Step 1

Recognizing Our Limitations
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We recognize our inability to overcome sin by our own efforts—that we are born as slaves to sin.

All Have Sinned

In the first step, we focus on an uncommon topic: brokenness. People must be broken before they can become Christians. A broken person sees his life as hopeless and helpless. The Bible tells a story of a prodigal son. The son was selfish. He demanded his inheritance before his father died. Then, he left home with his things. He wasted his life in worldly pleasures and soon had no money left. With no other choice, the son worked on a pig farm. His life was out of control:

And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. (Lk.15:16 NKJV)

The prodigal son had run out of money, friends, and answers. He was broken because he had no way out of his sin. In the same way, I was broken because I could not stop my sin. I still did those things that I hated doing. In Romans 7:7-25, Paul describes his life before he was a Christian:

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. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. (Ro.7:18-20 NIV)

Before Paul was a Christian, he was broken. Paul wanted to do good things; but he could not do good things. He always did the evil things that he hated. Paul’s life was out of his control.

When everything seems wrong in your life, you feel better when you compare your life to the lives of others. You can usually find someone who is worse than yourself to make you feel better. An example would be like someone who competes in the long jump. He

For Further Thought:

When I cannot stop my sins, I...

1. What is brokenness?
2. Why is it a bad idea to compare ourselves with others?
3. Why are there no big or little sins in God’s eyes?
4. Why did God give us the Law?
5. How did sin get power over us?
6. What is the sinful nature?
7. According to the Bible, are we free to choose between good and evil?
8. Describe your heart. How does your heart make you act?

Memory Verse:

There is no difference, for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23 NIV
Our hearts control our thoughts, and our thoughts control our actions. Therefore, our wicked hearts control what we say and do:

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\text{The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart. (Lk.6:45 NASB)}\]

Because of our wicked hearts, we think bad thoughts. Because of our wicked thoughts, we say and do bad things. We sin because of our wicked hearts:

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\text{Anything you eat passes through the stomach and then goes into the sewer. But the words you speak come from the heart—that's what defiles you. For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. These are what defile you. Eating with unwashed hands will never defile you. (Mt.15:17-20 NLT)}\]

In the Bible, David linked his sin to his wicked heart. For example, after David slept with another man’s wife, he asked God for a new heart. David knew that he had sinned because of his wicked heart:

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\text{Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. (Ps.51:10 NRSV)}\]

As long as we have a wicked heart, we cannot stop our sins. We need to get rid of our wicked heart:

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\text{Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. (He.3:12 NRSV)}\]

Therefore, we must recognize our inability to overcome sin by our own efforts—that we are born as slaves to sin. We need to understand the following steps that deal with the power of sin, our sinful nature, and our wicked heart.

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\text{Step 1 Recognizing Our Limitations} \quad \text{Twelve Steps in Christ} \quad \text{Twelve Steps in Christ} \quad \text{Step 1 Recognizing Our Limitations}
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may not be able to jump far, but he can always find someone with one leg whom he can out-jump. The Bible teaches us:

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\text{Oh, don’t worry; we wouldn’t dare say that we are as wonderful as these other men who tell you how important they are! But they are only comparing themselves with each other, using themselves as the standard of measurement. How ignorant! (2Co.10:12 NLT)}\]

Even though you are better than other people, you are still not a perfect person. For example, a second-rate athlete competing in the long jump may not be able to jump very far, but he knows that he can jump further than someone with one leg. If you were standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon with a one-legged person, you would be able to jump further than he could, but the other side is a mile away. If both of you jumped, neither of you would reach the other side. You would both fall into the Grand Canyon and die. Jumping across the Grand Canyon is like trying to reach God by your own efforts. God is holy—absolutely perfect. The holy God is on one side of the canyon, and sinful man is on the other side. Man’s goodness will never allow him to reach God. The Bible teaches:

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\text{Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord. (He.12:14 NKJV)}\]

God is perfect, and sin is imperfection. The perfect God cannot allow imperfect people into heaven. If he did, heaven would be no better than earth. God considers all sins to be equally wrong. From God’s point of view, there are no big or little sins. Stealing a cookie is just as bad as stealing a car or someone’s wife:

