

Causes of Backsliding

by A.W. Tozer

A.W. Tozer explores the causes of backsliding, emphasizing the heart's role in spiritual decline and the need for genuine repentance and restoration.

Duration: 37:45

Topics: "Backsliding"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the concept of backsliding and the ability to change one's moral state. He emphasizes that the technique of changing one's mind is not the cause of backsliding, but rather how it is used. The preacher uses the example of children who have different ideals as they grow older to illustrate this point. He then shifts the focus to Jesus and his unwavering love and affection for his followers. The preacher urges the congregation to seek Jesus' love before it's too late and not to harm those who have lost their conscience. He also highlights the tendency of humans to avoid tasks that require attention and effort, but encourages the congregation to remain faithful in giving and to restore those who have fallen spiritually. The sermon references Galatians 6, which discusses the restoration of those who have fallen.

Transcript

The backslider in heart, filled with his own ways, and a good man shall be satisfied from himself. The backslider in heart, filled with his own ways, and a good man shall be satisfied. I'd very much rather talk on any number of subjects I could think about, rather than to talk about the problem of backsliding.

It is age-old and it's universal, and the Bible has much to say about it. Therefore, I think it right and proper for you, something of what the Bible tells us, both of warning and encouragement, backsliding. Now, the causes of backsliding, or maybe first I should define the word before I go any further, for some strange reason which I cannot at the moment identify, become a funny word in the day in which we live.

Even ministers like to say that being Baptist they couldn't backslide and have a laugh out of it. Or they like to say, being Methodist, I believed in backsliding and practiced it. All that kind of corny, lame humor has grown up around the word backslide, backslider, backsliding, those terrible words.

So whatever silly and thoughtless men may do with this word, remember one thing, God never jokes about it, never takes it lightly. Backsliding, I think, came from the back where it said, Israel slideth back like a backsliding heifer. The thought was, and I've seen it as a lad on the farm, as an animal started up a

slippery bank and got partway up and then lost, lost track, control, and traction, they call it, and slipped back.

After many plunges and efforts did they get up? Sometimes slide back and can't get up at all. Well, the man of God with no intention at all of being facetious, said that Israel was like the animals that he had seen trying to climb up a slippery hill. They went and worked hard at it and pushed and then slid back as many steps as they had gone up, and eliding Israel to this backsliding heifer.

Now the causes of backsliding are mainly two, being the fickleness of the human heart. It would be a wonderful thing if you and I could remain what we were, but it would also be a most damning thing, how sad our state by nature is. The man was lugubrious and tears stained him.

Nevertheless, said truth that was as true as the throne of God, our state by nature is sad, and if we could not change, we would be automatically doomed to remain in that sad state while the ages spend themselves. But our ability to change our mind from worse to better is our hope. The call of God in repentance is a call from worse to better.

And if we could not go from one state to another, we would be frozen. We would be morally static and would be damned. But because we can move, and it is possible to go from one moral state to another, we can go from bad to good and can get right with God even though we were wrong before, can get good though we were bad before, can become holy and unholy before.

But that same ability to go from one moral state to another and to change our mind is also not the cause of backsliding but the technique by which it operates. Now, we switch from one... You watch that, watch it in children. When they're tiny, they have one ideal.

When they're nine or ten, they have another. When they're in their mid-teens, they're twenty-one, they still have another. We switch from one interest to another.

And people can do that in themselves. And this changing from one fad to another, shifting from one thing that interests us to another thing that interests us, all this is at least a reason back of the probability or ability of backsliding. The only thing we really stick to as a rule is something that nature or circumstance... We have to eat and drink and sleep and do all that nature forces us to do or that some strong instinct within us forces us to do.

As long as the human race goes on, there'll always be love and marriage and all that because it's a deeply rooted instinct in the human... And there'll always be a desire for food and always be a desire to protect ourselves. These are instincts. They lie in human nature.

And the result is we stick to something that we are able... We're able to follow it because we don't have to do anything to follow it. But anything that requires attention and careful painstaking labors, we tend to turn away from it and usually do turn away from it if we can. I just wonder if we had a count on the North American continent of all the people who took or started to take and didn't go through with it.

