashamed to look up.”

Does that sound familiar? Only when your pain is greater than your fear will you be ready to honestly take the first step, admitting that you are powerless and your life is unmanageable.

Tonight our acrostic will help us to focus in on the first half of Principle 1: powerless.

Powerless

Our acrostic tonight demonstrates what happens when we admit we are POWERLESS. We begin to give up the following “serenity robbers”:

Pride

Only ifs

Worry

Escape

Resentment

Loneliness

Emptiness

Selfishness

Separation

The first letter in tonight's acrostic is *P*. We start to see that we no longer are trapped by our PRIDE: "Pride ends in a fall, while humility brings honor" (Proverbs 29:23, TLB).

Ignorance + power + pride = a deadly mixture

Our false pride undermines our faith and it cuts us off from God and others. When God's presence is welcome, there is no room for pride because He makes us aware of our true self.

Next we begin to lose the ONLY ifs. That's the *O* in Powerless.

Have you ever had a case of the "only ifs"?

Only if they hadn't walked out.

Only if I had stopped drinking.

Only if this. Only if that.

How reluctantly the mind consents to reality. But when we admit that we are powerless, we start walking in the truth, rather than living in the fantasy land of rationalization.

Luke 12:2–3 (GNB) tells us: "Whatever is covered up will be uncovered, and every secret will be made known. So then, whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in broad daylight."

The next letter in powerless is the *W*, which stands for WORRYING. And don't tell me that worrying doesn't do any good; I know better. The things I worry about never happen!

All worrying is a form of not trusting God enough! Instead of worrying about things that we

cannot possibly do, we need to focus on what God can do. Keep a copy of the Serenity Prayer in your pocket and your heart to remind you.

By working this program and completing the steps you can find that trust, that relationship, with the one and only Higher Power, Jesus Christ, so that the worrying begins to go away.

Matthew 6:34 (TLB) tells us, “Don’t be anxious about tomorrow. God will take care of your tomorrow too. Live one day at a time.”

The next thing that happens when we admit we are powerless is that we quit trying to ESCAPE. That’s the *E*.

Before we admitted we were powerless, we tried to escape and hide from our hurts, habits, and hang-ups by getting involved in unhealthy relationships, by abusing drugs such as alcohol, by eating or not eating, and so forth.

Trying to escape pain drains us of precious energy. When we take this first step, however, God opens *true* escape routes to show His power and grace. “For the light is capable of showing up everything for what it really is. It is possible for the light to turn the thing it shines upon into light also” (Ephesians 5:13–14, PH).

The *R* in powerless stands for RESENTMENTS.

If they are suppressed and allowed to fester, resentments can act like emotional cancer.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:26–27: “In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.”

As you continue to work the principles, you will come to understand that in letting go of your resentments, by offering your forgiveness to those that have hurt you, you are not just freeing the person who harmed you, you are freeing you!

But if we try to maintain our false power, we become isolated and alone. That’s the *L* in powerless: LONELINESS.

When you admit that you are powerless and start to face reality, you will find that you do not have to be alone.

Do you know that loneliness is a choice? In recovery and in Christ, you never have to walk alone again.

Do you know that caring for the lonely can cure loneliness? Get involved! Get involved in the church or in your neighborhood or here at Celebrate Recovery! If you become a regular here, I guarantee that you won't be lonely.

“Continue to love each other with true brotherly love. Don't forget to be kind to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!” (Hebrews 13:1–2, TLB).

When you admit you are powerless you also give up another *E*, the EMPTINESS.

When you finally admit that you are truly powerless by yourself, that empty feeling deep inside—that cold wind that blows through you—will go away.

Jesus said, “My purpose is to give life in all its fullness” (John 10:10, TLB). So let Him fill the emptiness inside. Tell Him how you feel. He cares!

Next you will notice that you are becoming less self-centered.

The first *S* stands for SELFISHNESS.

I have known people who have come into recovery thinking that the Lord's Prayer was “Our Father who art in heaven ... Give me ... give me ... give me!” Luke 17:33 (TLB) tells us, “Whoever clings to his life shall lose it, and whoever loses his life shall save it.” Simply said, selfishness is at the heart of most problems between people.

The last thing that we give up when we admit that we are powerless is SEPARATION.

Some people talk about “finding” God—as if He could ever be lost.

Separation from God can feel real, but it is never permanent. Remember, He seeks the lost. When we can't find God, we need to ask ourselves, “Who moved?” I'll give you a hint. It wasn't God!

For I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't.

The angels won't, and all the powers of hell itself cannot keep God's love away.... Nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God demonstrated by our Lord Jesus Christ when he died for us (Romans 8:38–39, TLB).

Wrap-up

The power to change only comes from God's grace.

Are you ready to truly begin your journey of recovery? Are you ready to stop denying the pain? Are you ready to stop playing God? Are you ready to start admitting your powerlessness? To start admitting that your life has become unmanageable? If you are, share it with your group tonight.

I encourage you to start working and living this program in earnest. If we admit we are powerless, we need a power greater than ourselves to restore us. That power is your Higher Power—Jesus Christ!

Let's close in prayer.

Dear God, Your Word tells me that I can't heal my hurts, hang-ups, and habits by just saying that they are not there. Help me! Parts of my life, or all of my life, are out of control. I now know that I cannot "fix" myself. It seems the harder that I try to do the right thing the more I struggle. Lord, I want to step out of my denial into the truth. I pray for You to show me the way. In Your Son's name, Amen.

Principle 1 Testimony

Hi, my name is John. I'm a believer who struggles with alcoholism. My story is all about God taking me back when I finally gave up on doing it my way. You see, I had a great start in life. I was raised in a good Christian home. I was the child prodigy in my church, and many predicted I would take over for Billy Graham when he retired. Later in life I earned a master's degree from Fuller Seminary. In essence, I was trained for a life of ministry.

