



Articles and Sermons :: THE BACKSLIDING PROFESSOR - James

THE BACKSLIDING PROFESSOR - James - posted by hmmhmm (), on: 2007/8/19 14:05

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John Angell James, 1837

THE BACKSLIDING PROFESSOR

There are three stages of departure from God—

1. spiritual declension
2. actual backsliding
3. final apostasy

They are intimately connected, and lead on, unless stopped by divine grace, from one to the other. There have been many people in these states in every age of the church—there are some now. Our most solemn attention is required for such a subject. Professors are continually falling away from Christ, some only in heart, others openly in conduct; some partially and for a season, others totally and forever. The hopes of pastors and churches are continually receiving the bitterest disappointment from the relapses of those who "did run well." Like the blossoms in the spring, for a time they excited the most pleasing anticipations—but a blight came on—the blossom went up as dust, and the root appeared to be rottenness. The present chapter will include a consideration of the two first stages only.

1. DECLENSION IN PIETY, means a diminution of its vigor at the heart; a loss of the power of godliness, or, to use a scriptural phrase, "a leaving of our first love." We have a very expressive description of such a state of soul in our Lord's address to the church of Sardis, "Strengthen the things that remain, which are ready to die." Religion was not all gone—but it was nearly so; only a little remained, and that was ready to expire. This is a very common case now. There is no immorality; no open sin; but an utter decay of pious affection. The whole amount of piety that is left—is cold, heartless, dead formality. The fundamental doctrines and precious truths of the Gospel, though not renounced, are not relished and fed upon with that eager appetite, keen relish, and exquisite zest which they once were—and they can be very well spared from sermons, if their loss is supplied by displays of eloquence and the flowers of rhetoric. The means of grace, though not neglected—are mere forms, imparting no quickening power, and yielding no spiritual enjoyment. Pious affections of peace, joy, love, delight in God, and hope of heaven—are almost extinguished. The vigor of watchfulness, spirituality of mind, and the severity of mortification of sin are relaxed—under the idea that so much strictness in religion is not necessary. The company of the righteous is forsaken, and their conversation insipid. The tenderness of the conscience is blunted—and little sins of temper, of trade, of the heart and the tongue, are committed with far less repugnance than formerly. Besetting sins, once nearly subdued—acquire fresh life and power. In short, piety has lost its hold upon the mind, the heart, and conscience, as an elevating, sanctifying, and satisfying reality. Delight in God, the love of Christ, the joyful hope of heaven, have well near ceased!

Still, as I would not distress the humble and timid disciple, I would observe, that we are not to conclude that piety is declining, merely because our feelings are not so lively and flashy as they once were. If there be a growth in humility and meekness, in tenderness of conscience and self-denial, in a sense of the value of Christ, and in dependence upon the Spirit, there is no declension in piety, although there may be less of vivid emotion than there once was. Just as there is no decay of strength in the human frame, where the sprightliness and efflorescence of youth are gone, if the grave robustness of manhood remains. Nor should the aged believer mistake the decay of nature for the decline of grace. He hears, he prays, he reads, he remembers, and enjoys with less ability than he once did; but this is the effect of old age, and not of backsliding. The plant of righteousness seems to droop—but it is because the prop that sustained it has given way. The gracious Redeemer will make the same excuse in this case, as he once did for his slumbering disciples, that "the spirit is willing—but the flesh is weak."

Unhappily, for many, a state of declension exists in their souls without their being aware of it. "Strangers have devoured his strength," said God, when speaking of Israel, "and he knows it not; yes, gray hairs are here and there upon him, yet he knows it not." Hosea 7:9. So it is with professors, they are in a state of decay, and yet are not sufficiently aware of the solemn fact. It may be worthwhile to inquire into the causes of this self-ignorance.

