

Backsliding

by Richard Owen Roberts

Backsliding is the sin of crowding God out of one's life by filling it with self, resulting in a loss of spiritual vitality and a failure to apply biblical truth.

Scripture: Proverbs 14:14, Isaiah 1:3, Jeremiah 1:6-8, Hosea 14:1, 2 Peter 2:21, Revelation 2:4

Topics: "Spiritual Decline", "Repentance"

Description

Richard Owen Roberts preaches about the story of Jeremiah, a prophet called by God to speak to a nation in decline due to backsliding. Despite Jeremiah's initial hesitation and feeling of inadequacy, God equips him to boldly confront the people, denouncing their backsliding and calling them to repentance. The sermon emphasizes the dangers and signs of backsliding, such as neglecting prayer, contentment with spiritual decline, indifference to injustice, and a lack of compassion. Roberts urges listeners to recognize the gradual nature of backsliding, the need for repentance, and the importance of returning to God with humility and a desire for spiritual renewal.

Transcript

When the Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah confirming his ordination as a prophet to the nations, he modestly hesitated, saying, "Ah, Lord God! Behold I cannot speak; for I am a child." But the Lord who calls and equips told him in no uncertain terms, "Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak."--[Jeremiah 1:6-8].

Just as the time approached for Jeremiah to begin his public ministry, the Lord said,

'Thou therefore gird up thy loins, and arise, and speak unto them all that I command thee: be not dismayed at their faces, lest I confound thee before them. For, behold, I have made thee this day a defenced city, and an iron pillar, and brasen walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the priests thereof, and against the people of the land. And they shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith the LORD, to deliver thee.--[Jeremiah 1:17-19]'

He was one man against an entire nation! He was one man with an unwanted message! He was one man with the Godgiven courage to use a much-despised term! Jeremiah plastered Israel with a label they did not like and could not peel off! Jeremiah laid his axe to the root of Israel's tree and in specific, direct and plain-spoken fashion fixed attention on Israel's great problem! Fearing neither princes, priests, prophets

nor people, he denounced them all alike! He called their problem backsliding. For his faithful declaration of the truth of God, he received as much thanks and acclaim as he would if he were to declare the same message in the church today. Ponder this searching passage:

'Moreover thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the LORD; Shall they fall, and not arise? shall he turn away, and not return? Why then is this people of Jerusalem slidden back by a perpetual backsliding? they hold fast deceit, they refuse to return. I hearkened and heard, but they spake not aright: no man repented him of his wickedness, saying, What have I done? every one turned to his course, as the horse rusheth into the battle. Yea, the stork in the heaven knoweth her appointed times; and the turtle and the crane and the swallow observe the time of their coming; but my people know not the judgment of the LORD.'--[Jeremiah 8:4-7]

How is it that the so-called brute beasts and dumb birds are wiser than men? The salmon know when and where to return to their place of beginnings, but the backslider has forgotten the God who made him. Isaiah the prophet cried:

'The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward.'--[Isaiah 1:3-4]

What exactly is backsliding? Nowhere in all scripture is it better described than in Proverbs 14:14, "The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways." There you have it -- a backslider is a person who once emptied of his own ways and filled with the ways of God, but who gradually allows his own ways to creep back in until he is all but empty of God and full of himself again.

This is the very problem Jeremiah addressed. The people of his day had allowed more and more of self to slip into their hearts until the God who brought them out of Egypt and blessed them above all human beings was almost entirely crowded out of their lives and forgotten. Chapters two and three of Jeremiah clearly outline this crowding-out process. The Word of God to backsliding Israel commences with a lament concerning the former days:

'Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith the LORD; I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Israel was holiness unto the LORD, and the firstfruits of his increase: all that devour him shall offend; evil shall come upon them, saith the LORD.'--[Jeremiah 2:2-3]

What was had ceased to be. Their early love for God was gone. Holiness was forgotten. Israel no longer delighted the heart of God. A people who had once borne fruit were barren. Those once filled with God were now filled with themselves. Consider carefully the unfolding evidence:

"Thus saith the Lord, what iniquity have your fathers found in Me, that they are gone far from me, and have walked in vanity, and are become vain?" [Jeremiah 2:5]. In the vanity of their own minds and hearts, they determined God was no longer important to them.

