

One of the things I love about the Catholic faith is it has this sense of balance with respect to the soul and to life. And what I mean by that is that for the Catholic, we do not say that "I am saved" simply by saying we believe in Jesus. We believe that faith is a first step, and God's love will always be there, but it requires a response. And as we go through life and try to grow closer to God, learning how to say "yes" to Him and "no" to sin is an ongoing battle.

And that's because sin can often bring with it pleasure. But it all leads to the same place, abandonment from God. The thing of it is though is God reaches out to us to bring us back - it just requires a response, and an opening of our eyes to see the reality of sin, and to remember that try as we might, we can't overcome it on our own.

People who have a particular awareness of this truth are alcoholics.

An anonymous doctor named Jim C. shares the story of an anonymous woman by the name of Grace who came to finally realize that she had a problem with alcohol, but also realized that just because there was progress did not mean the temptations went away.

Jim shares that in the early 90s, he was treating a woman in an intensive outpatient chemical dependency group. Grace was a flight attendant and had been suspended from her job with a major airline due to her untreated alcoholism. She had been stealing the miniature liquor bottles, drinking in airport bars in uniform and so on. Her employer, realizing that she needed help, sent her to Jim's group.

After the eight-week program, Jim suggested to her it might be a good idea to solidify her foundation in recovery before returning to work, as she would be working in a high-risk environment (serving alcohol, being out of town alone, etc.). Grace did, however, return to work shortly after finishing outpatient treatment. One day while she was departing from a plane at the end of a long day, a major craving for alcohol overpowered her. There she was, in the Los Angeles International airport, pulling her roller bag behind her, when this passive craving to drink came over her. She tried to just "think through it" or "just forget about it" but it was way too powerful. It was so powerful, in fact, that she was resigned to the fact that she would just go drink.

Grace thought, Oh, the heck with it, I'll get another job...or maybe no one will find out anyway. But deep down inside, Grace did not want to drink. She truly had wanted to stay sober, but she was in trouble.

On her way to the bar in the airport, Grace had a moment of sanity. She stopped, picked up the airport paging phone and said, "Will you please page friends of Bill W.," she paused, quickly looking around for an empty gate, "to come to Gate 12?"

Within minutes, over the paging system in the L.A. International Airport came, "Will friends of Bill W. Please come to Gate 12? Will friends of Bill W. Please come to Gate 12?" Most people in recovery know what saying you are a friend of Bill W. Is an anonymous way to identify yourself as a member of AA.

In less than five minutes, there were about 15 people at that gate from all over the world. That brought tears of amazement, relief and joy to Grace. They had a little meeting there in that empty gate, total strangers prior to that moment. Grace discovered that two of those people had gotten out of their boarding lines and missed their flights to answer that call for help. They had remembered what they had seen on many walls of meeting rooms: "When anyone, anywhere reaches out their hand for help, I want the hand of AA to be there and for that I am responsible."

Grace did not drink that day. Jim ventures to guess that none of the people who came to Gate 12 drank that day either. Instead, Grace had a moment of sanity, realized she could not do it on her own, took the action of asking for help and received it immediately. This help, Jim says, is available to all of us if we want it and sincerely ask for it. It never fails.

Lent gives us a special time to ask for help. And just like the love of people for a stranger in need came to Gate 12 that day, the love of God comes to us always. But like Grace, we have to have the courage to pick up the phone.

Jesus like us is fully human, except He is without sin. But this does not mean that He is without free will. He has the choice to turn away from the Father. But He trusts in the Father and the Father's plan. And through this experience, He is strengthened for His mission. Note the Spirit brings Him to the desert. This is to help Jesus as through this struggle, His mission will become more clear. He will overcome these temptations and emerge victorious. And then His mission will begin in earnest.

Like Jesus, we are invited to go into the desert during this sacred time to become stronger. But this is a process, because while Jesus overcomes these temptations, there will surely be more, especially as He nears His passion. The question for us as we enter into both the season and look at the rest of our lives is how, like Jesus, can we be equipped to handle temptation and sin?

A starting point is to be aware of it and open our eyes. Sin is sometimes obvious when our conscience tells us something is wrong and we have remorse. But sin also can be hidden. The message of culture can be do what you want, when you want, and that everything is relative. We can minimize sin, like Grace did by taking those little bottles on the airline, and little by little it can overtake us. That's why a healthy examination of conscience is important. One that causes us to think outside of the box, not just of the sins that might be obvious. But to look deeper at our lives; to find the sins of omission. To honestly ask ourselves how we treat others; to look at if certain things in our lives are getting out of control like alcohol, tobacco use, overeating, gambling, etc.; to think about how we look at the human body, how often we go to Mass, etc. There are a lot of great resources online if you look up Catholic examinations of conscience, and they are good to sit with, especially during the season of Lent. This is not because we want to feel guilty of have a shame complexion. Quite the opposite. It's because we recognize there

are many things we do right, but we are not saints yet. We are on the road to sainthood. And we have to be aware that we have a problem for us to ask for help.