1. The natural consequence of decay—whether of body or mind—is a proportionate insensibility. The old man is not so sensible of his accumulating infirmities as those around him are. He scarcely remembers what he was, and is but imperfectly aware of what he is. So it is with the declining Christian, his heart is hardening, his conscience becoming more dull, and his spiritual perception more dim. A totally unregenerate state is death, a state of absolute insensibility, and in proportion as we lose the vitality of religion, we return or approximate to that state.

2. Declension is gradual. It is so in the human frame as age advances, and it is so in religion also. If we passed at once, from the vigor of youth to the decrepitude of age, how visible would be the transition, and how insupportable too! But aging is so slowly made as to be imperceptible, and even tolerable. It is thus with piety, decay is usually so gradual as to be perceived only by a comparison of distant periods, an exercise, which the backslider is rarely disposed to carry on. He goes back step by step. He first loses the glow of holy affection; then the spontaneousness of spiritual thoughts; then the tenderness of an enlightened conscience; and then the consistency of pious conduct. Private prayer is neglected, then family devotion, and lastly social religion. From neglect of duties, he goes on to the commission of sins. Yet he was at first quite unaware of any deterioration.

3. Self-ignorance is often the result of a neglect of the duty of self-examination. Many seem to think that religion is of so hardy a nature, that when once planted in the soul, like some weed in the desert, or shrub upon the mountain, it must flourish without care or culture. On the contrary, piety is a tender exotic of the hot-house, that requires the constant examination, and most devoted care of the gardener to keep it alive—much more to make it grow. How few set apart seasons for close and diligent inspection of their hearts; and who can wonder, then, that piety should be declining without their knowing it? Would it be a matter of surprise that a tradesman should be on the verge of bankruptcy, without his knowing the situation of his affairs—if he never examined his books, or took his stock? It will not do in temporal affairs, much less in spiritual ones, to take it for granted, we are going on well.

4. What helps the ruinous ignorance is, that professors are apt, when they do cursorily examine their state, to adopt wrong standards of character, and to compare themselves with each other—instead of the word of God. "I am no worse than my neighbor," is the excuse not only of the worldling, for his total neglect of religion—but of the professor, for his low degrees of piety. Instead of examining the Bible to see what he ought to be, and comparing himself with that, he just looks round upon his fellow-Christians, to see what they are, and is quite satisfied if he finds himself not below others. Alas, alas! the average attainments of the church of Christ are not such, as that its members having reached these, need not trouble themselves about anything further.

5. Mistaken symptoms of prosperity often lead to ignorance of our real condition. The hectic flush upon the countenance, and the sparkle of the eye, may be supposed by some ignorant people to be the marks of blooming health—when, in fact, they are the tokens of incipient consumption. The increased appetite may be regarded as the symptom of returning strength, when, in reality, it may be only the harbinger of death. So in religion also, there are delusive signs of spiritual health and vigor. Increased ability and disposition to 'talk of religion' in the way of explaining and defending its doctrines, may be mistaken for an increased interest and influence of it in the heart, whereas it may be nothing but the working of pride, or an effusion of vanity. Zeal for some peculiar religious notions or forms, may be supposed to be pure concern for God's glory, though all the while it may be the most rancorous party spirit. Liberality in giving, may be self-righteousness or ostentation; undeviating formality may be miscounted ardent devotion; enthusiastic attachment to some novel opinion, may be erroneously supposed to be spirituality of mind. These are but a few specimens of the errors into which men fall, in judging of religious prosperity; and they tend to show the vast importance of our having a scriptural knowledge of the correct tests of personal godliness.

In all these ways may professors be kept in ignorance of the state of their souls, and be in a declining condition, without being sufficiently aware of their alarming situation.

