

The Serenity Prayer

July 20, 2025

As we continue our summer series called *Prayer for People Who Have Trouble Praying*, we come into prayers created in modernity. Sometimes ancient words help, they ground us in timelessness. But the last two prayers in this series, today's by Reinhold Niebuhr and next week's by Thomas Merton, are, I think, distinctly modern. They show us some of the paradoxical nature of life as a Christian in modernity. Today, we focus on Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer." Its most common form is this:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

While some people claim this prayer has ancient origins, it is attributed to the mind of Reinhold Niebuhr, a brilliant 20th century Christian theologian. Niebuhr wrote these words in the 1930s as part of a longer prayer for a church service. They were heard by Howard Chandler Robbins, an Episcopal clergyperson in New York, who, with Niebuhr's permission, printed them both in a book and distributed them across the country through his leadership in the National Council of Churches.

A few years later, around 1941, the same words entered into the rhythms of a newly-forming group known as Alcoholics Anonymous. A member of a New York meeting saw the prayer in an obituary and shared it with his group. Another member immediately ordered 500 cards with the prayer printed on them so that it could be carried in a recovering alcoholic's wallet. Some of you know that this prayer begins or ends every AA meeting. Bill W., one of AA's founders, said, "Never had we seen so much A.A. in so few words."

What is so marvelous about this prayer? How can the same words toward God feel as authentic on the lips of the world's greatest theologian as they do on the lips of someone struggling under the weight of alcohol addiction?

One reason is that the Serenity Prayer addresses a universal problem in human life: the problem of change. Change, is life's only constant. There is change we can control and change we can't, but either way, people hate change. Change makes us act, think, feel differently. Our brains prefer certainty. Even when we have control over change, we don't always trust ourselves to make the right decisions. Change is almost always hard.

Take a minute and explore this with a neighbor. Share a change that you have either recently gone through or are planning or expecting. Talk a little bit about the emotions you connect with this change.

(share)

The Serenity Prayer's power is that it engages our ambivalence about change. Its first line is: "God give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change."

That's an amazing declaration. There are some things you cannot change. You are not all-powerful. You can't do everything. You can't know everything. I can't be six inches taller or 20 years younger. You can't change the weather (although we can change the climate, but that's a sermon for another day). You can't change your parents, your genes. Some things in this world just are. It's not your *choice*. It's not your *fault*.

This prayer asks you to accept the world and yourself as they are. In an America which constantly constantly beckons you to consume your way toward self-actualization and fulfillment, that's a radical declaration! Another way to express this is to say that you aren't God. That is a such a beautiful truth.

We're always acting otherwise, acting like everything is up to us. We're always trying to make everything in our lives just so, even if we're arranging everything to cover up our pathologies. AA's solution, and one that works for all of us is this: "First of all, we have to quit playing God."

Control isn't possible. We cannot control others' behavior. We can't control our feelings. The quest for control leads to misery. The first step in all spirituality—is to accept the things we cannot change. This cracks the door for the possibility of a power greater than ours, a wisdom deeper than ours, a love and faithfulness stronger than ours.

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change." This prayer would be brilliant if it stopped there.

But the second clause is just as good: "give me the courage to change the things I can."

This first clause rooted you in your human frailty, your weakness; this second clause affirms your human agency, your human freedom, your human potential. In AA, you must admit you're an alcoholic, you can't change that—but it doesn't mean you have to be drunk. We always have a set of choices in every situation. The work of being a human being is to learn how to exercise your choices responsibility and even virtuously. It takes some of us a long time—years of failure, but every human being can learn to make good decisions instead of destructive ones. This absolutely requires you to do "inner work." Every one of us has to confront the fears and insecurities that lead toward unhealthy choices. Spiritual maturity is being able to tell the difference between fleeting impulses and genuine desires.

We don't do this all on our own. The third clause suggests we need something else to make this all work: we need wisdom. Wisdom isn't something we have. It's something that's earned, but also something that given. Wisdom in Scripture is a divine gift. In the Christian tradition, we also can look to Jesus to teach us what wisdom looks like in the flesh. We ask Jesus to show us what it looks like to live with integrity, to live with love, in a world where we

constantly navigate between the things we control and those we don't. Wisdom is also what we share with one another; we learn from those who have walked the way before us;; the congregation is a source of wisdom.

I want to say one more thing about this prayer. While it has been extraordinarily helpful in the recovery community, this prayer was perhaps originally a prayer about social justice—what it feels like, spiritually, to be engaged in the long, slow work of gospel-infused social change.

The author of the prayer, Reinhold Niebuhr, wasn't a detached academic theologian. He was first a pastor of a Lutheran congregation in Detroit in the 1920s, with a congregation full of men employed in the automobile industry. Niebuhr would visit the factories of America's great capitalist "hero," Henry Ford, and see the conditions that the men of his congregation worked under—the heat, the pain, the drudgery. The real cost of those cars that every American wanted wasn't covered by the price tag—the real cost was paid by the men of his church, who toiled every day in conditions only a step up from slavery. Niebuhr brought union organizers to use his pulpit to mobilize campaigns for workers' rights. Niebuhr knew from Genesis that God created a world in which human beings are supposed to reap the benefits of their own labor.

But Niebuhr wasn't naïve. He learned in those early days that *Henry Ford wouldn't give up his power or his profits just because a few Christians pointed out that Jesus had something else in mind*. Niebuhr wrote:

“There is nothing in history to support the thesis that a dominant class ever yields its position or privileges in society because its rule has been convicted of ineptness or injustices.”

Our world, Niebuhr understood, is run by people exercising power. If we Christians follow God's call to create Beloved Community, to bring the love and justice of God to earth as it is in heaven, we must enter this world of power. You can't just moralize and sermonize. You have to get power and use it. This Christian realism was one of Niebuhr's enduring insights. He loathed moral purity. Christ teaches pacifism; but Niebuhr knew pacifism would have no effect on Hitler.

The key, Niebuhr thought, for any Christian to engage in this deeply compromised struggle for power is to understand the paradoxical nature of our human condition. To know that every human being is capable of creating great beauty, and every one of us is capable of inflicting incredible harm. We can know what is good, and still act selfishly. We are full of grace and full of sin. Americans, Niebuhr wrote, aren't good at this balance. As a nation, we are “so deluded by the concept of our innocence that we are ill prepared to deal with the temptations of power which now assail us.” Someone please post that on Truth Social.

Prayer is a tool that keeps us from self-delusion. It's a practice that opens us to the hard work of exploring our inner life. Prayer, when it works, is a doorway from naivete to wisdom.

Whoever you are, whatever situation you are in this morning, may the words of this prayer finds their way into the core of your being:

-if you're struggling with addiction or self-destructive behavior

-if you're facing sickness, or mortality

-if you're working for justice in the world, but aren't sure it's making a difference

-if the world feels a bit too much with us...

Come back to this prayer, with its three simple lines:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change

The courage to change the things I can

And the wisdom to know the difference.