They conveniently forgot the great things God had done for them in former days; bringing them out of Egypt, leading them through the wilderness, and bringing them into a plentiful country [Jeremiah 2:6-7]. Whenever great mercies are forgotten, praise and thanksgiving are lost.

The religious leaders had joined the backsliding hosts. The priests failed to ask, "Where is the Lord?" Those responsible for handling the law did not know God. The pastors also transgressed against the Lord, and the prophets joined the forces of Baal [Jeremiah 2:8]. Thus, all the religious leaders engaged in activities totally devoid of spiritual benefit.

With God crowded out of their lives, they cast about for something else to take His place. Not being altogether godless in their thinking, they happily adopted as gods -- figments of their imaginations -- gods that were no gods -- a truly astonishing and horrible departure from the glory the people had once known and enjoyed. Jeremiah wonders if any other nation ever exchanged its gods, especially the living God, for no gods [Jeremiah 2:10-11].

Israel had once drunk at the fountain of living waters, but in their backslidden state they hewed out for themselves broken cisterns that could hold no water [Jeremiah 2:12-13]. Imagine -- the living waters of a fountain exchanged for the stagnant water of a leaking cistern!

Those who had known the guiding and correcting power of a holy God, so absolutely essential to life and happiness, crowded it right out of their lives and began drifting on the vast sea of the backslidden [Jeremiah 2:19].

Despite continual disclaimers of any pollution and repeated washings with nitre and soap, the filth of their backslidden condition was upon them. Having played the harlot under every green tree, they could not hide their iniquity [Jeremiah 2:22-23].

What could be more natural than for those who had crowded God out of their lives to worship and serve the things they had made with their own hands rather than the Creator who made them? [Jeremiah 2:27-28]. In a time of trouble they might call to a stick and say, "Thou art my father," or to a stone and say, "Thou hast brought me forth."

As with backsliders of all times and places, they could not be content until they drawn had others into their circle of corruption. A great delight of the fallen is the fall of others, but the blood of their victims is upon their shirts [Jeremiah 2:33-34].

Despite these overwhelming evidences of backsliding in Israel, Judah did not return to the Lord with all their heart but only deceptively, so that faithless Israel was less treacherous than Judah [Jeremiah 3:10-11].

When God sent Jeremiah to proclaim this message, He did not lead him to believe that Israel was expectantly waiting for a prophet to come and reclaim them. Jeremiah was clearly told, "They shall fight against thee." And they did. Backsliders are notorious fighters. Returning from backsliding requires tremendous grace. Note this demand, "Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the Lord, and I will not keep my anger forever. Only acknowledge thine iniquity that thou hast transgressed against the Lord thy God, and hast scattered thy ways to strangers under every green tree, and ye have not obeyed My voice, saith the Lord. Turn, O backsliding children...." [Jeremiah 3:12-14].

When God sent Jeremiah it was a message not merely for the common people, but for the kings, princes, and priests as well. Imagine the anger kindled among the religious leaders when God used Jeremiah's tongue to declare, "I will give you pastors according to Mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding" [Jeremiah 3:15]. If it takes grace for lay people to repent of their backsliding, how

much more grace is required for backslidden pastors to repent not only for their own sins but also of the evil of misleading God's people? Imagine the struggle of Jeremiah faced with those backslidden leaders God promised to replace!

When God sent Jeremiah, however, it was not only with the promise of a certain fight, but also of certain victory, "They shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee saith the Lord, to deliver thee" [Jeremiah 1:19]. Every backslider must face the fact that he is engaged in a fight he is certain to lose. Backsliders never prevail against the God they have crowded out of their lives.

While the term backsliding is not used constantly in the Bible, the problem of backsliding is frequently present. Beginning with Genesis 6:5,6 where we are told, "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart," and continuing to the Revelation of John where Jesus lamented, "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love" [2:4], man's capacity to grieve his Creator by being filled with himself is abundantly evident.

Backsliding is not a phenomenon to one age or people. The temptation to backslide is consistent with the people of God. However, the sin of backsliding is not always prevalent to the same degree. It was definitely a great evil in the days of Moses. Hosea felt deeply the burden of the evil as did Isaiah and other prophets. In the New Testament days the Jews manifested tragic backsliding. Now, in our own day, this great evil is prevalent once more. Literally millions of professing Christians show signs of severe backsliding.