I threw all of that away, however, for what the Bible calls "the lusts of the flesh" and what I thought was a call to freedom. How did that happen? As you will see, I made the mistake of thinking I was strong enough to live life on my own terms.

My earliest memories are about God and Jesus. I remember asking my dad, "Why doesn't everybody believe in Jesus? It's so easy." (At the time I was praying that Nikita Khrushchev would

become a Christian.) My dad answered, “When you get older, you’ll understand. It gets harder to believe.” My dad meant no harm, but the mind of a seven-year-old is a tender thing. I took his observation as a mandate: If I was going to grow up, I was going to have doubts. Shortly thereafter, I began to lose confidence in my relationship with God.

The struggle to rediscover a simple childlike faith would be the defining theme of my life for the next forty years. I discovered binge drinking in college during my senior year. But the need to try to earn God’s acceptance persisted. If anybody could get God to give them a standing ovation, I was going to be that man. I married a good Christian girl from a good Christian home and entered Fuller Seminary. I had been a lazy undergrad student. Consequently I had two things to prove: first that I was indeed the spiritual giant my dad and others had always expected me to be, and second, that my intellectual prowess had no equal. I graduated from Fuller with a 3.8 GPA, a master’s degree in divinity, and some major anxiety attacks. You see, all that head knowledge was worthless because I was performing a religion for God instead of having a relationship with God.

My self-doubts about God’s salvation had spread to all areas of my life. I had even begun to doubt my very manhood, so I entered therapy. There I found that much of my low self-esteem could be explained away by an overactive “inner parent” who constantly demanded perfection. Good sound psychology as far as it goes, but it fell short of the saving conclusion the Big Book states that we all have to make: “ ... any life run on self-will can hardly be a success.” Jesus put it another way in the real Big Book, the Bible: “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:35).

After starting a Ph.D. program in historical theology, I left Fuller and joined the business world. About a year later, a woman who was like a second mother to me died suddenly of a brain tumor. In spite of my pleading with God, Jan died that night, and I completed my walk away from God. Instead of turning to God in this time of loss, I used that dear woman’s death as a convenient excuse to give up on God and satisfy all of my pent-up desires for wine, women, and song.

I was riding high in 1984. I had plenty of money, a home in Anaheim Hills, and I was

surrounded by women who were openly available. I began to commit adultery after nine years of marriage. My excuse for being unfaithful was that my wife was not “exciting” enough. Excuses helped me to justify a divorce. Excuses and alcohol always gave me a way to deny the pain and deny what I had become: totally self-centered and egotistical. I found a gorgeous girlfriend who looked good on my arm, and I went into party mode for the balance of the '80s. Alcohol and cocaine were the order of the day. Believe it or not, that gorgeous girlfriend became my wife and remains my wife to this day in spite of all the hurt and heartache I have caused in her life. In 1993 our daughter was born. My little girl made me start to realize that I was not the center of the universe. I knew my family should be the center, but I continued to drink and act like an irresponsible adolescent.

Finally, in early 1994, my wife told me enough was enough. That was my wake-up call. I knew I had to get my life together or I was going to lose my wife and my little girl, both of whom I loved with all of my heart. I stopped going out to the bars but continued to drink at home. Drinking became a way to pass out every night and perpetuate the denial that had become my existence.

It took another two years, but in March of 1996, at the urging of my wife, we started attending Saddleback. Every Sunday, always nursing a hangover, I would be moved to tears by the music. God, through Pastor Rick, would touch my heart with some observation from the Bible that all my “enormous” Bible study skills had never uncovered before.

One Sunday, another John from our Celebrate Recovery group gave his testimony. Like me, he was a functional alcoholic. His story and the ministry of this church made me start to hope again that it was possible to have a relationship with a God of love rather than a God of judgment.

June 11, 1996 was my first day of sobriety. I came to our recovery meeting with a feeling that there was no place else to go. If I mentioned all of the men in this group who have helped me on the road to recovery, we would be here a lot longer than the time I have been allotted! However, I have to mention my brother Kenny. That first night, with a lot of love and not a lot of formal education, Ken helped me, Mr. Intellectual, complete four-word sentences as I tried to explain why I was there.

On Day 8 I wrote this in my journal: “I am still searching for a God that I know is there. Perhaps

my God is too small, perhaps He is not there. I fervently hope that is not true; I have nowhere else to go.” I knew beyond any doubt that alcohol was just a symptom. I was in a life-or-death search for the God who could make sense out of my life. On June 26, after a short meeting with Pastor John, one verse he shared with me finally cut through all of my denial. It was Psalm 46:10: “Be still, and know that I am God.” It was as if God was saying to me, “Stop trying to maintain the facade, stop making excuses for your life, that is why I died for you. Be still, relax, and accept My gift of freedom.”

I came home to my Abba, my Daddy in heaven. Like the prodigal son who finally realized that being a servant in his father’s house was much better than living like a pig on his own, I finally admitted how much I needed God’s help to manage my life. When I did, He welcomed me home with great joy, and the party (Luke 15:23) God threw for me and my family was overwhelming. In less than a month, my wife and I were baptized together by Pastor John, joined Saddleback Church, and dedicated our little girl to God.

I continue to be amazed at the peace I feel as I learn to let go of my own control and allow God to direct me. For the first time in forty years, I am praying an adult version of the prayer I prayed at the age of seven: “God, thank You, life is so simple when I turn everything over to You.” The belief of a child, tempered by forty years of life, gives me a peace and serenity that I never imagined possible.

Thank you.