I now go on to consider the case of the BACKSLIDER IN CONDUCT. I mean the professor who has yielded to the power of temptation, and fallen into actual sin. The Scriptures furnish us with melancholy instances of this in the history of Noah, Lot, David, Jonah, and Peter; while our knowledge of the church of Christ, in our own days, adds to the number. Some have fallen into intemperance, others into impurity; others into fraud; and others into all the varieties of human misconduct. In some cases there have been gross departures from the rule of Christian morals, without its being suspected, a

and the backslider has pursued his guilty course, without its being known to anyone but God and his conscience. Generally, however, the solemn fact, sooner or later becomes notorious, and is matter of public scandal.

People of all ages; of both sexes; of the various grades of society; and of the different sections of the church, have been guilty of the sin of backsliding. That such things should occur, however it may be lamented, cannot be matter of surprise, when we consider the prevalence of temptation, the constitution of human nature, and the imperfection, and occasional unwatchfulness of the best of men. To such as are in this melancholy and dreadful condition, I now make my appeal.

Is it necessary to represent to you the sinfulness of your conduct? But who shall describe its enormity? What pencil can delineate in shades dark enough—the aggravated nature of your crime? Against what light, what mercy, what professions, what vows, what privileges—have you sinned? Your transgressions include the blackest treason, united with the vilest ingratitude. But I will suppose that you are already sensible of this. Permit me, then, to ask you—are you happy? Impossible! unless your heart is hardened, and your conscience is seared as with a hot iron. No, the streams of religious comfort are dried up; the fountain of life is at a distance, and nothing but a cup of wormwood is its substitute. Faith is suppressed, love quenched, hope clouded, joy fled, prayer restrained—and every spiritual delight vanished. Guilt, shame, darkness, and defilement, have taken possession of the soul. In what agony of spirit have you sometimes repeated those verses—

Where is the blessedness I knew,
When first I saw the Lord;
Where is the soul refreshing view,
Of Jesus and his word?

What peaceful hours I once enjoyed,
How sweet their memory still;
But they have left an aching void,
The world can never fill.

Is not your experience a living comment on those words, "Your own wickedness shall correct you, and your backslidings shall reprove you; know, therefore, and see, that it is an evil and bitter thing that you have forsaken the Lord your God."

It is, or it ought to be, no small addition to the misery of a backsliding state, that it stops your usefulness. In your holier and better days you did good; but what good can you do now? Why, even the declining professor, who still keeps up his place in the church, and among his fellows—has ceased to be what he was. His prayers in public have lost their unction, his conversation in private has lost its savor; the sick are not visited; the poor not relieved; the young not counseled; the sinner not warned, as they once were. His energies are paralyzed, his influence gone. He has begun to withhold his wealth, his time, his labor—from the cause of God. His family, his friends, all see, feel, and lament the alteration. O, how changed from that once useful member of the church of Christ, which he then was!

And if this be the case with him, how much more of you, whose misconduct has in effect separated you from all those scenes of usefulness, which he in some measure still frequents. You not only do no good—but much harm. You are not privileged to be even neutral. You diffuse around you the savor of death. If you are a parent—you prejudice the minds of your children against religion, and may live to see your sins acted over again in their conduct, as David did his, in the actions of Amnon and Absalom. You harden sinners; discourage inquirers; give strength to the arguments of the infidel; point to the jests of the scoffer, and impudence to the brow of the profane.

But consider the imminent danger you are in of falling into future temptations, of sinking deeper into the mire of sin, and departing farther and farther from God. You cannot stop where you are—but must come back in the character of a penitent—or go on to that of an apostate. You are in danger of eternal damnation. "The object at which sin aims, whether in believers or unbelievers, is DEATH, eternal death—and to this it has a natural and direct tendency. And if it does not come in all cases to this final outcome, it is not because of its being different as to its nature or tendency in some people, to what it is in others—but because a timely stop is put to its operations. Only let sin go on without repentance until it has finished its work—and eternal death will be the outcome! Whatever we are, so long as sin lies unlamented upon the conscience, we can have no scriptural foundation to conclude that we are true Christians. No real Christian, it is true, will prove an apostate; yet, while we are under the influence of sin, we are moving in the direction which leads to apostasy. If we are contented with a relapsed state of mind, what ground have we to conclude that it is not our element, or that we have ever been the subjects of true religion?" (Andrew Fuller's Works, vol. 4. p. 460.)

I now suggest one or two cautions, and some directions, which are applicable to your case.

Do not attempt while the sinful practice is continued, to gain any comfort of mind by the supposition that you are a true Christian still, and shall one day be restored to God by penitence and faith. Do not attempt to establish in reference to your own case, the distinction between the backsliding of a child of God—and that of a hypocrite. There is a difference, I know, both as to causes and results—but you cannot discern it in yourself, nor can others discern it in you, as long as you are living in sin! There is no view of God's word, nor any recollection of your own experience, that should have the smallest influence to comfort you—while you are living in sin! There is more in that one sin which you refuse to repent of and forsake, to make it probable so far as we can judge, that you will draw back to perdition; than there is in all your supposed conversion, and in all the doctrines of grace to make it probable that you will be brought to heaven. To take any comfort in the idea of future repentance, while sin is for the present committed and enjoyed—is the most unscriptural, irrational, and shocking of all delusions!

Do not allow yourselves to believe that you have repented, except upon good grounds. Do not imagine that you are penitent, because you grieve over the sin and condemn it—if you have not forsaken it! You may shed floods of tears, and decry the sin with the severest condemnation—but if it is not relinquished, you are a backslider still, and such you must remain—until you have given up the evil thing! If, on the other hand, you have given up the sin—but still continue to justify or palliate it, you are far off from penitence. Nor is it enough to have a partial and transient amendment, produced rather by some temporary cause, such as a sermon, or an alarming event—rather than by a renewed exercise of penitence and faith. Equally inadequate is that amendment which is not the result of deep humiliation before God—but of mere selfish and prudential considerations. And be assured, that you have not yet been brought to the necessary compunction and reformation, if you love to talk or think of the sin you have committed. Repentance blushes even to think, much more to speak of our transgressions. Repentance is a silent retiring grace. And it is moreover characterized by the most exquisite sensibility in dreading and avoiding everything that, in the remotest degree, tends to, or tempts to the repetition of the sin! So that if we put ourselves in the way of sinning again—we are still in a backsliding state.

Backsliders, be not deceived! And do not, oh! do not remain as you are! In seeking restoration, take care to use the right means. Mistake not the way back to God. Add not another error to those into which you have already fallen. The following DIRECTIONS may be of service to you.

1. There must be a sincere desire to return. In whatever way we may have departed from God, there must be a sincere desire to come back to him again. Without this, all directions will be in vain, and all means without effect. And do you not desire it? Is your backsliding pleasant? Are you as happy as when living near to God, and enjoying the testimony of your conscience? To quicken your desires and make you long more earnestly for restoration to the enjoyment of the divine favor, it may be well to listen to the admonition given by our Lord to the church of Ephesus. "Remember from whence you are fallen!" This was not said in the way of taunt; then it had been severely just—but in the way of friendly counsel. Think, backsliding Christian, what you once were, and ask, "Is it better with me now, than it was then?"

Think of your holiness and happiness in those days of your first and fervent love! Think how sweet, yes sweeter than the honeycomb, were those precious truths, for which you now have no relish! Think how delightful were those means of grace in which you now take no pleasure! Think how joyfully you resorted to the house of God, welcomed the Sabbath, and joined in the communion of saints at the table of the Lord! Think with what confidence you drew near to God, while your conscience testified in your favor, and took away every dread of the Most High—you had the joy of faith, the comfort of love, the patience of hope, and a humble consciousness of purity. But this is all gone—and O, how changed! how fallen! Look up to those delectable mountains, from the sunny tops, and verdant slopes, and beautiful prospects of which you have descended into the gloomy and sterile wilderness in which your spirit now roams like the dispossessed demoniac in the Gospel, seeking rest and finding none. Return! Return to God! Let a sense of duty draw you—and a sense of misery drive you back to him from whom you have departed!

2. You must at once abandon, and with abhorrence too, the sin by which you have departed from God. You must instantly, and without reluctance, forsake your evil ways. You must say with the poet—

The dearest idol I have known,
Whatever that idol be,
Help me to tear it from your throne,
And worship only thee.

"Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have

mercy upon him, and to our God—“for he will abundantly pardon.” This is the direction for the sinner, and the same applies to the backslider. The hand of faith when it opens to lay hold of Christ, drops the sin it had grasped before. You must part with your sin or Christ.

3. It may be well to consider in what way you have fallen, that your repentance may have a special reference to your transgressions, and that your recovery may be in the way, and to the point of your departure. Was it by a sudden temptation plunging you into sin, or by the long accumulation of little sins, that you were prepared for the greater fall? Was it by pride and prosperity, or by rashness and imprudence? Was it by neglect of private prayer, or of the Scriptures? An examination of this point is of considerable importance in various ways.

4. You must closely consider and rightly understand the evil nature of your backslidings, as sins committed after your conversion to God. As our first turning to God begins with conviction of sin, so must every other return. Such sins as yours have been committed in violation of the most solemn vows and engagements; without any provocation on the part of God; and against the greatest and frequently repeated mercies. They are characterized by singular perils in reference to ourselves, and peculiar danger as regards the well-being of others. But all this is nothing, if your hearts are not duly impressed with these things. The clearer your perceptions are of the enormity of your conduct, the more earnestly you will covet the renewed expressions of divine forgiveness, and the returning sense of pardoning mercy.

5. Consider God's infinite willingness to receive and pardon the penitent and returning backslider. When once the erring Christian is brought to a due and deep sense of his sins, how pungent his grief, how oppressive the weight of his guilt. He is in danger of sinking into the depths of despondency, and viewing himself as an outcast from both God and his people. His sins in all their aggravations appear to his distracted mind. Satan accuses! Conscience stings! Every look of every Christian seems to reproach him. And what is worse, God seems to frown upon him—and has, to his perturbed imagination, appeared to cover his throne with a cloud from which thunders roll, and lightnings flash, and dreadful forms of justice come forth.

No, you are mistaken! Trembling penitent, the cloud, and the thunder, and the lightnings, and the dreadful forms of justice exist only in your imagination. God has scattered over the whole page of revelation, invitations, encouragements, and promises to draw you back to himself. From the hour of your departure, he has never ceased to look after you, and even to follow you, with the messages of 'wounded love'—and 'inviting mercy'. Harken to a few of them. "O, Israel, return unto the Lord, your God; for you have fallen by your iniquity. Take with you words, and turn unto the Lord; say unto him, take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously. I will heal their backslidings, I will love them freely; for my anger is turned away from him." Hosea 14. Can you need encouragement after this? Will not this cheer you, and be felt as a sufficient warrant to return to God, and hope for mercy? If not, listen to the following pathetic language—"Surely I have heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus, 'You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined, like an untrained calf; bring me back that I may be restored, for you are the Lord my God. For after I had turned away, I relented, and after I was instructed, I slapped my thigh in grief; I was ashamed, and I was confounded, because I bore the disgrace of my youth.' Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 31:18-20). What unbelief or despondence can stand out against this?

6. But perhaps you need still more particular directions. Your case is difficult, your situation one of danger and urgency. Embrace every opportunity of retirement for reading the Scriptures, especially those parts which are suited to your case. Turn to such portions of Holy Writ as Jeremiah 2, 31. Hosea 14. Micah 7. Psalms 25, 32, 38, 51. the parable of the prodigal son, and other portions, which set forth at once the spirit of penitence, and the mercy of God.