God is infinitely patient and understanding of the weaknesses of His people, but backsliding is not merely a problem of human weakness; it is the sin of crowding God out by filling one's life with self. Many who are astonished and disgusted that a dog will return to his own vomit have failed to consider carefully Peter's warning.

'For 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 delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.' --[2 Peter 2:21-22]

Here is an accurate description of backsliding: the washed pig wallowing once more in the mire and the dog eagerly lapping up his own vomit!

What more powerfully proclaims the need of revival in our day than the backslidden condition of the hosts of professing Christians? The people of Jeremiah's day had no edge on us in departure from the living God. If there was ever a people wallowing in mud like pigs and consuming their own vomit like dogs, it is the present generation. We delight in our vast progress and entertain ourselves with stories of the wonderful increase of knowledge in our lifetime, but the love of filth and corruption has scarcely ever been greater in the history of the world. We pride ourselves in our understanding and in our love of the downtrodden and oppressed, we do not hesitate to advise the rest of the world how to conduct its affairs, but we are so deeply embedded in the quagmire of self that all our mouthings are like dirty bubbles.

Evidences Of A Backslidden Condition

Backslidden Christians are everywhere. They are in the churches and out of the churches. They are in the pews and in the pulpits. They are on boards and are bored. They serve on committees and teach Sunday school. The backslidden seem to be more numerous than the upright and their influence throughout the world vastly more powerful. While backsliders do not all manifest the same traits, evidences of their condition are not difficult to pinpoint.

Prayer ceases to be a vital part of a professing Christian's life. It is grievous to realize that many churches have no public prayer meeting of any kind. More upsetting is the fact that many individual Christians have no regular stated seasons of private prayer during which they commune alone with God. How can a person be both Christian and prayerless? But prayer does not need to be entirely lacking from a life for backsliding to prevail. When it becomes perfunctory and without moral earnestness, there is more than ample evidence of backsliding. Some who say their prayers everyday never pray. The formulation of thoughts and ideas along religious lines, the mouthing of words, the bowing of the head and body, and the repetitions of pious phrases, do not in and of themselves constitute real prayer. If the heart does not earnestly commune with God, no genuine prayer is present. The mere repetition of religious expressions, no matter how beautifully constructed or sincerely spoken, does not constitute real prayer. When the heart of man and the heart of God meet in communion, there is prayer. Prayerlessness and mere formality in saying prayers are unmistakable marks of a backslidden condition.

The quest for biblical truth ceases and one grows content with the knowledge of eternal things already acquired. Almost all backsliders demonstrate a sense of satisfaction with the truth already in their possession. Backsliders are rarely diligent in their study of the Bible. They do not find themselves in the grip of a passion to mine treasures from the Word of God. They are content with the little pearls of wisdom their mothers hung about their necks in the days of their spiritual infancy or with the Scripture gems the pastor mines on their behalf. They do not find themselves daily in the garden of the Lord plucking flowers rare and fragrant. They are content with the wilted bouquet they carried to their baptism. If any new biblical truth comes to them, it must come by the effort of another, not their own. This is not to say backsliders never read the Bible. Many backsliders have long established habits of dutiful devotion they have never broken, but while they go on reading Bible words, backsliders are content with the truth of God already in their possession.

The biblical knowledge possessed or being acquired is treated as external fact and not applied inwardly. Not every backslider has totally abandoned the acquisition of biblical truth. Some badly backslidden pastors acquire new Biblical knowledge on a weekly basis. It is possible to go on learning new things from the Holy Scriptures without benefit to the soul. If biblical truth does not enter the heart and transform the life, its acquisition is without eternal merit. The Bible was designed by God not merely to inform us, but to transform us. If biblical truth already possessed is not acted upon, the accumulation of additional truth will have little or no effect. Some backsliders teach Sunday school every week. They carefully prepare their lessons and diligently consider the facts they are to present. However, if their contemplation and their teaching of the Word of God do not move from the area of the head to the realm of the heart, no amount of additional study and teaching will alter their backslidden ways. Likewise, the backslider may sit in a Bible preaching church every time the doors are open. He may listen attentively to the words spoken and congratulate the preacher on his unfolding of biblical truth, but if the Word preached does not drive out self, his backslidden condition only worsens every time he hears the Bible proclaimed.

Earnest thoughts about eternal things cease to be regular and gripping. In the early days of a person's new walk with Christ, the mind continually turns toward spiritual matters. When backsliding commences,

the mind turns less and less toward heaven, God, eternity and holiness. In the earliest stages of the decline, spiritual thoughts may come frequently, but they are less gripping. As a person becomes more and more filled with his own ways, there will simply be less room for thoughts of eternity. At first, there may be a conscious awareness that the thought patterns are changing, but as backsliding progresses, it becomes less and less obvious to the backslider that this transformation is taking place. Eventually, a gentle rebuke will be treated with scorn and the backslider will rise to justify his own departure from the living God.

The services of the church lose their delights. The recently converted find participation in the services of the church a thrill and a joy. They never think they will grow weary of these newly discovered blessings. The singing of every hymn is an experience to be remembered. The hearing of the Scriptures read publicly is sheer delight. They sit on the edges of their seats to hear the sermon and can scarcely find sufficient words to thank the preacher for his immense contribution to their lives. Not content to come only on Sunday mornings, they may even shock the elders by their presence at every stated meeting of the church. Then backsliding sets in. "What happened to the preacher?" they wonder. "How did he lose his fire? Why do the once stirring hymns now seem to drag?" Even the scriptures lose their cutting edge. The backslider now finds it difficult to attend even Sunday morning service. The warmhearted approach of the pastor and the people now seem meddlesome. Rather than risk an uncomfortable conversation with an overzealous deacon, the backslider slips out quickly from the service and makes his way home, spiritually hungry and unsatisfied. Finding no help in such a church, he either abandons attendance altogether or seeks a church home where backsliders are more comfortable.

Pointed spiritual discussions are a source of embarrassment. The person on fire for Jesus Christ delights in every opportunity to talk about Him. No place seems inappropriate for vital spiritual conversation. When backsliding begins, the church seems like the best place to discuss religious matters. Soon it seems altogether inappropriate to speak seriously of spiritual matters in mixed company. It isn't long before free discussion of eternal matters becomes a source of acute embarrassment. If anyone takes the liberty of addressing the backslider concerning the welfare of his soul on a street corner, in an airplane or on a commuter train, his temper may flare. For fear of public confrontation, the backslider is apt to make fun of a serious-minded co-worker who persists in speaking freely of spiritual issues on the job. The backslider is apt to go so far as to proclaim vehemently, "There are two things I never discuss -- religion and politics!" Mark this, if the public discussion of deeply important spiritual matters is an embarrassment to you, there can be no question concerning your backslidden condition. The person whose love for Christ is current will delight in every opportunity, public or private, to hear Him lifted up with reverence.

Sports, recreation, and entertainment are a large and necessary part of your lifestyle. Paul acknowledged there was profit in physical exercise. Jesus demonstrated the worth of drawing aside from daily tasks for rest and revitalization. However, the current focus on fun and games has nothing in common with a biblical lifestyle. So serious has become man's love of entertainment that some churches even compete with one another for star-studded cast to lead their public services. Few churches even consider holding special meetings in competition with sporting events. Many a preacher is more certain to have the Sunday morning service over by noon sharp than he is to say anything worthwhile. He would no sooner incur the wrath of his recreation-minded congregation by detaining them from Sunday afternoon picnics and games than he would deprive himself of his own Saturday evening entertainment.

Christians are not saved to play but to serve. If sporting events are as important to you as spiritual progress, you are backslidden. If you must choose between church and recreation and recreation wins,

you are backslidden. If you devote more time to play and exercise than to prayer and the Word of God, there can be no doubt of your true spiritual condition. In your case, backsliding has not only begun, but progressed to a deplorable level.

Sins of the body and of the mind can be indulged in without an uproar in your conscience. Prior to conversion it is not to be expected that sins will play havoc with the conscience. The unregenerate is known to have a scarred conscience and can hardly be required to shed tears over sins. But how can a Christian, who has been made a new creature in Christ Jesus, for whom "all things have become new," manifest this same callousness? By one method only backsliding.

When a Christian is walking in fellowship with Christ, his sensitivity to right and wrong is similar to that which characterized Jesus in His life on earth. If that walk deteriorates, sensitivity vanishes and the backslider manifests a lack of concern over personal sin. What once seemed almost inconceivably awful becomes too insignificant to worry about. Sins that were carefully shunned are now embraced by the backslider with relish. As he grows more and more full of himself, he looks with increasing warmth upon those sins of the body and mind which will make his position comfortable and pleasant, demonstrate his freedom from unnecessary restraints and prove that he is able to discern good from evil as the Almighty. Once sick at the mere thought of sin, the backslider can engage in gross iniquity with scarcely a stir of conscience or a tear of grief.

Aspirations for Christlike holiness cease to be dominant in your life and thinking. For the backslidden, holiness seems both unattainable and unnecessary. Not so for the earnest Christian who takes to heart the biblical injunction, "Be ye holy, for I am holy" [1 Peter 1:16]. Knowing the truth of the words "holiness without which no man shall see the Lord" [Hebrews 12:14], the active Christian makes biblical holiness the great goal of his life. Every time he falls short, even by a fraction, he is grieved and confesses his shortcomings to the Lord with pleas for help that he might do better.

Not so the backslider. Weary of the claims of God upon his life, he crowds out aspirations to holiness with self-centeredness until his thoughts of holiness lose their grip and actually become somewhat repugnant to him. Whereas he once lived to be holy, he would now sooner die than be holy. Having choked out the love of holiness, the backslider finds contentment with his current condition. He neither hungers nor thirsts for righteousness nor feels grief for its lack.

The acquisition of money and goods become a major part of your thinking. When a professed Christian begins to focus on money, cars, houses, lands, stocks, bonds, and adornments, he is clearly on the course of the backslider. The Bible does not condemn the possession of money or of goods. Neither does it prohibit their broad use, but in no uncertain language it forbids the love of money and a heart attachment to things. The believer is expected to live as a pilgrim who is passing through this world of goods. He must not attach his heart to that which is perishing but is ordered to set his affection on "things above." He must lay his treasures up in heaven where moth and rust cannot corrupt and where thieves cannot break through and steal.

The backslider will not live by these standards. He cannot bear to see so much wealth around him without laying up his own share. To live for eternity -- so far away indeed when the present is all around him -- is a task in which the backslider will no longer engage. When you feel yourself grasping after the here and now, take heed. Your backsliding is showing.

You can mouth religious songs and words without heart. Much public singing of hymns and Gospel music must be utterly distasteful to God. Consider the ease with which Christians sing,

My Jesus, I love Thee, I know that thou art mine,

For Thee all the follies of sin I resign

when no abandonment of sin is intended and no fresh love of Christ is present, or

Sweeter as the years go by

when bitterness fills the heart of more and more with each passing year.

Contemplate the often repeated prayer, "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven," lifted Sunday after Sunday by men and women who steadfastly refuse to do the will of God themselves and are in no position to assist its accomplishment in the lives of others. Consider testimony meetings in which only events of years ago are narrated because the speaker has no current experience with the Lord he can share. The ability to mouth religious phrases, songs, prayers, and testimonies without depth of feeling is a certain sign of backsliding. Every honest Christian can expect occasions when he bows to the will of God only with the greatest of difficulty, but on such occasions he has the grace of silence. But the backslider finds no difficulty speaking hypocritically. To mouth the words and phrases of affection and commitment actually foreign to his heart poses no greater difficulty than continuing in his backslidden condition.

You can hear the Lord's name taken in vain, spiritual concerns mocked, and eternal issues flippantly treated, and not be moved to indignation and action. The true Christian not only reverences God's name, but also cannot bear the misuse of that name by others without deep hurt and sorrow. To remain silent among mockers is a restraint godly people cannot stomach. To hear sacred things treated with contempt and eternal matters made light of without indignation is beyond the ability of all who truly love God with all their hearts and minds. Those who walk in fellowship with Christ can be expected to take their stand against all the works of darkness, but the backslider has no trouble mingling with the profane. Their contemptuous and filthy language brings no grief to his soul. To offend the swearer by gently asking him to refrain from irreverent speech is unthinkable to the long-established backslider and to leave the room because the tone of the conversation is degrading would never occur to him.

You can watch degrading movies and television and read morally debilitating literature. That movies, television, and literature are getting more degenerate with each passing year is obvious. How can Christians allow themselves to be contaminated by this filth of the world? Would Jesus go with you to the theater to watch the movie of your choice? Would He join your family television circle and listen with you each hour? Could He sanction all that you read? If not, you have clear evidence of backsliding. Whenever a Christian does anything Jesus would not sanction, he is in deep trouble. If you cannot control what you watch and read, you would be better without eyes. Did not Jesus say it would be better for a man to pluck out his own eyes rather than be led to hell by what he gazed upon? The growing Christian takes Jesus' words seriously and avoids temptation, but the backslider thinks those who refuse to be corrupted by what they watch are narrow-minded. The backslider will defend his right to read anything published and will read whatever pleases him, advertising his broad-mindedness and in the process proving his backslidden condition.

Breaches of peace in the brotherhood are of no concern to you. The unity of His Body is a matter of great concern to Jesus Christ. The entire prayer of John seventeen focuses on this. Many of the Apostolic letters plead for unity. Clear biblical guidelines have been laid down for its preservation and its restoration when broken. Every individual with a heart in tune with God is deeply concerned about the unity of the Church. This unity cannot be broken without grief of the believer. The godly person will do nothing to break the unity, nor will he remain silent while others are destroying it.

Not so with the backslider. What does the unity of the Church mean to him? He finds no problem in splitting a church over insignificant issues. If no doctrinal differences are available over which to divide the "One Body", the backslider is content to divide it over personalities. He feels no great grief when fellowship of believers is broken any more than he feels joy when the fellowship is preserved in unity. Personal concerns are always of greater importance to him than overwhelming biblical truth. Like the apostates Jude renounced, backsliders separate themselves for sensual reasons [verse 19]. While Jesus pronounced His blessings upon the peacemaker, the backslider is content to find his blessing elsewhere.

The slightest excuse seems sufficient to keep you from spiritual duty and opportunity. While the soul prospers, duty and opportunity are seized with joy. Faithful Christians delight in the very prospects of usefulness. But let spiritual backsliding begin and opportunities of service once regarded with enthusiasm become burdens too heavy to bear. The backslider becomes a master excuse-maker. Whereas earlier he would have laughed with astonishment at the feeble excuses of other backsliders, he is now able to offer the most unlikely reasons for his failure to take his spiritual responsibilities seriously. He even expects those who hear his excuses to believe his unworthy lies. He cannot attend prayer meeting in the evening "because _____" and certainly not in the morning "because _____." He cannot usher on Sunday "because _____." You name it and he will have an excuse to explain why he cannot do it. It is not simply that the excuses are usually flimsy, often inconsistent with the real facts, seldom more than slightly accurate, and never appropriate for a professing Christian, but that the excuse-maker is hardly aware of the fallen condition his excuses represent. The backslider is often the last to know his real condition. By then it may be humanly impossible to reclaim him.

You become content with your lack of spiritual power and no longer seek repeated enduements of power from on high. The growing Christian, characterized by spiritual yearnings and restlessness, wants more and more of God's grace and fullness. Every experience in the Christian's pilgrimage is but a stimulus to new heights. Yesterday's growth is a reminder of tomorrow's needs and opportunities. A fresh outpouring of God's power and grace whets the appetite for yet another. A precious time in prayer and the Word is an encouragement to further times of prayer and Bible study. However, this is not true for the backslider who is content to sit back and enjoy what he has already experienced. Let others go on seeking power with God; he has found all he wants. Let others press in towards new goals, he is comfortable where he is. No intimations of Spirit outpourings, no descriptions of lofty spiritual heights, and no appeals to fresh consecration disturb his slumbers.

You pardon your own sin and sloth by saying God understands. Of course God understands! Certainly He remembers that we are dust, but what has God's understanding to do with our sin and sloth? Christians are not called to take their ease. They were not born of the Spirit in order that they might remain in sin. To continue in sin and to tolerate sloth on the pretext of appreciating the grace of God are presumptions of the worst sort. This evil approach is certainly not new. When the Apostle Paul asked, "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" he vehemently answered his own question by declaring, "God forbid. How shall we that are dead to sin live any longer therein?" [Romans 6:1-2]. Willingness to condone or pardon

one's own sin and spiritual sloth is a certain sign of backsliding.

