Step Six

"Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character."

"THIS is the Step that separates the men from the boys." So declares a well-loved clergyman who happens to be one of A.A.'s greatest friends. He goes on to explain that any person capable of enough willingness and honesty to try repeatedly Step Six on all his faults—*without any reservations whatever*—has indeed come a long way spiritually, and is therefore entitled to be called a man who is sincerely trying to grow in the image and likeness of his own Creator.

Of course, the often disputed question of whether God can—and will, under certain conditions—remove defects of character will be answered with a prompt affirmative by almost any A.A. member. To him, this proposition will be no theory at all; it will be

just about the largest fact in his life. He will usually offer his proof in a statement like this:

"Sure, I was beaten, absolutely licked. My own will power just wouldn't work on alcohol. Change of scene, the best efforts of family, friends, doctors, and clergymen got no place with my alcoholism. I simply couldn't stop drink ing, and no human being could seem to do the job for me. But when I became willing to clean house and then asked a Higher Power, God as I understood Him, to give me re lease, my obsession to drink vanished. It was lifted right out of me."

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In A.A. meetings all over the world, statements just like this are heard daily. It is plain for everybody to see that each sober A.A. member has been granted a release from this very obstinate and potentially fatal obsession. So in a very complete and literal

way, all A.A.'s have "become entirely ready" to have God remove the mania for alcohol from their lives. And God has proceeded to do exactly that.

Having been granted a perfect release from alcoholism, why then shouldn't we be able to achieve by the same means a perfect release from every other difficulty or defect? This is a riddle of our existence, the full answer to which may be only in the mind of God. Nevertheless, at least a part of the answer to it is apparent to us.

When men and women pour so much alcohol into themselves that they destroy their lives, they commit a most unnatural act. Defying their instinctive desire for self preservation, they seem bent upon self-destruction. They work against their own deepest instinct. As they are hum bled by the terrific beating administered by alcohol, the grace of God can enter them and expel their

obsession. Here their powerful instinct to live can cooperate fully with their Creator's desire to give them new life. For nature and God alike abhor suicide.

But most of our other difficulties don't fall under such a category at all. Every normal person wants, for example, to eat, to reproduce, to be somebody in the society of his fellows. And he wishes to be reasonably safe and secure as he tries to attain these things. Indeed, God made him that way. He did not design man to destroy himself by alcohol, but He did give man instincts to help him to stay alive.

It is nowhere evident, at least in this life, that our Creator expects us fully to eliminate our instinctual drives. So far as we know, it is nowhere on the record that God has com pletely removed from any human being all his natural drives.

Since most of us are born with an abundance of natural desires, it isn't strange that we often let these far exceed their intended purpose. When they drive us blindly, or we willfully demand that they supply us with more satisfactions or pleasures than are possible or due us, that is the point at which we depart from the degree of perfection that God wishes for us here on earth. That is the measure of our character defects, or, if you wish, of our sins.

If we ask, God will certainly forgive our derelictions. But in no case does He render us white as snow and keep us that way without our cooperation. That is something we are supposed to be willing to work toward ourselves. He asks only that we try as best we know how to make progress in the building of character.

So Step Six—"Were entirely ready to

have God remove all these defects of character"—is A.A.'s way of stating the best possible attitude one can take in order to make a beginning on this lifetime job. This does not mean that we expect all our character defects to be lifted out of us as the drive to drink was. A few of them may be, but with most of them we shall have to be content with patient improvement. The key words "entirely ready" underline the fact that we want to aim at the very best we know or can learn.

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How many of us have this degree of readiness? In an absolute sense practically nobody has it. The best we can do, with all the honesty that we can summon, is to *try* to have it. Even then the best of us will discover to our dismay that there is always a sticking point, a point at which we say, "No, I can't give this up yet." And we shall often tread on

even more dangerous ground when we cry, "This I will *never* give up!" Such is the power of our instincts to overreach themselves. No matter how far we have progressed, desires will always be found which oppose the grace of God.

Some who feel they have done well may dispute this, so let's try to think it through a little further. Practically everybody wishes to be rid of his most glaring and destructive handicaps. No one wants to be so proud that he is scorned as a braggart, nor so greedy that he is labeled a thief. No one wants to commit the deadly sins of anger, lust or gluttony.* No one wants to be agonized by the chronic pain of envy or to be paralyzed by sloth. Of course, most human beings don't suffer these defects at these rock-bottom levels.