I'd hate to embarrass you fellows by asking the men in this congregation to stand. All of you who started out, I took six lessons, six piano lessons. Yesterday I spoke to a group of Convention of Church Musicians.

But anyway, I didn't continue with my piano. And how many more of you are like me? Because it's not instinct with us. I found no instinct waking me at night, pushing me toward the piano.

I found no such instinct. And that isn't in us. Certain people have something that's so strong in them that it almost amounts to... We call them natural-born musicians.

And they'll have some kind of musical expression no matter what. And they don't have... Because it's in them, but it's not in the most of us. That's just as sure as you live.

And the result is we don't do what becomes... Notice what's painstaking and what isn't pleasant. We tend to follow what is easy and golden... And outside of taxes and certain other duties that are forced upon us from the outside, either by nature or by law, we tend mostly to do what we like to do and what is natural to us. And of course that is the fertile soil where sex-lighting grows.

People under some great pressure of bereavement or fear turn to... And for a while go ahead. But the instinct is not in them. The instinct is all the other way.

And it's irksome. The irksome that's reading your Bible and praying, it becomes a painstaking thing and something that isn't natural. And so we turn away a little at a time until shortly we're gone back.

And if we had every man in Chicago stand and every woman... The evangelistic pressure had made some step toward God. And now today have forgotten all about him, and they're drinking and smoking and living. There's no God in heaven above.

I tell you, it would be a shock we wouldn't get over if we could see them all in some park maybe standing like so. Tier on tier, or rank on rank, I think is a better military word. But if you were shocked and horrified at how many sometime have made a step toward God or maybe even met God, but because serving Jesus Christ is contrary to nature, our state by nature is sad and it does not miss.

So the fickleness of the heart turns us away, and people do backslide like the heifer. And then there's the inherent evil of the human heart, the cause of backsliding. The whole constitution of a human being is against... Now there are two things you must remember here, that if man were what he originally was, if man were now what we originally were, made in the image of God without sin, then it would be perfectly natural to serve angels in heaven above.

And the seraphim beside the throne have no trouble serving God. They've nothing in them to pull them away from. They're made to serve God.

And when they're made to serve God, they're doing a thing as natural to them as a duck when it goes to the water does a thing natural to her. A bear in the wintertime curls up in his den, he's following his nature, and the holy angels above follow their nature to serve God. And if you and I were what we should be, unfallen and without this taint and stain of sin, we would be able, and the average would come natural, would flow out like a fountain from the pressure beneath.

But we're fallen. I wrote and said that whoever got down on his knees and said, Our Father who art in heaven was doing the most natural thing in the world. Somebody wrote along, I am not responsible for people when they don't read what you write, all of it, or read something into it, or if they're too dumb to understand it, I'm not responsible for that.

So I don't worry too much about it. The quarter said, get rid of me. I was a modernist because I said when a man prayed, if the truth were known, he is doing the most natural thing in the world, but not by his fallen nature, but because it was made in the image of God.

When a man turns his face toward that which anciently he did in Adam, and which he should be doing now, but which sin has robbed him of the power, so both my critic and I are right. Sin made our nature so when we pray it's not natural. We have to walk all the accumulated ages of sin if we say our Father who art in heaven.

But if that sin hadn't come, anything to override, we'd simply raise our voices, and like the bird we'd sing God's praises without effort. Turn away from God and cool off, and go back, change their minds, or at least change their hearts. And it all begins with the heart, the backslider in heart.

Now that's not there by accident. The backslider in heart it says. Remember that backsliding begins with the heart.

People blame other circumstances and say, it's my home life, it's the place where I work, it's the school, or it's because I was ill, or it's because I had to work too much, it's because I didn't have time. Those are external things. Backsliding begins in the heart.

The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways, and always it begins with the heart. And the order of discovery is this, first God knows it. God knows when my heart's cooling off better than before I do, and then the individual finds it out, and then the church finds it out, and at last if he continues, the world finds it out.

That's always the order. The world finds out a man has backslidden and gone back on his faith. The church knew it before the world found it out, and the individual knew it before the church found it out, and God knew it before the man found it out.

