

RECOVERING BENEDICT

twelve-step living
and the
rule of benedict

JOHN EDWARD CREAN JR.

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INTRODUCTION

Recovering Benedict was first inspired by the down-to-earth wisdom of the *Rule of Benedict* (RB). Addicts sometimes suffer from more than one addiction at a time. Numerous anonymous twelve-step programs have come into existence to address addictions to alcohol (AA), narcotics (NA), overeating (OA), gambling (GA), sex (SA), and debt (DA) to name but a few. Support groups such as Al-Anon, Alateen, Nar-Anon, S-Anon, and others were created to assist those who are in a relationship with addicts.

In my view, the most effective recovery programs are those based upon the twelve steps first outlined in a work referred to as *The Big Book* or simply *Alcoholics Anonymous* (April 1939). This pioneering methodology suggests addressing addiction “one day at a time.” Because of AA, a generous number of daily recovery readers already exist. *Recovering Benedict* also approaches recovery from twelve-step methodology, but from an additional perspective as well. The meditations after each daily reading from the *Rule of Benedict* were written for persons in recovery and those who support their efforts.

Benedict of Nursia (480–547) was an Italian layperson who sought a more authentic spiritual life than was currently available to him in the religious culture of his day. Benedict, often referred to as the “father of Western monasticism,” collated various strands of monastic culture and practice into a single coherent document. He created his short handbook to guide others seeking a holier life. For over fifteen centuries now, the *Rule of Benedict* has been translated, adapted, and adopted in far more ways than Benedict could ever have imagined. It is a true classic of Western spirituality.

An equally novel, indeed revolutionary way to deal with the age-old problem of alcoholism appeared with the publication of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. The first edition of 1939 ushered in a fresh way to approach the *disease* of alcoholism. Based on twelve simple yet practical steps and minus moral judgmentalism, this pioneering venture—like the *Rule*—inspired

others to translate, adapt, and adopt it to address not only alcoholism but countless other addictions as well.

Basic to all twelve-step programs are values such as rigorous honesty, interdependence with others (through attending meetings and working with a sponsor), accountability, systematic step work, confidentiality, anonymity, persistence, simplicity, self-evaluation, openness to transformation, humility, consideration, and a reliance on one's Higher Power—however one might understand that. In my view, the twelve-step method has met with such enormous success because deeply within its methodology it has both spiritual as well as therapeutic roots.

While most of the basic values espoused by AA certainly existed well before 1939, it took one motivated individual, in consultation with fellow travelers, to pull the various strands together into a new format. And here is where the dots connect for me: it took a sixth-century Italian drawing on earlier experience to create a handbook for Western monasticism; it likewise took a twentieth-century American to pull together a program for people who just wanted wellness, who wanted to recover.

Recovering Benedict came into being because I, too, found healing by relating monastic practice with recovery values. Monastics and non-monastics alike share the same twenty-four hours. Monastics live twenty-four hours of work balanced with prayer; addicts likewise try to live out their lives one day at a time. How we spend our hours are how we spend our days.

A Recovery Prayer

*May your reading and reflection
bring you the peace
that passes all understanding.*

*May you experience all the serenity
that sober living can bring about.*

*May you come to quiet
and find wholeness.*

May you be restored and revived.

*And in our moments of reflection,
in our heartfelt prayers,
let us remember the community of souls
struggling along with us.
Amen.*

The Twelve Steps (adapted)

1. I admit I am powerless over my dependencies and that my life has gone out of control.
2. I believe in a Higher Power that can restore me to sanity.
3. I surrender my life and my will to my Higher Power.
4. I examine my life as courageously and as completely as I can.
5. I admit to my Higher Power, to myself, and to someone else exactly what I've been doing wrong.
6. I am fully prepared for my Higher Power to remove all my character defects.
7. I humbly ask my Higher Power to remove all my character defects.
8. I list every person I have harmed and am ready to make amends to each and every one of them.
9. I make amends personally to everyone I have harmed wherever possible, unless doing so would cause them or others further harm.
10. I continue examining my life, and whenever I do wrong, promptly admit it.
11. I seek more conscious contact with my Higher Power, asking only for discernment and perseverance.
12. Grateful for my spiritual awakening from working these steps, I share my experience with others, while practicing these principles myself, one day at a time.

Prologue

LISTEN carefully, my child, to my instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from one who loves you. Welcome it and faithfully put it into practice. The labor of obedience will bring you back to God from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience.

