

What Is a Backslider?

~Other Speakers M-R: John R. Rice:

"The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways." - Prov. 14:14.

"Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee: know therefore and see that it is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God, and that my fear is not in thee, saith the Lord God of hosts." - Jer. 2:19.

Christians sin. Some of the saintliest of God's people have fallen into outrageous sin. And that has puzzled honest hearts and has been the sneer of the wicked down through the ages.

Infidels who hate the Bible have claimed that God's Book is immoral because it tells frankly of the frailties and sins of the saints of God. But really only God could write a book like that, honestly telling, without excuse, without glossing over, the constant downward tendency in the human race, revealed even in the saintliest characters.

Men who write books about their heroes make much of their good points, and gloss over or excuse their sins and failures. Men who write books about their enemies make much of their sins and failures, and gloss over their good qualities. But the Bible, written by an honest and holy God, simply tells the truth about mankind. We are a race of sinners, and the best men that ever lived still sinned.

The problem of sin is still present with Christians, as real as when they were unsaved. I find everywhere I go defeated Christians, sad Christians who fear that God has forsaken them or who doubt that they were ever saved. The problem of backsliding is ever with us. So I have prepared this Bible message to show what is a backslider, why people backslide, the sorrows and punishment of backsliding, to show that the true backslider is really saved, and to show how any Christian who has fallen into sin can get back into full fellowship with God and have the joy of his salvation restored.

I. What Is a Backslider?

A backslider is a saved person who falls into sin. A lost sinner cannot be a backslider. You have to go somewhere before you can slide back. But one who is truly born again, a child of God who falls into sin, is a backslider. It may be outrageous and gross sin known to everyone, or it may be merely coldness of heart, a lukewarmness of heart instead of the burning fire of love for God. But when a Christian loses any of his joy, or loses part of his sweet fellowship with God, or falls into sin, then he is a backslider. Remember that only Christians can backslide.

We have many examples of this in the Bible. What an honest Book the Bible is to tell us of the failures and sins of God's people through the ages! God wanted us to know that the men of the greatest faith, saints who had truly been born again, were frail people such as we are and subject to the same temptations and surrendering sometimes to the same sins.

God tells how Noah got drunk and lay naked in his tent. He tells how Lot sought the fellowship of the wicked Sodomites, lost all his influence, got drunk and ruined his own daughters. The Bible tells how Abraham deceived, calling Sarah his sister. Even saintly Moses lost his temper. When God commanded him to speak to the rock that Israel might be watered from it a second time, in a temper he beat upon it with his rod and so dishonored God that he lost his chance to enter the Promised Land.

David, a man after God's own heart, a man used to write the Psalms, that blessed book of devotions for the saints through all these centuries, committed adultery with Bathsheba and then had her husband Uriah slain to hide his sin. The Bible tells how Samson, a judge of Israel who had been filled with the Holy Ghost and was a Nazarite from his birth, kept company with harlots until God left him powerless, a slave of the Philistines with his eyes burned out.

The Bible tells how Peter denied Christ and cursed and swore; how all the disciples forsook Jesus and fled; how later Peter, fearing the Jewish Christians, played the coward again, and led even good Barnabas away with his dissimulations. The Bible tells how Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus, was a coward, a secret disciple. Even Paul the apostle went up to Jerusalem against the plain leading of the Holy Spirit.

So the saints of the Bible fell into sin. They were backsliders.

These examples should humble us and teach us that even the mightiest of God's saints sometimes backslide, fall into sin, and so lose the sweet joy that every Christian ought to have.

A Christian who backslides is like a child who disobeys his parents. It does not affect his sonship but it affects his fellowship, his joy, and the approval of the Father.

But it is well to note there are some in the Bible who did not backslide. For example, Adam, when he fell into sin in the Garden of Eden, was not a backslider. He had never been born again. He had never been saved and so could not backslide. In the Garden of Eden he had been created a perfect man and had perfect fellowship with God as one of His creatures, made in His image. But he had not been redeemed by blood. Up to that time in the Bible blood had never been mentioned as a remedy for sin. There had never been an animal sacrifice picturing the coming of the Saviour. There had never been a gospel message nor any need of one. There had never been a prophecy of the coming Saviour.

Adam, as a sinless being in the Garden of Eden, like Eve his wife, was not a Christian. He was simply a perfect man, as she was a perfect woman. When Adam fell into sin and ate the forbidden fruit, he was not a backslider. He was, for the first time, a poor lost sinner who had never been converted, who had never been born into God's family, who had never been born again, who had never been redeemed by the blood.

And so fallen angels are not backsliders. Angels in Heaven are perfect and sinless and have fellowship with God, but they are not Christians. Angels, who have never been saved and given everlasting life as forgiven sinners, cannot backslide.

Judas Iscariot was not a backslider. In John 6:64,70,71 we are told that Judas did not believe in Christ, was not saved but was a devil.

"But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him ... Jesus answered them, Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil? He spake of Judas Iscariot the son of Simon: for he it was that should betray him, being one of the twelve."

Judas heard the preaching of Jesus but never repented. He was a moral man who evidently depended on his morality and would not turn to Jesus in saving faith. At last he fell into grossest sin and betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. But Judas was not a backslider. No one can be a backslider who has not first been a "frontslider." Only Christians, born again children of God, are backsliders.

Strange as it may seem, all Christians backslide, for all Christians sin. In I John 1:8 we are told, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Every Christian is taught to pray daily in the Lord's Prayer (that model prayer for all who can look up in the face of God and call Him, "Our Father which art in heaven"), "And forgive us our sins" (Luke 11:4). All Christians sin, and that means that all Christians backslide.

When you remember that "the thought of foolishness is sin" (Prov. 24:9), that "whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23), that "to him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (Jas. 4:17), then it becomes clear that all of us have fallen short even after we are saved. We have all had foolish thoughts; we have all done some things without any special faith about them; we have all left undone things that we knew were proper and right for us to do. Who will say that every minute of your life you have loved God all you ought to, that you never pray a second less than you ought to pray, that you never leave undone a single thing that God wants you to do? You cannot say that; neither can I. And that is proof of sin.

Christians grow old. Our teeth decay, our hair turns gray or falls out, we grow decrepit in body, and finally even Christians die. That proves that Christians are sinners. For everywhere in the Bible we are told that death is the result of sin.

Adam was warned that if he sinned, "thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:17). James 1:15 says that "sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death." Ezekiel 18:4 says that "the soul that sinneth, it shall die." Romans 6:23 plainly says that "the wages of sin is death."

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Oh, we Christians are yet frail sinners; so it is clear that all Christians backslide. And that is the reason why God must save us by grace and keep us by grace. We did not earn salvation, and we cannot keep it. We did not deserve it when we got it, and we do not deserve it now.

Dear reader. will you test yourself by this simple rule? Was there ever a time when you were nearer to God than you are now? Was there ever a time when you read the Bible more, or enjoyed it more than now? Was there ever a time when you prayed more, when you had your prayers answered more frequently? Was there ever a day when you won more souls than you have won today? Was there ever a time when you were more completely absorbed in the Lord's business? If there was ever a time when you were nearer the Lord than today, you are a backslider. You have slid back from that close intimacy with God, from that high place of blessing which you once had.

Remember that our text in Proverbs 14:14 says, "The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways." Backsliding is not necessarily getting drunk nor committing adultery, nor any outward course of sin seen by the public. Backsliding is in the heart!

It may be, dear Christian, that you have drifted somewhat but have never noticed it. You may be like Samson who "wist not that the Lord was departed from him" (Judges 16:20). We need to search our hearts and we need to watch and pray lest sin creep up on us.

Are you a backslider?