We then get to the asking for help part. It can be hard to do this, because we might feel like it's up to us to figure it all out. But sin is powerful. Inevitably, we will succumb to it at times as Grace did when she tried to deal with it on her own. On the one hand, we must remember that when we fall, God's love and mercy are always there to pick us back up. In AA, there is no judgment for what people have done in their past - just the love of others who are there to help. We can think of Christianity as SA, Sinners Anonymous, and there is also no judgment here too - just the love. The love of a God who would die for you and me even if we were the only persons who ever walked the face of the earth. We are created out of love, and that love never wanes. So this is why we need to make use of confession, and trust in God's mercy. To quote Pope Francis: "When we are tempted, only the Word of God, the Word of Jesus saves us. Christ is always willing to teach us how to escape from temptation. Jesus is great because he not only brings us out of temptation, but also gives us more confidence. The Lord waits for us, ... trusts us who are so tempted, who are sinners... He always opens horizons." But we also want to look for help too when we are tempted. Perhaps you are in a situation where it's time to talk to a doctor or counselor about an addiction or compulsion. Or maybe it's time to join a group like AA for support. But for other sins and struggles, two basic things to do can be to run to God for help. To pray when we are tempted. To say the words "Jesus, I trust in you." To ask for the help of Mary and the saints. That is what Jesus did in the Garden, and an angel was sent to strengthen Him and give him comfort. But it can also help to have people we can trust. A friend of Bill W. If you will. A true friend is someone we can talk to about deep things and have a heart-to-heart to about what we are going through who won't judge us, but will help us. In families, parents and kids and spouses need to have this trust so they can truly talk to one another and help each other and listen. When we can truly open up our hearts to people, it can do so much. But we also need to meet them at the gate too like Grace's friends of Bill W., and not judge them but listen, counsel and help them through their battles.

Lastly, in the ongoing battle with temptations, I think it's important to remember there are many phases to it, and it's important to make use of the many tools at our disposal. In those moments of temptation, we again run to God and others, but some things that can help too are an ongoing relationship with God. An alcoholic goes to many an AA meeting, and you and I need to have an active faith life, going to Mass, talking to God daily, not just in times of temptation. Because when we pray, we grow in grace, and get stronger. Jesus is in the desert for 40 days and he is not tempted the entire time, but rather spends much time in prayer. Prayer and the sacraments fortify our bond of love for God.

With that relationship with God, we must also have knowledge. It's important to form our conscience; Jesus is able to identify sin and in the accounts from Matthew and Luke, He has more of a dialogue with the devil about the specific temptations of the flesh, of pride, and power. Remember, if the world is saying do whatever you want and seek

pleasure now, if we are seeking the Kingdom of God, we have to know what is right and wrong. This comes by learning our faith.

It also helps to know what is going to lead us into temptation. Sometimes there are people we call friends who aren't true friends but cause us to do bad things. Or, as I talked about a month ago when looking specifically at temptations of the flesh, we can sometimes be prone to them after alcohol use, when we are stressed, or very tired or other things aren't right in our lives. When we look at sin, it can really help to look back on what was going on when a particular sin was committed. Removing those tendencies or bad situations or people from our lives can help us get back on the right track. This is why the practice of fasting during Lent, or giving something up, can really be helpful too. We can look at things and see that there are perhaps things that aren't in and of themselves that are sinful, but things that have the potential to cause problems down the road. By removing something during Lent, we might find come Easter that we were spending too much time on something (e.g., video games, overeating, drinking, gambling) that was reducing us from becoming who we want to become, namely a saint.

It's important to remember temperance is a virtue, not teetotalism. Some things we should always avoid, but the Catholic also has the balance of the physical and the spiritual. We live in this world, can live the good life; we can enjoy the pleasures of life, even the sensual pleasures or use things like alcohol within reason. But there is always the danger that we lose sight entirely of the spiritual and become only focused on the physical and these temptations overcome us. Inevitably that will lead us further away from God.

My name is Paul, and like you, I am a sinner. I always will be. But I also know that I am loved by God, and that with His help and the help of others, and by using the grace that He has given me through the virtues and through the sacraments, with these tools, I can overcome those sins and temptations with time. It's one I will never win on my own though. So join me now not at Gate 12, but at the altar where Jesus will meet us together in our sinfulness, and respond with His love, and never forget that when we leave, while the temptation and future sins will inevitably come, we will never be alone. Like Grace, may we have the courage to pick up the phone, and realize that with the love of God and others and by learning how to respond to that love, using those tools in the ongoing battle with sin, we can truly reach our final destination of heaven.