This message of mine is for you, then, if you are ready to give up your own will, once and for all, and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for Jesus, the Christ.

First of all, every time you begin a good work, you must pray to God most earnestly to bring it to perfection. In God's goodness, we are already counted as God's own, and therefore we should never grieve the Holy One by our evil actions. With the good gifts which are in us, we must obey God at all times that God may never become the angry parent who disinherits us, nor the dreaded one, enraged by our sins, who punishes us forever as worthless servants for refusing to follow the way to glory.

Lord, I begin a new work today. It is one more chance you have given me to begin again. What a blessing to have a God who forgives, who again and again invites me to start over, to tear up the messy pages of my life and start writing on a fresh pad of paper. By my *labor of obedience*, I want to return to you from whom I departed so long ago through the sloth of my own disobedience, by careless and inattentive living. I want to be attentive to you, to start listening to you right now. I've tried it the other way, listening to myself, and that has gotten me exactly nowhere, perhaps worse than nowhere—it's gotten me into big trouble.

I am ready right now for your paternal counsel. I'm ready to listen. I need to listen, and listen deeply, which literally means *to obey*.

I desperately need to renounce my own misguided will and embrace yours. I have come to the end of my rope trying to go it alone: *I admit I am powerless over my dependencies and that my life has gone out of control.*

To begin this journey, I first need to be willing to listen. Please open my ears and keep them open, Lord. Unstop them, just as you did for that deaf person when you said the word, *Ephphata*: “Be opened.” Open my ears, Lord, so I may hear your loving, accepting, and welcoming voice. Amen.

January 2, May 3, September 2

Prologue *(continued)*

Let us get up then, at long last, for the Scriptures rouse us when they say: “It is high time for us to arise from sleep” (Rom. 13:11). Let us open our eyes to the light that comes from God, and our ears to the voice from the heavens that every day calls out this charge: “If you hear God’s voice today, do not harden your hearts” (Ps. 95:8). And again, “You that have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:7). And what does the Spirit say? “Come and listen to me; I will teach you to reverence God” (Ps. 34:12). “Run while you have the light of life, that the darkness of death may not overtake you” (John 12:35).

Now is definitely the hour, Lord. It’s way more than high time. I’ve been asleep for how long? That fantasy world of addiction is a world of make believe, a world of phony dreams and noxious nightmares. I thought that slumber was a great escape, but it proved to be a never-never land, a land of dreams that would never satisfy, of promises that could never be kept. Yes, it’s time for me to wake up and to get on with real life in real time. That would be your time, Lord, the blessed reality of every ticking second.

I know. I have to run, and run fast, while I still have the light of life lest the darkness completely overtake me. Those words couldn’t ring truer in my soul. I have already lived under the darkness of death. It has overtaken me more than once. The darkness always seemed to have won. It always seemed to get the best of me, because I wouldn’t listen for your voice. Instead, I listened to the selfish voices in my own head. I didn’t look for it and therefore I couldn’t see *the light that comes from God*. Someone else called it your *deifying light*. How I love that expression. That’s the

kind of light that can reshape me into your image and likeness, just like you created me.

If today I hear your voice. Lord, if in the next twenty-four hours you should beckon to me, please let me hear you clearly. Help me shut out all those competing voices *that would corrupt and destroy the creatures of God*, voices that would distract me from focusing on you and you alone. At least for these next twenty-four hours I'm counting on you to protect me, Lord. Amen.

January 3, May 4, September 3

Prologue *(continued)*

Seeking workers in a multitude of people, God calls out and says again: "Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?" (Ps. 34:13). If you hear this and your answer is "I do," God then directs these words to you: If you desire true and eternal life, "keep your tongue free from vicious talk and your lips from all deceit; turn away from evil and do good; let peace be your quest and aim" (Ps. 34:14–15). Once you have done this, my "eyes will be upon you and my ears will listen for your prayers; and even before you ask me, I will say to you: "Here I am" (Isa. 58:9). What is more delightful than this voice of the Holy One calling to us? See how God's love shows us the way of life. Clothed then with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide, that we may deserve to see the Holy One "who has called us to the eternal presence" (1 Thess. 2:12).

Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days? What a question. Who wouldn't? Yet, by giving in to my unhealthy appetites I have chosen the opposite of life: death itself.

In the heat of the moment I have often failed to [*keep*] *my tongue free of vicious talk [and] my lips from all deceit*. I have lied plenty to cover up my hidden life and mask my shadow side. And in the throes of my compulsions I have viciously attacked people who dared even mildly to disagree with me. I was a constant critic with nothing constructive to offer. My resentments abounded. Perceived offenses, even

slight ones, I met with open hostility. “Don’t cross me,” I’d think; “I’ll get you for it later.”

