

Three Classes of Backsliders

by Albert M. Ewing

The sermon highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing spiritual decay in the church, particularly among those who have backslidden in heart.

Topics: "Spiritual Backsliding", "Repentance"

Description

Albert M. Ewing delves into the topic of 'The Backslider in Heart,' emphasizing the importance of recognizing backsliding even within those who are actively involved in church activities. He distinguishes between different classes of backsliders, including those who have returned to sinful habits, those who have stopped professing but maintained a moral life, and those who appear religious outwardly but lack true spiritual fervor. Ewing highlights the need for self-examination and genuine repentance to avoid spiritual death and maintain a close relationship with God.

Transcript

In the further discussion of this most important subject, "The Backslider in Heart" we purpose to notice a few things closely associated with this particular group that plays no small part in the professed church of Jesus Christ. Too much cannot be said on this all important matter as stated by the writer of the Proverbs 14:14.

He was not indulging in broad generalities of the term, "backslider" as is often the case. Solomon was all too wise, to think of the backslider in heart only, as one who has quit professing religion, praying and attending church.

He is talking of a group that is sincere in their profession, and has not as yet made the discovery of their backsliding: like Samson "They wist not when the Lord left them." As much could be said of the church which they serve: they too had not discovered it. Many backsliders in heart are serving the church in responsible positions, and the church does not seem to discern them.

Does the individual not know that he is backslidden? I would say that he does not. How can any one be backslidden and not know it? Well, if he knew that he was backslidden, and keeps on professing, he would be a backslidden hypocrite. This class that I am writing about does not know because their trouble is inward, and not outward. Man looketh on the outside, "outward appearance." He reasons that because he is doing nothing wrong outwardly he is all right inwardly. He does not seem to recognize the break in the Spirit.

God does not look so much at what I am doing outwardly, as He looks at how I am doing inwardly. God looketh on the heart. Of course there will be, of necessity, a slight imperfection of works, but this will not be so noticeable to the natural eye. Jesus said, "I have not found thy works perfect before me." But it took the all-seeing eye of Jesus to see it. The most spiritual folk in the church said nothing about it.

The backslider is not readily discovered as such, because of his many ear marks of a true Christian; but with all their religious activities, performing almost normally in some cases, doing and acting the part of a Christian, but like the five foolish virgins, out of oil. Only the test of the midnight cry, "Behold the Bridegroom cometh," could reveal to them their spiritual condition. Thousands are the slumbering backsliders in the church today; no ordinary preaching is sufficient to awaken them. They are like the Pharisees, with their "Lord I thank Thee, I am not as other men, I fast twice a week, I pay tithes of all I possess" Luke 18:11, 12. They were opposed to Sabbath desecration and dressed according to their ritual: but void of divine love. They were separatists; very clean indeed, but empty.

Our method of determining or identifying the backslider is wrong many times, and I think we can arrive at a more satisfactory understanding of the subject, "The Backslider in Heart" if we reason that the wise man had in mind a particular class. I know the reader will say, there is no difference: that a backslider is a backslider, any way you put it: to which we agree; but it will do no harm to think of him in more ways than one.

Let's divide the subject into at least three classes, and study them separately. This no doubt will improve our thinking and help us to see that the old saying is still true that, "It is not all gold that glitters."

First. There are those who have just quit and gone back, as the dog to his vomit and the sow that was washed, to her wallowing in the mire. II Peter 2:21; Galatians 2:18. They have quit professing and have taken up their old sinful lives, and admit frankly that they are backslidden. They are running now with the same old crowd and to the same excess of it, as they ever did.

Second. There are those, who, while they have quit professing and attending church, have not gone back to their old sinful habits.

My own brother lost his wonderful experience with God and was out of grace for twenty years; yet he never took up a bad habit that he gave up to get salvation in the first place. Very much unlike the first class, mentioned above, that did go back to their old sins again.

He held the job as foreman in a large factory, with men working under him, and although a backslider, yet he requested his men, not to swear while working on the job.

He would frankly admit that he was a backslider, and had been for many years. One year before he was instantly killed, he was gloriously reclaimed, and after twenty years of backsliding, he could bring a clean outward life back to God. How sad to look upon those who have once known the way of life and the sweet peace of mind and soul, now engaging in sin, cursing, drinking, visiting taverns, movies, dance halls and gambling houses.

Peter said "It had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it to turn from the holy commandment" II Peter 2:21. Many do this very thing, and may never come back to Jesus.

Third. There is a third class or group, who have backslidden in heart, but not in life, and are still "making long prayers for a pretense" Matthew 23:14; Mark 12:40. This class is the most insidious of the three groups. They love the chief seats in the synagogues, "front seats of authority"; they pride themselves on their strictness or radicalism: they are religiously religious about their church. They seem to think more of their church than they do of Jesus. They are infatuated with it, and are often heard to say, "I love my church." Well, we should appreciate the church, but we should love Jesus, more than any material thing. Religious infatuation must not be confused with love for God. If a lot of people would examine themselves at this point, they might find that they were worshipping the creature more than the Creator.