*This sentence has been updated from the original text to generalize the possible consequences of extreme emotions.

We who have escaped these extremes are apt to congrat ulate ourselves. Yet can we? After all, hasn't it been self interest, pure and simple, that has enabled most of us to escape? Not much spiritual effort is involved in avoiding excesses which will bring us punishment anyway. But when we face up to the less violent aspects of these very same defects, *then* where do we stand?

What we must recognize now is that we exult in some of our defects. We really love them. Who, for example, doesn't like to feel just a little superior to the next fellow, or even quite a lot superior? Isn't it true that we like to let greed masquerade as ambition? To think of *liking* lust seems impossible. But how many men and women speak love with their lips, and believe what they say, so that they can hide lust in a dark corner of their minds? And even while stay ing within conventional bounds, many people have to admit that their imaginary sex excursions are apt to be all

dressed up as dreams of romance.

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Self-righteous anger also can be very enjoyable. In a per verse way we can actually take satisfaction from the fact that many people annoy us, for it brings a comfortable feel ing of superiority. Gossip barbed with our anger, a polite form of murder by character assassination, has its satisfac tions for us, too. Here we are not trying to help those we criticize; we are trying to proclaim our own righteousness.

When gluttony is less than ruinous, we have a milder word for that, too; we call it "taking our comfort." We live in a world riddled with envy. To a greater or less degree, everybody is infected with it. From this defect we must surely get a warped yet definite satisfaction. Else why would we consume such great amounts of time wishing for what

we have not, rather than working for it, or angrily looking for attributes we shall never have, instead of adjusting to the fact, and accepting it? And how often we work hard with no better motive than to be secure and slothful later on— only we call that "retiring." Consider, too, our talents for procrastination, which is really sloth in five syllables. Nearly anyone could submit a good list of such defects as these, and few of us would seriously think of giving them up, at least until they cause us excessive misery.

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Some people, of course, may conclude that they are indeed ready to have all such defects taken from them. But even these people, if they construct a list of still milder defects, will be obliged to admit that they prefer to hang on to *some* of them. Therefore, it seems plain that few of us can quickly or easily become ready to aim at

spiritual and moral perfection; we want to settle for only as much perfection as will get us by in life, according, of course, to our various and sundry ideas of what will get us by. So the difference between "the boys and the men" is the difference between striving for a self-determined objective and for the perfect objective which is of God.

Many will at once ask, "How *can* we accept the entire implication of Step Six? Why—that is *perfection*!" This sounds like a hard question, but practically speaking, it isn't. Only Step One, where we made the 100 percent admission we were powerless over alcohol, can be practiced with absolute perfection. The remaining eleven Steps state perfect ideals. They are goals toward which we look, and the measuring sticks by which we estimate our progress. Seen in this light, Step Six is still difficult, but not at all impossible. The only urgent thing is that we make a beginning, and keep trying.

If we would gain any real advantage in the use of this Step on problems other than alcohol, we shall need to make a brand new venture into open-mindedness. We shall need to raise our eyes toward perfection, and be ready to walk in that direction. It will seldom matter how haltingly we walk. The only question will be "Are we ready?"

Looking again at those defects we are still unwilling to give up, we ought to erase the hard-and-fast lines that we have drawn. Perhaps we shall be obliged in some cases still to say, "This I cannot give up yet…," but we should not say to ourselves, "This I will *never* give up!"

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Let's dispose of what appears to be a hazardous open end we have left. It is suggested that we ought to become entirely willing to aim toward perfection. We note that

some delay, however, might be pardoned. That word, in the mind of a rationalizing alcoholic, could certainly be given a long-term meaning. He could say, “How very easy! Sure, I’ll head toward perfection, but I’m certainly not going to hurry any. Maybe I can postpone dealing with some of my problems indefinitely.” Of course, this won’t do. Such a bluffing of oneself will have to go the way of many another pleasant rationalization. At the very least, we shall have to come to grips with some of our worst character defects and take action toward their removal as quickly as we can.

The moment we say, “No, never!” our minds close against the grace of God. Delay is dangerous, and rebel lion may be fatal. This is the exact point at which we aban don limited objectives, and move toward God’s will for us.