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\text{For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. (Ja.2:10 NIV)}\]

One sin makes us imperfect. One little sin will keep us from heaven:

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\text{There is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God. (Ro.3:23 KJV)}\]

No matter how much good we do, God will not let us into heaven. God does not forget our past sins when we do good things. For example, our good actions are like a white wedding dress. Our sin is like a black spot. If a person stains a white wedding dress, the wedding dress is ruined. When we sin, we ruin all the good that we have done:

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\text{For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment. (Isa.64:6 NASB)}\]
People have always done more evil than good. At the beginning of history, God did not give people any laws. At that time, God described how evil people were:

*The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.*

(Ge.6:5-6 NIV)

God was very upset because people only thought about evil all the time. During the next 2000 years, God gave His people a set of laws. Now, God’s people would know when they disobeyed God. But they still did not obey Him. At this time, Solomon described how the people behaved toward God:

“When they sin against You (for there is no one who does not sin), and You become angry with them…”

(1Ki.8:46 NKJV; 2Ch.6:36)

The word *when* means that everyone still sinned. Again, God described the human heart at this time:

*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?*

(Jer.17:9 NKJV)

After Jesus rose from the grave, God described non-Christians:

“Well then, should we conclude that we Jews are better than others? No, not at all, for we have already shown that all people, whether Jews or Gentiles, are under the power of sin. As the Scriptures say, “No one is righteous—not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one”

(Ro.3:9-12 NLT)

At this time, all non-Christians still disobeyed God. No one lived to please God. Look around. Today, people are no different. We must conclude that everyone sins. People are not perfect. Therefore, non-Christians will not live with God in heaven:

*All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.*

(Eph.2:3 NIV)

**The Purpose of the Law**

Everyone has disobeyed God. Some people hate the bad things that they do. So why do they still do bad things? Some people want to do good things. Then why don’t they do good things? Something makes people act differently than they want to. The Bible teaches us

*Our sinful nature is part of who we are. Therefore, we cannot manage our lives:*

*For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death.*

(Ro.7:5 NIV)

We need to admit that we sin. Everyone struggles with at least one sin:

*If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.*

(1Jn.1:8 NASB)

When we agree that we cannot manage our lives, then we can begin to seek help. Could I save myself? No! When I knew I could not stop my sin, I asked God for help:

*When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.*

(Ro.5:6-8 NLT)

Are we aware that we are slaves to our sin? Do we know that we cannot free ourselves? We are powerless. We cannot stop our sins. We must realize that we cannot manage our lives. Only then will we seek help and find hope:

*“For when I am weak, then I am strong.”*

(2Co.12:10 NKJV)

**Spiritual Heart Disease**

Only when we realize that we are sick, will we go to the doctor. We describe our symptoms to the doctor. However, we will not get better until the doctor finds and fixes the problems in our bodies. God is like a doctor. In Exodus 4-14, God explains why Pharaoh did evil:

*Why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did?*

(1Sa.6:6 NIV)

Sin controlled and hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Therefore, Pharaoh disobeyed God. Today, we are just like Pharaoh. We disobey God because sin controls our hearts. We have wicked hearts:

*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?*

(Jer.17:9 KJV)

We think with our minds, but our hearts control our thoughts:

*For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.*

(Pr.23:7 NKJV)
drinking, but his drinking controlled him. Therefore, people sin because their sinful nature makes them a slave of a sin.

We like to think that we can choose freely between good and evil; however, we give in to evil and do bad things. After some time, when we try to stop our sins, we can’t. Hence, we learn that our desire for evil is stronger than our desire to do good. Throughout our lives, without Christ, we are never free to choose good. Rather, our sinful nature makes us desire evil things. We are deceived:

For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. (Ti.3:3 NASB)

We do not realize that our sinful nature inclines us to sin. We are self-deceived. We always do certain sins, but we cannot understand why. We are blind to our addiction. Therefore, we defend our wrong actions:

This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. (Co.1:21 NLT)

We do not believe that we have a problem. However, we are the problem because our nature desires sin:

All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God’s anger, just like everyone else. (Eph 2:3 NLT)

We naturally oppose God. For example, God asked us to love our neighbor. However, we are inclined to ignore our neighbor because of our sinful nature:

For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. (Ga.5:17 NIV)

We must realize that our nature rebels against God:

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. (Ro.8:5-8 NIV)

When God commands us to do good, we naturally want to disobey. We cannot stop our sinful actions. Our nature inclines us to disobey God.