But it all begins in the heart. Now what is the heart? Well, he's one who's losing interest in the things of God, and gradually going back to the old ways, or new and more refined sins than the ones he used to do. But the point is he's losing interest, he's cooling off.

The fires of his heart are not as hot as they were a few weeks or months or years before, and his love toward God is cooling off. This, I say, is backsliding in heart, and he's losing interest in communion with God. If you don't do as well as you used to, then the only kind and honest thing I can say is that you're a backslider in heart, because as much as you loved before, you will love to pray as much as you loved to pray before.

But if you do not love to pray as much as you used to, then what conclusion can I arrive at? I don't like to say these things. I wish I didn't have to. But what conclusion can a man arrive at? If a doctor takes a blood count and finds the blood count way down, what can he say? He says, this man is not in a good state of health.

Or if he runs other tests and finds that the man's health is bad, what honest thing can a doctor do? Pat him on the shoulder and say, I'll meet you on the golf course Saturday. Everything will be all right. Bill, keep cool.

That doctor would be. And what a traitor to his own profession. There's only one thing for him to do, and then the findings.

And if the findings say that he's not well, that his state of physical health is poor, the doctor says, I don't know that he'd have to go into all the details and tell it in Latin, but he ought to tell him, well, but you're not in as good a shape as you ought to. Listen to me now. You take this prescription, or do this, or go to Florida, usually, they say.

Or do something for yourself. But the point is, the honest man will tell a patient if he finds, runs tests and finds that their point of health. Now, if you do not love prayer as much as you once did, now what can I do about it? I didn't do that.

I hope I didn't. If I'm an honest physician, I can only say to you, you better go to the specialist. There is a specialist who deals.

Your temperature is way down. And if it is, there is one that can heal you. I can't, but I can tell you where there is one.

And they're losing of our individual communion with God. Read your hymns in the old hymn book and see how sometimes they, how once they loved the fellowship with God. Communion was sweet to them.

But we've got so many things now. And to crowd out communion, we have radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and all around over the country, and long trips and all that. And the tendency is to, I insist, are only external aids to the devil.

They're not the causes. The deeper than that, it lies in the heart. And when a man is backslidden in heart, he tends to get a little bit bored.

If a glowing earnest Christian bores you a little, if when you're in a little group drinking the coffee, put it together, or your soda, and somebody brings up the thought of God, if it bores you a little or embarrasses you, you'd better look to your own heart, my friend. Seriously, to your own heart. Because whenever religion bores us, we may be sure that we're wrong inside.

Now I'd like to qualify that. I want to be as honest and realistic as possible. So I will say that some explain religious bores.

And they have a way of introducing religion into the most impossible situations, and do it without any spontaneity whatsoever, but only because they've been trained to do it. Like trained seals, they bore an archangel. But if an honest, happy-hearted Christian turns and talks about God, and it bores you or embarrasses you, you're in the wrong company.

And if you're bored with spiritual talk, not religious chit-chat, that'll bore anybody. But if you're bored with spiritual conversation on the wrong inside of your heart, then the best thing to do is to remember it and admit it, acknowledge it before. And then I notice another symptom of this backsliding in heart is the developing of a critical spirit toward other preachers.

If he isn't a Paul Reese, why, some people, they want to hear, I don't know what they want to hear. God knows I never could quite figure it out. I guess it was an archangel with David's harp.

Playing good on this man gets up and the poor deliverer in a few blunders tells us his simple heart out about God and the things of God. God can say he's all right, he's all right, and he'll come in small numbers, but no zeal or enthusiasm unless he's an extraordinary preacher. I tell you, we could well afford to humble ourselves and listen to anybody that had anything to say.

Anybody at all. I think we ought to pray, God, give me a heart so sensitive that I'll get help from anybody, except, of course, from the hypocrite and the pretender. Nobody can get help from them.

Nobody can get help from the self-exploiter and the man of, I don't want to get help from them. I don't look to the devil for my help, but any honest man of God. Look when Spurgeon went to the Methodist church and sat in the balcony in a stormy night and only went in because he wanted to get out of the storm.