This class of folk is often very strict. The Pharisees were. There were no worldly cravings; they were faithful to their ceremonial creed, and yet they had no charity for others not of their persuasion. No divine love, no Holy Ghost. Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold." John 10:16. That did not set very well with them. They had a feeling that they were the only sheep in the clover patch. Well, when we feel that way about it, we are becoming sort of goatish, and have lost something that will take repentance to get it back.

How may one lose the Holy Ghost, or his "sanctification" without losing all? I would say, to that question, "This is very rarely done." If this should occur, I would say that it would be brought about by neglect, without deliberate willfulness. Plenty do not want to grieve Him or lose Him: but they grieve Him away by avoidables: I mean by avoidables, things that could have been prevented had we not been so careless and unmindful of the checks of the Holy Ghost.

The backslider in heart being filled with his own ways, wants to follow his own program, by substituting his own ideas for the plan of God and loses the personal touch of the Holy Ghost. Being radical, is not being hot, or Spirit-filled by any manner or means.

When we think of the backslider, we think of one who has gone back into sin and to old habits; but the backslider in heart is different, in that he is often very religious outwardly, critical, censorious, and fanatical, hot in the brain, but cold in the heart. We are to be cold or hot. Revelation 3:15.

The backslider in heart has lost the fire of the Holy Ghost that made him hot, so he cooled off and was spued out. (v.16). We are to be baptized with the Holy Ghost and fire, and this is the only thing that will keep us hot: nothing we can do will substitute for the Holy Ghost

The church at Sardis. Revelation 3:1-6. Among all the messages given to the seven churches of Asia, none are so pathetic as this one. The condemnation and reproof is direct: "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead." (v.1). Sardis was an ancient city of Lydia in Asia, and the church located there was probably the result of St. John's labors. It was the first city in that part of the world to receive the gospel, and by their good Christian living, had made for themselves a great name. They did an excellent work for a time, and as Paul said of the Galatian church, "Ye did run well, who did hinder you?" Galatian 5:7. So this church of Sardis, ran well for a season and was very popular for a while, but finally succumbed to their surroundings like other churches.

The command of God was, "Be watchful, and strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die" (v. 1). There is not the slightest hint that what had perished, may be restored. I have observed fruit trees half dead, with the other half still bearing fruit. The dead part cannot be saved; only with great care and watchfulness can the green part live. We hurt ourselves by backsliding.

The snake never moves backward unless there is no other way of avoiding it. Their covering is so delicate and thin that if they are compelled to move backward they injure their epidermis, which they must lose by the process of fasting and shrinking until they can crawl out of the old hide and come out with a clean bright raiment and look like a new creature. How much like the backslider, who has crawled backward and hurt himself and now with humiliation, with godly sorrow and repentance he is able to shed the soiled garments of the backslider, and appear once again in the garments of salvation, pure and white, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, washed in the blood of the Lamb.

Jesus informs this church that their works were not perfect before Him. Revelation 3:1, 2. Of course not. We could not expect them to be under their condition, with only a few of their number that had not defiled their garments. No church can do effective work with more than half of their membership dead. Jesus said they were dead, all but a few which had not spotted their garments with the world; He said, "They shall walk with me in white" for they are worthy. White is a type of the righteousness of the saints.

Backsliders cannot wear white, it is too easily soiled and spotted. The picture is not all dark, there were a few that had the fire, but they were in great danger of being overcome by the appalling apathy of their environment. Their imperfection of works, which they were accused of, was the result of their break in the Spirit and their consequent spiritual death.

They possibly were capitalizing on their great and popular name: they said we have a big church; but Jesus said, "Ye have only a few names that have not defiled their garments." They only survive. The rest of your church are dead.

Here is the testimony of a once flourishing church which had the fire, but later, gradually and imperceptibly fell away, until the major portion of their number were dead spiritually, and serving only to sustain a religion that was formal, and a name that lived only in the opinion of the people. They were good people, so the people said, and that was all they wanted. This quite satisfied them. When Jesus testified, His testimony differed from that of the people. He said, their works were imperfect, their names lived only in the minds of the people, and they were dead (backslidden) spiritually down and out of the race, and unless they repent and do their first works, He will come quickly and remove their candlestick "church" which was their light.

The backslider has the light of those around him that have not defiled their garments, but have kept them clean and white, and are walking in the light with their Savior.

Then again they have the pale glow, and shimmering light of a past experience, when they saw better days. While they are trying hard to convince themselves that they are all right, because of their good outward moral life, they are not meeting with much success, for the reason, it takes more than good deeds and a good name to supply a spiritual lack. This would be like short beds and narrow comforters; most uncomfortable indeed.

If the enemy has stolen our gold, and gone off with it, there will be no use to shine up our old brass, it just will not fill the bill. Jesus said, "I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire." Made bright by burning, and melting, not rubbing. There is no successful substitute for the Holy Spirit, the New Birth, or entire Sanctification, and these cannot be had unless the blood of Jesus Christ is applied in the heart.

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