What a nasty way to live. What a perfect path toward spiritual death.

“Turn away from evil and do good; let peace be your quest and aim.” I found it hard to do that. It was easier to be nasty, critical, cynical, and caustic about others rather than to be positive and affirming. I took the proverbial path of least resistance: don’t just get angry, get even.

Yet now I seek the serenity of recovery: that “peace . . . which surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7). Said Jesus, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27). I need that kind of peace.

God promises to be there with me, even when I am just trying to seek his kind of peace—trying to build positive relationships with my fellow human beings. In that moment, God speaks words of love and affirmation to me in that delightful voice of his. God whispers in my ear: “You don’t need that anymore. Let me show you a more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31, adapted).

January 4, May 5, September 4

Prologue *(continued)*

If we wish to dwell in God’s tent, we will never arrive unless we run there by doing good deeds. But let us ask with the Prophet, “Who will dwell in Your tent, O God; who will find rest upon Your holy mountain?” (Ps. 15:1).

After this question, then, let us listen well to what God says in reply, for we are shown the way to God’s tent. “Those who walk without blemish and are just in all dealings; who speak truth from the heart and have not practiced deceit; who have not wronged another in any way, not listened to slander against a neighbor” (Ps. 15:2–3).

They have foiled the evil one at every turn (Ps. 15:4), flinging both the devil and these wicked promptings far from sight. While these temptations were still “young, the just caught hold of them and dashed them against Christ” (Ps. 15:4, 137:9).

These people reverence God, and do not become elated over their own good deeds; they judge it is God's strength, not their own, that brings about the good in them. "They praise" (Ps. 15:4), the Holy One working in them, and say with the prophet: "Not to us, O God, not to us give the glory, but to your name alone" (Ps. 115:1). In just this way, Paul the apostle refused to take credit for the power of his preaching. He declared: "By God's grace I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:10). And again Paul said: "Those who boast should make their boast in God" (2 Cor. 10:17).

Dwelling under the protective shelter of God's tent is difficult to do unless I do something good for someone other than myself. The twelfth step is the "pass-it-on" step: *Grateful for spiritual awakening from walking these steps, I share my experience with others, while practicing these principles myself, one day at a time.* In my morning meditation, I am asked to pray for the person who is still sick, for my recovering sister or brother still struggling with the pull of addiction. But besides praying, I need to share my pilgrimage, for better or for worse, with another human being. Meetings are a precious opportunity to share deeply one's sorrows and joys, one's successes and failures *as we trudge the Road of Happy Destiny.*

And here's a practical tip about temptation I can't afford to miss: *While these temptations are still young, I catch hold of them and dash them against Christ.* In other words, surrender early: get out while the getting is good.

Lord, in the past, I have dallied a bit too long, played with fire and got burnt, sometimes badly. Now, more and more I feel led to turn away quicker. Dash that thought against the Rock of Ages. It won't hurt the rock but it could hurt *me* badly. If I hang onto that thought, it will get me hooked again sooner or later, and the struggle to recover my lost sobriety will begin all over again.

At least for the next twenty-four hours, let me visualize you, Lord, as my Rock, hard as diamond, the sturdiest stone of all. Let me shatter temptation against you before temptation shatters me. Lord, I claim you as my tent and shelter, my rock and refuge. Amen.

January 5, May 6, September 5

Prologue *(continued)*

That is why it is said in the Gospel: “Whoever hears these words of mine and does them, is like a wise person who built a house upon rock; the floods came and the winds blew and beat against the house, but it did not fall: it was founded on rock” (Matt. 7:24–25).

With this conclusion, God waits for us daily to translate into action, as we should, these holy teachings. Therefore, our lifespan has been lengthened by way of a truce, that we may amend our misdeeds. As the apostle says: “Do you not know that the patience of God is leading you to repent?” (Rom. 2:4). And God indeed assures us in love: “I do not wish the death of sinners, but that they turn back to me and live” (Ezek. 33:11).

The house on the rock. I can see it now: a beautiful summer home built by the sea. A gorgeous beach, an infinite expanse of water, the sound of seagulls, the sensation of wind across my face—everywhere your presence, Lord, in the still serenity of an ocean vista.