And the Methodist class leader who was tall rose and exhorted the congregation to look straight to Jesus and be converted. And says, I went in there a sinner and when I went out I could have sung there's a fountain filled with blood with the best saint in the church. And he was converted by hearing a man who had no reputation, a class leader, if you please, a layman who was leading a prayer meeting.

I'll illustrate that truth by a dozen anecdotes if I cared to do it, true ones of people who've been helped by the simplest-hearted people. And remember and sometimes repeat, maybe a bit monotonously, of the time I heard a solo that I'll never forget. The song, and the singer was not a high-class singer.

The singer was a long, thin, dried-out Texan who looked at the sun a long time and weathered. His skin was weathered, every part about him was long. He would be, he'd have made a good cowboy if he just had the equipment on.

And his voice was what they call that is, he could stay on pitch, he could carry the tune, but it was gravelly. It was an awful lot of very low growling static coming in along your radio. And he had that kind of voice, but he was a dear Christian brother.

He was from down Texas somewhere and became an Alliance preacher, a sweet Christian brother, all that. And he stood up to sing. And I knew what was coming because I knew what kind of voice he had, but that morning, put his head off and sang, I've found a friend, oh, such a friend.

He loved me, I knew him. From 28 years ago and to this day, when I think of my good old lanky brother singing, I've found a friend, oh friend, my head instinctively bows. I heard something, I heard a voice from a man who couldn't have sung, we wouldn't let him sing here.

He couldn't sing anywhere where Christians have any standards or taste. But the Holy Ghost, through the voice, a gravelly voice of a long lean Texan, no cowboy, just a long lean Texan, wanted to tell people that he'd found such a friend. Brethren, we ought to be careful lest we become too, because the tendency to criticize unkindly.

Now if it's a question of trying to improve, that's another matter. If it's a question of trying to push the standards up and write and preach and pray and talk and exhort to try to get people to do things better, to help the choir to raise its standards, that's another matter and that's perfectly all right. But if it's just carping criticism and assaults the use of it, I don't care to hear him.

Because if a man writes or sings and he's a sincere man, then he ought to warm my heart with his sincerity. If I'm not backslidden. And still, we can be in this state and still keep up appearances.

Oh, if all the church people who are entering churches this morning who are only going there to keep up appearances, I don't mean be hippity. It's not a deliberate effort to deceive. No, no, not that.

But shame or duty or fear or social pressure or something else brings them, they're not there because their hearts are warm. They're there only because it should be. They are where they want to be on the Sabbath day.

And if all who are thus present in churches who are nevertheless cooling off in their hearts or have cooled off and do not have in their heart what their presence is to show that they have, many a pastor would spend the afternoon on his face weeping between the porch and the altar, crying, Oh, I've done or haven't done that my people are in such a condition. Solomon here has a tragicomic word. He says he shall be satisfied from himself.

And I've looked that up and I find it means you get nothing. That sounds funny, but, brother, it isn't funny. The backslider in heart will soon get enough of himself.

Now, how does he get enough of himself? Well, he gets enough of himself with his attempts to pray and he finds how heavy and embarrassing it is to be devout. He's asked to pray and he tries to be devout, but his heart is long ago broken to a ship. And he's like an instrument that's ready to be plugged in where there's no power.

And he plugs in dutifully, but I tell you, he can get enough of that before very long. If I was broken with God in my heart this morning, I'd not come around or anybody to help me because it's embarrassing. A man gets enough of that after a while.

We get enough of our own hollow testimonies. They're false and the word's dry, and yet we daren't stop talking because we've got a reputation for being good Christians. A lot of people have a reputation for being good Christians in churches and then they secretly break with God.

And there is a lack of communion there. The fires have burned low and they're hardly able anymore to feel any sense of God at all. And yet they have to keep it up so they may even allow themselves to get elected to boards and to young people's groups and choirs and all the rest.

And I still am afraid that the whole thing's hot because their heart has slipped away. Friends, let me ask you this question. You've been married ten years, six years, five years, whatever it is.

Let me ask you, if you positively knew, lady, really knew, that deep in his heart your husband had no care for you at all, that deep in his heart were secret wishes that he's fighting down, that he might be rid of you from the necessity of being where you are, how would you feel about it? That's backsliding in heart. He's not going to tell you. And I suppose in almost every instance it's just not true.