That sin is not just an action. Sin is a power that controls us. Many people say that they decide what they want to do. However, some people hate their actions, but they cannot stop doing them. Why can’t they stop their actions? They can’t stop because they are slaves to sin:

Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. (Jn.8:34 NASB)

God gave us the Law to teach us that we are slaves to sin. Once we learn God’s Law, we realize that we have disobeyed it. Hence, we know that we are sinners:

For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. (Ro.3:20 RSV)

When I learned that God required me to obey His Law, I tried to obey it. But I couldn’t stop my sinful actions. Slowly, I realized that sin deceived me. I always thought that I chose my actions. But all that time, sin controlled me:

Indeed I would not have know what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.” But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. (Ro.7:7-8 NIV)

Sin controls our desires. Hence, we always choose to disobey God. God’s Law shows us that sin is a power:

Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. (Ro.7:8-10 RSV)

The Law taught me what sin was when it told me not to do something. The Law made me choose. I could either obey God or disobey God. The power of sin influenced me, and I disobeyed God by doing evil. The Law gives sin more power because the Law forces everyone to make a choice:

The power of sin is the law. (1Co.15:56 RSV)

The Law gives sin power. For example, a father takes his son to a friend’s farm, and the farm has a fish pond. The father tells his son to stay away from the pond. This command makes the boy curious about the pond. Suddenly, he wants it. If the child did not know about the
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Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

(Ps.51:5 NIV)

People do not sin and then get a sinful nature. Rather, people sin because they have a sinful nature. Our sinful nature makes us want to disobey God. When we were young, our parents did not teach us to sin. We naturally desired to sin:

These wicked people are born sinners; even from birth they have lied and gone their own way.

(Ps.58:3 NLT)

Babies are naturally selfish and sinful. For example, after a baby learns to roll over, he tries to roll over whenever his mother changes his diaper. The baby has learned to disobey his mother before he is one year old. According to the Bible, all people are inclined to sin because of their sinful nature:

And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can’t. I want to do what is good, but I don’t. I don’t want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. But if I do what I don’t want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

(Ro.7:18-20 NLT)

You and I struggle with different sins because as people we are different. For example, I might struggle with drinking alcohol, but you don’t. You might struggle with gambling, but I don’t. Some sins control you, and other sins control me. However, everyone struggles with at least one sin:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

(He.12:1 NKJV)

What is the sin that you struggle with? Finish this sentence: “My life would really come together if only I could...” You might struggle with alcohol, gambling, cigarettes, drugs, sex, violence, laziness, or whatever. Every person has at least one sin which controls him:

They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for people are slaves to whatever masters them.

(2Pe.2:19 NRSV)

My friend’s brother had a problem with drinking alcohol. When I asked about his brother’s drinking, my friend said, “My brother just likes beer.” This was not true. He could not stop at one drink because his sinful nature caused him to drink to excess. He did not control his pond, sin could not influence him to disobey. Likewise, if we do not know God’s Law, sin cannot influence us to disobey it. Therefore, the Law increases our sin because every command gives us the knowledge of evil and forces us to make a choice. And, sin uses these choices to make us disobey God:

The law was added so that the trespass might increase. (Ro.5:20 NIV)

The Law reveals that sin controls us. However, the Law never helps us do good. The Law warned us that God will judge us:

For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law.

(Ro.2:12 NASB)

God did not expect the Law to stop our sin or to help us obey:

I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die.

(Ga.2:21 NIV)

Rather, God gave us the Law to teach us that we are sinners and need help:

For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

(Ro.7:14-17 NASB)

The Law shows us that we are powerless against sin:

But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.

(Ga.3:22-24 NKJV)

We must realize that we are slaves of sin, or we will never look for help. We might think that we do what we desire. But, the Law proves that sin controls us. Therefore, we cannot help ourselves, for without Christ, we are powerless over sin.

Sin’s Deception

Why does sin control us? Sin controls us because of our sinful nature. Every person is born with a sinful nature: