

Four Types of Backsliders

by Zac Poonen

The sermon discusses four types of backsliders and the right attitude towards them, emphasizing the importance of fellowship, discipline, and repentance.

Scripture: Numbers 18:16, 1 Samuel 15:30, Psalm 51, Jeremiah 3:13, Jeremiah 3:15, Luke 15:7, Luke 16:15, John 1:4, 2 Thessalonians 2:3

Topics: "Backsliding", "Restoration"

Description

Zac Poonen discusses the four types of backsliders as illustrated in Luke 15: the lost sheep, lost coin, lost younger son, and lost elder son. He emphasizes that backsliding often stems from a lack of fellowship, carelessness within the church, a spirit of independence, and pride. Each type of backslider requires a different approach for restoration, highlighting the importance of discernment and the right attitude towards those who have strayed. Poonen encourages believers to actively seek out and restore the lost while also recognizing the need for humility and repentance in their own lives.

Transcript

The Bible says that one of the signs of the end-times will be a great apostasy (falling away from the faith) (2 Thess.2:3). Backsliding has become a very common feature in all churches now.

Jesus spoke about four types of backsliders in the three parables in Luke 15 - represented by the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost younger son and the lost elder son

The Lost Sheep And Lack of Fellowship

The lost sheep is a picture of a born-again believer who backslid. He went astray because he lacked fellowship. Perhaps he was alone in a place where there was no good church. Not having a strong enough relationship with the Lord, he was dragged down by his surroundings. Or perhaps, he did not value fellowship with other believers sufficiently, and thus went astray. If he had stayed in the midst of the church, he would have been safe. But perhaps he was self-confident and thus went astray.

There may have been other reasons too why he backslid. The attractions of the world may have proved to be too much for him. Or perhaps he was discouraged by the pressure of trial. He may have been deceived by the craftiness of men and demons. Or he may have been careless in his walk with the Lord and gradually fell away.

The Lord describes His flock in this parable as consisting of "righteous persons WHO NEED NO REPENTANCE" (Lk.15:7). The reason they don't need any repentance is because they are judging themselves all the time and striving at all times to have a conscience without offence towards God and men. They are quick to confess the slightest sinful thought and attitude to God, and equally quick to confess the slightest sinful word and deed to men. Thus they live each day as those who need no repentance - because they repent constantly. The lost sheep did not have this attitude - and so it backslid.

The Lost Silver Coin And A Careless Church

The lost coin was lost due to very different reasons. It was lost because of the failure of the woman. The woman is a picture of a church. She was careless in taking care of her coins.

The coin was a silver coin - and silver was used to redeem the firstborn children of Israel in the Old Testament (Numbers 18:16). So the silver coin speaks of a redeemed child of God (once saved) who is now lost. But this believer backslid primarily due to the failure of his church. His church was perhaps a dead church where the standards of God's Word were not preached and so they did not care for his eternal soul.

Cain asked the Lord if he was his brother's keeper. He was. In the church, every one of us has a responsibility to "keep" our brothers and sisters from falling. So this parable is directed not at the backslider as much as at the other members of his church (the woman) who are careless enough to allow a coin to be lost.

The Lost Younger Son And A Spirit of Independence and Rebellion

The younger son represents yet another type of backslider. He was one who was impatient to launch out on his own - before God's time. He sought his own, loved money, rebelled against his father and finally left his home.

Here is a believer who wants to receive everything he can, from God and from his elder brothers. But after he has received everything, he leaves them. Many preachers make use of their connection with their spiritual fathers and thereby get a ministry and a name for themselves. Once they have got that, they seek to become independent.

This son is a picture of a believer who doesn't want the discipline of being subject to God-appointed authority (his father). God's purpose in all discipline is to break His children, so that He can commit spiritual authority to them one day. But many like this younger son, frustrate God's purposes for them, and end up with "the pigs"! Only then do some of them "come to their senses" and return to the Father's house in brokenness and repentance.

The Lost Elder Son And A Spirit of Comparison And Pride

The elder son is a picture of a believer who does not look like a backslider. He is a proud, self-righteous believer who compares himself with others and who feels that he has lived a better life and produced better results in his ministry than others.