I'm merely making up an illustration here. But the point I want to make is that we want the love of people's hearts. We don't care so much about the external things.

It's the love of the heart. And so when God finds our hearts are slipping and we won't admit it to ourselves, in our secret moments we won't admit it, but we've gotten to a place where if we told the truth we're bored with God's religion and we wouldn't say it, we wouldn't admit it, we'd be ashamed of it, but it's there. What do you think God thinks about it? Jesus in the book of Revelation said, You've left your first love.

That is your first degree of love. And he chided that church because he found happening way back there in the second century. He chided that church because it was losing its affection.

But it didn't say so. Not an elder in the Ephesian church never stood to preach. Not a deacon that ever passed the plates.

Not a member of the Ephesian church. Would ever dare to get up and say, I'm tired of God. I'm weary of this whole business.

Not a one. Their past testimony, logic, all the rest made them keep quiet. But the heart of Jesus, long it wasn't there, chided them.

He said, I don't feel the warmth I used to feel. Your smile is not, your breath not so warm. The tone of your voice not so affectionate.

But I miss it, he said. You've left your faith. A man will get enough of that after a while, trying to keep up religious appearances with a hollow testimony and trying to talk with enthusiastic Christians about God and seeming to enjoy it.

Years ago, he talked about something like this and he said that it was like a man trying to last seen the point. Had you ever seen anybody do that? That waxy look with that waxy smile? That somebody we appreciate or honor or turn and make a pleasantry? And we say to ourselves now, that's a wonderful man and he's gone and we ought to smile. Or even chuckle.

How many a hypocritical chuckle I've made for a joke. And Rader was bold enough to use that in spiritual things. Maybe he won't hurt this morning.

He said, laugh at a joke when you hadn't seen the point or when there wasn't any point, I might add. But trying to talk about God and prayer and all the spiritual things when your heart isn't in it, a fellow will get enough of that after a while, brother. Sure as you are, the next letter in heart, he'll get enough of himself.

I pray that he may soon. I pray that we may soon. For unless of ourselves, I'm afraid there's not much help.

But I pray we'll get enough of ourselves. And then that constant church attendance was bored with it. And how many there are, I repeat, that are in church this morning that are here, maybe not here, but some churches at any rate, bored with it.

But they've heard somebody say, don't send your children, take them. And they steadfastly determine they're going to follow that, and it's good and I'm glad they do. But oh, it would be so much better if they enjoyed it.

So much better that they're going to church. I have been forced to go to religious meetings that I didn't want to attend. I knew that there was nothing there for me, that I couldn't contribute anything.

And I have gone nevertheless because circumstances compelled me to. But I'd get enough of that pretty soon. Really, I would.

If I had to be doing something I don't like to do, brother, I'd get bored with that right early. He'd get enough of himself. And this constant, you don't want to go really.

If you had your way, you'd turn over and go back to sleep. That's an evidence of something I don't like to think about. And in this matter of giving, God's warm-hearted people give spontaneously.

They love it. They love it. They don't put their hands up and sing, when we asunder part, it gives us inward pain.

But they give joyously because it's a pleasure to give. I got a big check for mission. That is for relief over on the other side of the water.

The eve of the day before Thanksgiving. And the brother who sent it wrote this half-humorous note. He said, I want this to go for such and such.

And he said, I'll buy my turkey dinner better Thanksgiving day. Well, now, there was no hardship there. That was spontaneous.

That came out of a heart that wanted to serve. But this everlasting sitting down and taking out that dollar out of the ten, that ten out of the hundred, that hundred out of the thousand, and yet not enjoy doing it. I'd get enough of that after a while, wouldn't you? If I wasn't a Christian, I wouldn't tithe.

Not all the things and button pushers that come along and try to show that if you tithe, you'll have more money than you did. If you don't tithe, all of that low-grade effort to get people to give, it isn't Christian, it isn't spiritual, it isn't decent. What kind of people would you, if you brought your offerings to God's house, knowing that if you did, you'd be more prosperous than if you didn't, knowing that you'll have more than if you didn't tithe, and you tithed to get more? What kind of people would you be? No, you people have proved better than that.

