

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent  
March 13, 2011  
Fr. Tom Elliott

# The Root of Habitual Sin

Joel 2:12-18  
Psalm 51  
2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

There was a stereotype about 60 years ago that all Catholic priests were alcoholics. This stereotype was so well-known that the common joke was, “Wherever you find four priests you’ll find a fifth.”<sup>1</sup> While I know that the majority of the priests back then were not alcoholics, there were, in fact, many who did struggle with drinking. I am certain that one of the leading causes of the pervasive alcoholism within the priesthood was due to the seminary formation these men received. In the seminary decades ago, young men were told to stay away from women so that they wouldn’t be seduced away from their vocation. They were also told to avoid friendships with parishioners, since this could lead to preferential treatment. In short, the seminarians were told to isolate themselves. Is it any surprise that many of them stayed at their houses and drank?

The root of every habitual sin, attachment and addiction is the *desire for love*. Our deepest desire in life is to know God’s unconditional love and to love Him, and others, in return. Undoubtedly, this is why Jesus spoke so frequently in the Gospels about love. Two important examples of Jesus’ message of love include—

As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love.  
-John 15:9

If I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love.  
-1 Corinthians 13:2b, 13

From the moment of our conception, our deepest desire is to experience and know God’s unconditional love for us and to return it. However, this desire is quickly covered up, smothered, ignored, and manipulated as we grow up. By the time we become young adults, we often don’t even think much about God, and we are rarely in touch with that deep desire for love within us. Instead, we have begun substituting attachments for God and love.

The word, “attachment” comes from French word *a-tache*, which means, “nailed to.” When our desire to *receive* love and to *offer* love gets attached to something specific, it usually forms an addiction. Once an addiction forms, our attention and energy is typically consumed by it. During times when we have given up hope of conquering the addiction, our attention and energy is focused on satisfying the desire of the addiction. During times of willful resolution to stop the addiction, our attention and energy is consumed by trying to stop the addiction. This leaves us drained and exhausted. And, it further takes our attention away from the true root of our addiction—our desire to know God’s unconditional love for us and to love Him and others.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Fifth,” of course, referring to a measurement of alcohol.

In light of this understanding of the root of all addictions, attachments, and habitual sin, we can see how prayer is essential for our healing. Prayer is a place where we experience, or have God confirm, His unconditional love for us. It is also an important place where our character is molded in order to love more authentically. Many of you might remember the spiritual formation program that we did as a parish a few years ago. It was entitled, “My Heart’s Desire.” The reason it was named that was because of this link between our deepest desire and prayer that I’m talking about right now. It is so important that we don’t stop growing in our knowledge and practice of prayer. In fact, we are going to be offering three days of recollection on prayer and discerning God’s will beginning this coming Saturday. Why? Because it leads us to our deepest desire!

While prayer is the manifestation of our deepest desire and, therefore, is essential to our detachment from addictions, it can also become yet another failed “remedy.” Often, prayer and spirituality is our final attempt to overcome addictions; and, there is a significant and important difference between prayer that facilitates healing from our addictions and prayer that leaves us with our addictions, often feeling even greater despair and worthlessness. Next week, we will look closely at that difference.

This week, I encourage us to spend time in prayer reflecting on a few things. First, how has prayer played a role in our experiencing God’s unconditional love for us? Secondly, at what points in our lives have we felt like a failure in prayer because it did not bring about the healing we wanted it to? Lastly, is our current style of prayer one that allows us to be renewed in God’s love and be more loving toward others, or do we find ourselves even more critical, isolated, despairing, and/or uncaring?

### **SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:**

- ✚ Spend some time naming all of your desires. Pay attention to the desires that are “beneath” your most obvious desires. In fact, think of your desires as an onion and spend some time peeling back the layers of your desires until you get to the deepest desire.
- ✚ Share with God one or two times in your life when you hoped that prayer or going to church would “fix” a problem you were having. Did it work? If so, how did it work? If not, what did you feel like when it failed?