But living by the sea can be both beautiful and treacherous. Storms can arise, and they will. Big waves and powerful winds may prevail. That’s the price I must pay for such a beautiful environment. You tell me it’ll be okay if I remember to build my seaside home on your bedrock, rather than on the shifting sands of my own emotions. I know I need to do just that. No matter what may come, I can both enjoy the beauty and weather the storms.

My unruly appetites may flare up at any given moment: all addiction is *baffling, cunning, and powerful*. Yet, with your Rock still in sight, I have a living reminder that you are there, Lord. The storms of human passion may brew, the winds of self-gratification may threaten, but if for even a split second I can remember the Rock, perhaps I can escape ruin and peril, one more time.

Lord, daily you wait for me to translate all this theory into practice. *Twenty-four hours* are my saving watchwords. On a daily basis, you promise always to be there for me, as I try to put your teachings into action.

Unfortunately, it's a trial and error process; I wish it weren't. I wish you would just snap your fingers and it would be ever and always so. But your humanity, Lord, empathizes with my weakness, and you are patient. So patient, in fact, that you lengthen my life just to give me more time to try and get it right. What a Lord, what a God you are. One who encourages rather than one who chastises.

Truly, the infinite patience of a loving God leads me to repent. Though my efforts must always be finite, I thank you in victory, as well as in defeat, for you remain a God of mercy, kindness, and love. Amen.

January 6, May 7, September 6

Prologue *(continued)*

Now that we have asked God who will dwell in the holy tent, we have heard the instruction for dwelling in it, but only if we fulfill the obligations of those who live there. We must, then, prepare our hearts and bodies for the battle of holy obedience to God's instructions. What is not possible to us by nature, let us ask the Holy One to supply by the help of grace. If we wish to reach eternal life, even as we avoid the torments of hell, then—while there is still time, while we are in this body and have time to accomplish all these things by the light of life—we must run and do now what will profit us forever.

What doesn't come to us naturally, let us ask the Holy One to supply by the help of grace. Or to say that as a prayer: That you, O God, may be pleased to give me the help of your grace for anything that my weak human nature finds hardly possible. If that doesn't hit the nail on the head for me, Lord. Temptation has so many different pathways to get at me. How that happens continues to *baffle, outwit, and overpower.*

I want to dwell in *your* tent, Lord, and fulfill all the duties and obligations you have for me, but I can't do that by myself. I cannot wage that level of battle single-handedly; I need you there at my side: to my left, to my right, in front of me, behind me, above me and beneath me, as prayed in the hymn attributed to St. Patrick ("St. Patrick's Breastplate," #370, *Hymnal* 1982).

For sure, this is the *battle of holy obedience*. To fight this one simply by relying on my human nature, my human willpower, is to fight a losing battle. To do battle infused by your overflowing grace at least makes victory possible. The *light of life*, dear Lord, is key for me here, lest I stray back into the shadows, into the *valley of the shadow of death* (Ps. 23).

Yes, Lord. I must hasten to do right now what will profit me for all eternity: to address the *baffling, cunning, and powerful* nature of my addiction outfitted with no less than your full armor (Eph. 6:13–17). “Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all” (1 Chron. 29:11). Amen.

January 7, May 8, September 7

Prologue (*concluded*)

Therefore, we intend to establish a school for God’s service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset (Matt. 7:14). But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love (Ps. 119:32). Never swerving from God’s instructions, then, but faithfully observing God’s teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ (1 Pet. 4:13) that we may deserve also to share in the eternal presence. Amen.

Lord, these words remind me that I must consciously observe a certain strictness of lifestyle in order to amend my faults and safeguard genuine love. I no longer want that counterfeit kind of self-absorbed love that led me down unwholesome paths in the first place. If *I am fully prepared for you to remove all my character defects*, then I must do my part and be serious about amendment of life. Especially at the outset of my

journey, I need to tread the narrow path of self-discipline that prepares me for sober living.

My path to recovery need neither be *harsh nor burdensome*. It could be delightful and rewarding. For it to be so, I must aspire to a stricter code of sobriety, beginning with a practice known as “custody of the eyes.”

The eye has been called the window of the soul. As such, in this *school of the Lord's service*, I need to keep my windows clean and my eyes trained on my Higher Power. Beginning this journey, Lord, I am fully prepared for you to outfit me with an appropriate pair of “blindners.” Blindners are there literally to keep horses on track. Put those blindners on me, Lord, and keep me on track.

As I daily struggle toward spiritual integrity, may the heart you have given me expand to be filled with the sweetness of your love. Amen.