There is no music in your soul and no song in your heart. The healthy Christian is characterized by a spirit of praise. Even those without musical talents will make a "joyful noise unto the Lord" when their souls are in health. The spirit of praise and thankfulness is always the spirit of the growing believer. Past mercies are strong in the memories of prosperous souls. Psalms of thanksgiving fill the hearts of those who walk with God. But let a little backsliding begin and praise turns to murmuring. Thousands of special mercies from the hand of God can be forgotten in the face of one affliction. Mark the changing attitude of the Israelites who could not remember with thanks the mercies of their God. They fell from a place of sweet praise to backsliding, murmuring and complaining against God and their divinely appointed leaders. The song was snatched from their hearts. The joy was gone from their experience. Backsliding was their lot and portion. It is the same with backsliders of every generation.

Has the music gone from your soul? Are your songs of praise without the ring of joy? Have the past mercies of God grown dim? Do you even now chafe under the lightest hand of affliction? Are you in the grasp of a complaining spirit? What further evidence of backsliding do you require?

You can adjust happily to the lifestyle of the world. The world sees no great problem with unpaid debts. Bankruptcy is perfectly acceptable among today's godless businessmen. Dishonesty as a way of life is as acceptable in most business circles as profit. Lying is hardly noticed and certainly considered excusable as the means to a good end.

Can the Christian accept such behavior? No! He is required to denounce the hidden things of dishonesty, to resist walking in craftiness and to cease handling the truth deceitfully [2 Corinthians 4:2]. With hearty earnestness, the growing Christian conforms to biblical standards of righteousness, but not so the backslider. Bills are carelessly or deliberately paid late or left unpaid. Backslidden Christians take bankruptcy as a way out of legal obligations without serious twinges of conscience, and lying is common among them. Backslidden Christians tell people what they want to hear just as the ungodly do. Appointments are not kept. Promises, even to pray for a need, are not remembered. Many commitments are never honored. When you find yourself able to fit into the world's way of debt, when your word is not binding and truth is not to be found in your inner self, the brand backslider is rightly yours.

Injustice and human misery exist around you and you do little or nothing to relieve the suffering. The Lord Jesus Christ was marked by compassion; so are all of His followers. By disposition, some are more attentive to the needs of those around them than others, but every genuine Christian must be sensitive to the hurts of others and minister with the grace and mercy of Jesus as he is able. Unlike Christ, the backslider is content to inquire, "Who is my neighbor?" and pass to the other side of the road. Whenever you are willing to turn a need into an intellectual discussion, you have been marked by the backslider's pen. Giving a cup of cold water in the Savior's name is still an elementary requirement for faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus. If your eyes are blind to the sufferings of humanity on every hand and your heart is sealed by indifference, the testimony of your backslidden condition is so loud and eloquent that the whole world can mark your condition.

Your own church has fallen into spiritual declension and the Word of God is no longer preached there with power and yet you are still content. It was never God's plan for any church to exist without divine power. More than a few churches are dead, however, and the spiritual power has been gone for so long that this condition has become the accepted norm. How can it be? Jesus Himself is never in decline or lacking in

power. The believer has no reason to accept declension and powerlessness in his church, and if he does, he needs to face his own backslidden condition. It is not fair to blame the pastor. He may be partially responsible, but take the condition of your church to heart. If you were always fervent in spirit, instant in season and out of season, ready in prayer, and quick to lift and encourage in all that is right and holy, would your church be where it is now? Perhaps you cannot change the situation of your church, but you can certainly shape the condition of your own soul. If declension and powerlessness mark your church, they need not mark you. If you are content with those conditions in your church, it is proof of your own backsliding.

The spiritual condition of the world declines all around you and you cannot perceive it. Growing Christians are perceptive. Just as Jesus could discern signs of spiritual health and vitality, so can His true followers. Most of us can look at someone we know and love and discern when they are feeling physically ill. Such an ability is not considered remarkable in any way. Is it any more remarkable when Christians are sensitive to and concerned about the spiritual welfare of those around them? If you find it difficult, if not impossible, to discern Christians from non Christians, you may wisely ask why. If you cannot tell when your brother or sister is in spiritual health, it may well be a mark of your own declension. Spiritual blindness marks many that claim the name of Jesus. Knowing virtually nothing of spiritual health themselves, they find it impossible to perceive the spiritual sickness of their own immediate world. Such weakness is unknown to Jesus, the Great Physician. When you cannot see the signs of declension around you and you cannot hear the cries of the perishing multitudes, you need to look to your own spiritual welfare.