Instead of humbly acknowledging these blessings as the undeserved mercy of God, he becomes proud of what he thinks he has accomplished. Therefore God resists him and very soon Satan is able to knock him down.

The first three backsliders in these parables finally came home. But in the case of the elder son, we see him outside the house, at the end of the story. So the Lord must have wanted to point him out as the worst backslider of the lot.

The Right Attitude Towards Lost Sheep

The Good Shepherd went after the lost sheep until He found it. We who are under-shepherds must have the same attitude. We must go after those who have backslidden from the church through carelessness, Satanic deception and their lusts. It must be the longing of all of us to be "shepherds after God's own heart" (Jer.3:15), who can seek out the many such lost sheep around us today.

Many are quick to criticise these lost sheep, saying that they should not have wandered off on their own, or listened to the voices of false shepherds, etc., What God is looking for however are shepherds after His own heart who will go after these lost sheep and bring them back to the fold.

The Right Attitude Towards Lost Coins

The woman who lost her silver coin was eager to find it.

So she did two things: She lit a lamp and swept her house diligently, until she found it. These are the two things every church needs to do. First of all, she needs to light a lamp. The life of Jesus is the only true light (John 1:4) and this is what the church needs to hold up and emphasise at all times. Secondly, there is a lot of rubbish - sin and human traditions in the church - that needs to be swept out completely. Only then will many lost coins be found.

The Right Attitude Towards Lost Younger Sons

The father of the prodigal son did not go looking for his son when he was lost. He allowed his son to reap the consequences of his rebellion. And when his son came to an end of himself, he came home on his own. He was not carried home on anyone's shoulder, like the lost sheep. He came back when he was totally sick and tired of himself. God's love for such backsliders is shown in His not going after them, but allowing them to reap what they have sown.

Many believers however lack this wisdom and seek to carry these rebellious sons on their shoulders in to the church. Thus they ruin them. On the other hand, these believers don't do much for the lost sheep. Thus because they lack discernment, they console those who should be rebuked, and rebuke those who should be consoled.

Feeding rebellious sons of God will only ensure that they never return to God. Such acts are not acts of compassion but acts of folly. Such foolish actions make these lost sons stay out in the far country even longer - and in some cases forever.

When the prodigal son returned, the father made him sit at his right hand. He didn't place his son on probation or make him live in the servant's quarters - because his son had come back in brokenness and repentance - on his own, without anyone having to persuade him.

When rebellious sons return to the church in true brokenness and repentance, our hearts must be wide open to welcome them. Here is where we see the difference in attitude between those who are like God and those who are like the Pharisees. It will certainly take time for confidence to be restored in such a

prodigal son who was once rebellious. But if he has repented, he must be accepted immediately, warmly, and wholeheartedly, even if he is not given any ministry in the church for many years.

The Right Attitude Towards Lost Elder Sons

In the case of the elder son, the father went outside the house and pleaded with him repeatedly. But the older boy would not yield. Jesus left the story open-ended at this point, leaving it to our imagination to decide what happened to him finally.

There are two possibilities: Either, he may have yielded to his father's pleadings and finally come back home, with his head held high. Or he may have rejected his father's pleadings and gone out into the darkness. Whichever way he may have chosen, he lost the place of honour in his home, for that had already been given to his younger brother. The father had already given his ring and the seat at his right hand to his younger son.

There is a vast difference between "prodigal sons" and "elder brothers". Prodigal sons are convinced of their sin on their own and repent deeply and seek no place of honour in the church. They only want to be slaves until the end of their lives. They are truly broken. "Elder sons" however have to be repeatedly spoken to, before they are convinced. And even when they are convinced, they seek to come back to their place of honour in the church - as kings and not as slaves.

King Saul knew that he had sinned. But he wanted to confess his sin privately to Samuel. He told Samuel, "I have sinned; but please honour me now before the elders of my people and before Israel" (1 Sam.15:30). King David also sinned - far more seriously than Saul. But he wrote a psalm and acknowledged his sin publicly (Psalm 51).

Jesus told the Pharisees that their greatest sin was that they sought to justify themselves before men (Luke 16:15). God hates this sin more than any other. There is very little hope for a backslider who wants to justify himself before men.

God's Word to sinners has always been: "Only acknowledge your sin" (Jer.3:13).

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

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