You know when you separate a ten-dollar bill from your wallet and put it in the plate or give it, you know you're out ten dollars, but you know that God takes that ten dollars and transmutes it into everlasting blessing for the world to come and your heart's joy as to do it. But giving, giving when out of habit, a man will get enough of that after a while, and I pray the sooner the better. And when you're cheerful, keep spiritually cheerful and relaxed when you're enjoying.

Galatians 6, it says, Brethren, if any man be overtaken in a fault, ye of which are spiritual, restore such a one. It points out that the words used there are medical terms, and they mean when an arm gets out of joint, a shoulder gets out of joint, it gets snapped out for you. One of my boys was hurting football, and he slept in a brace for a long old years until that arm could get so it wouldn't snap out.

I knew a dear old brother who used to be in the church here who had a knee that would go like that on him. How painful. And the Holy Ghost likened backsliding to a knee out of joint.

And to keep cheerful and smiling as though nothing was going on with a knee out of joint, that takes more heroic ability than I do. If I'm not cheerful inside, don't expect me to be cheerful on the outside. Don't you bring any Norman or Dale Carnegie books and tell me to relax and be cheerful.

I can't be. If my heart isn't singing, I can't sing. If my heart isn't cheerful, I can't look cheerful.

Maybe you can, but I pray that you can't. An uncheerful soul trying to be cheerful, you get enough of it after a while, the Holy Ghost says. He'll be filled with his own.

Oh, I pray that God will do us the inestimable favor of going from heart to mind and soul to soul and finding us this morning, finding and locating us this morning with a geiger, finding us this morning. And if there's a cooling off in there, find it and cure it. You remember when Jesus looked upon Peter, it says, And Jesus turned and looked upon Peter, and Peter went outside and wept bitterly.

I don't know what Jesus said. I guess he didn't say anything, for it doesn't say he did, and I can't do it. He simply turned and looked at Peter.

The little woman said, Are you one of his followers? And Peter said, No. She said, I think you are. He said, I'm not.

She said again, You are. Your speech be raised. Then he said, I'm not a Christian.

I'm going to do something no Christian would do. So he cursed. He said, If I'm not a Christian, I may get arrested along with Jesus.

So in order to prove that I'm not a Christian, I'm going to curse. And so he cursed. No, he's not.

Jesus did, and it was just before he died. Jesus turned and looked at that cursing apostle, a sharp man with a keen eye. He wasn't well-educated, but he was a genius in his own right.

And he looked up into that face for once, and what he saw in that face of hurt and pain and sorrow and longing and love was too much for Peter. He dashed out of the house, dashed out, hurried out of the house, and stood outside somewhere, and with his face in his hands, wept bitterly. The Greek language indicates an uncontrolled torrent of weeping.

And Jesus said a word. He never just looked at Peter. I wonder if the tender Jesus this morning won't look at you.

Oh, Jesus, look on us by love, by undying affection, a love that a few hours later would die also. That love hasn't lost any of its content, no weaker, no smaller. As big as God is big, and as eternal as God is eternal.

Oh, Lord Jesus, we're thy sheep. And the world is big, and the devil is going about like a roaring lion. The temptations are strong, and the flesh is weak.

And maybe some of us are cooling off inside our hearts. Please, Lord, before it's too late, help us to get enough of it quick before it's too late. Please, Lord, don't let us harm in the backsliders.

People that have lost their conscience can no longer grieve because they can. No longer sorrow that they don't feel sorrow. Oh, we plead, look at us again today in our hearts.

We're no better than Peter, but maybe, Lord, some who like Peter have sneaked out of discipleship, or at least inwardly they have. Look on us, Lord, and break our hearts. Look on us and make us weep.

Give the grace of tears this morning, Lord Jesus, a few tears. If we knew that we could have this morning \$10,000 offering plates for the church and permissions, we'd be glad. But if we knew instead we were to have 10,000 tears of grief and repentance and penitence and faith and hope and joy, we'd lay the \$10,000 away and take the tears that we might weep because we can't weep.

Oh, help us this morning.

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