You are willing to cheat your employer. Every employee owes his employer full measure. If the hours of employment are 8:00 to 4:30, these are designed to be hours of labor. Mere presence on the premises during these hours is hardly sufficient. If one is hired to work forty hours per week, that means forty hours of actual productive employment, not merely forty hours, more or less, on the job site. Obviously, office supplies, tools, equipment, and materials provided at work are not for home and personal use. Christians know these things and earnest believers take such matters seriously. It is inconceivable that a true follower of Jesus Christ would cheat his employer. Can you imagine Jesus robbing His Father in heaven while He was here on earth with a job to do?

The backslider doesn't seem to see it this way. He finds little difficulty coming to work late and leaving early. He considers lunch and coffee breaks flexible, and if two or more hours a day or consumed, he has no inward struggles with dishonesty. Nor does visiting with other employees and disrupting their work stir the backslider to anguish. A little theft of time, a little theft of goods, "What's so unusual about that?" the backslider inquires. Being filled with his own ways, can he really be expected to concern himself with his employer's welfare?

You find yourself rich in grace and mercy and marvel at your own godlikeness. Every true Christian is marked by spiritual humility. There is no way a growing Christian can conceive of himself as having arrived. Jesus spoke eloquently on this theme in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" [Matthew 5:3]. Who are the poor in spirit but these who know how far they still have to go, those who, having seen God in His infinite majesty and holiness, realize how truly unlike God they are. While appreciative of every mercy received and every grace practiced, the poor in spirit are ever aware that the graces they lack are far more numerous than the graces they enjoy, and the mercy they show is nothing in comparison with the mercy they themselves experience. To His own word on the poor in spirit must be tied Jesus' word to those who mourn. They too are blessed or happy "for they

shall be comforted" [Matthew 5:4]. Those who mourn are those who, having seen God as He is, then see themselves as they are. What can the man who compares himself with God do but mourn? Somehow the backslider fails to perceive things this way, and that failure is overwhelming evidence of his tragic condition.

Your tears are dried up and the hard, cold spiritual facts of your own existence cannot unleash them. If your prayerlessness does not cause the tears to flow, are you not being confronted with the evidence of your backsliding? If your own personal sin does not provoke you to tears, are you not faced with the hardness of your heart? If the decline of spiritual interest all around you is unnoticed, unalarming and totally incapable of forcing tears from your eyes, is it not because of your backslidden condition? If the lostness of your own children, your parents, your sisters, your husband, your wife, your brothers, your neighbors, your friends, your schoolmates and your companions on the job cannot unleash the tears, is it not because you no longer really care for the very things that stir most deeply the heart of God? When the things that grieve the Savior have no power to grieve you, do you not have clear evidence that you are in a backslidden condition? Jesus saw Jerusalem and He wept. Do you weep over your Jerusalem? When Jesus beheld the hardness of men's hearts, His own heart was broken. Is yours? Surely no more certain sign of backsliding could possibly exist than an inability to weep with the Son of God and an unwillingness to share His heartbreak.

If any of these aspects of backsliding apply to you, ask these questions: How did I get into such a backslidden condition? Did it happen suddenly? Is it the result of one single moment of carelessness? Was it caused by a solitary sin? No, this would be highly unlikely. Usually backsliding happens a little bit at a time. Let me illustrate: it is rush hour in the city of New York subway. The train is crowded and no seats remain. There is, however, a three or four inch space between you and the person on your right. An aggressive passenger, unwilling to stand, spies the narrow gap and sits down -- mostly on you and your neighbor. With a few bold wiggles the newcomer manages to force himself into a place a more timid soul would have never considered possible. So it is with the sins that lead to backsliding. Your life as a Christian is seemingly full of Christ and there is no room for self, but an aggressive sin comes and wiggles its way in, crowding Christ out just a little bit. You give place to this sin and soon another does the same thing. Sin by sin, error by error, selfishness by selfishness the backsliding continues until you are virtually empty of Christ and full of sin and self.

God's word to the backslider is plain: "Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come unto thee; for thou art the LORD our God." [Jeremiah 3:22]. "O Israel, return unto the LORD thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity." [Hosea 14:1]. After lamenting the tragic backsliding of the Ephesian Christians in losing their first love, Jesus commanded, "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent." [Revelation 2:5].

God is weary of your backsliding. Turn from it while there is still time and opportunity to live for His pleasure and glory.

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