Be also much in prayer. Solemn approaches to God are eminently calculated to impress the mind with a sense of sin, to inspire us with abhorrence on account of it, and at the same time to encourage our faith in God's pardoning mercy, and our dependence on his restoring grace.

There must be minute and unreserved confession of sin, an utter renunciation of all self-justification, excuses, and palliations. There must be a disposition to lay the hand upon the mouth, and a spirit of self-condemnation. We must admit all the aggravations of our sin, and look upon it, just as we may suppose God does.

You shall praise God that he has borne so long with your misconduct, and be especially grateful that he did not cut you off in your sins, nor allow you to go on still sinning, and acting out your transgressions to the full extent of their nature and tendency.

Set apart special seasons of devotion to humble yourselves before God, by fasting and prayer. Extraordinary cases require the use of extraordinary means. "A day," says Mr. Fuller, "devoted to God in humiliation, fasting and prayer, occasionally occupied with reading suitable parts of the Scriptures, may by the blessing of the Holy Spirit, contribute more to the subduing of sin, and the recovery of a spiritual mind, than years spent in a sort of half-hearted exercises."

Be neither surprised, mortified, nor offended, if for a while, your fellow-Christians who are acquainted with your lapses, should look timidly upon you, and seem incredulous as to the sincerity of your repentance. "Why should a man complain, a living man for the punishment of his sins. I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him." Let the spirit of these passages be in you, and consider whatever you may be called to endure, as a light affliction—compared with what you have deserved.

In all your approaches to the Savior, let it be under the character in which you first applied to him for mercy—that of a SINNER. "If you attempt to approach the throne of grace as a 'good' man, who has backslidden from God, you may find it impossible to substantiate that character. The reality of your conversion may be doubtful, not only in your apprehension—but in itself. Your approach, therefore, must not be as one that is washed, and needs only to wash his feet; but as one who is defiled throughout, whose hands and head, and every part needs to be cleansed! Do not employ yourself in raking over the rubbish of your past life in search of evidence that you are a Christian. You will not be able in your present state of mind, to decide that question; nor would it be of any service to you if you could decide it. One thing is certain; you are a sinner, a poor, miserable, and perishing sinner; the door of mercy is open, and you are welcome to enter in. 'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance!' Let your past character be what it may, and let your conversion be ever so doubtful, if you can, from this time, relinquish all for Christ, eternal life is before you." Fuller.

In your approaches to God as a sinner, feel as much your need of Christ as you ever did. You can go to God in no other way, but as a sinner. And by no other way than Christ. God meets his returning children, just where he meets his repenting enemies, at the cross; and nothing is so eminently adapted to open all the springs of godly sorrow, as a believing contemplation of the death of Christ. There must be a simple dependence upon the Spirit of God for our restoration. We cannot of our own accord depart from God—but it requires the omnipotence of his grace to bring us back.

You must be satisfied with nothing short of a complete recovery; which includes two things—

1. A sweet and comfortable sense of pardon; such a faith in God's promise of mercy, such a full reliance on the blood of Christ, as takes away all tormenting sense of sin and dread of God, and restores the soul to peace. And together with this recovery, includes such a victory over your corruptions, as that they shall lie wounded to death before you.
2. And with all this must be united a holy and trembling jealousy over yourself, a spirit of deep humility, and abasing consciousness of weakness, a feeling of dependence, and a purpose of 'watchfulness' for the future.

Re: THE BACKSLIDING PROFESSOR - James, on: 2007/8/20 11:32

Thank you for this post, brother Christian. Very sobering.

Quote:
-----Do not imagine that you are penitent, because you grieve over the sin and condemn it—if you have not forsaken it! You may shed floods of tears, and decry the sin with the severest condemnation—but if it is not relinquished, you are a backslider still, and such you must remain—until you have given up the evil thing! If, on the other hand, you have given up the sin—but still continue to justify or palliate it, you are far off from penitence. Nor is it enough to have a partial and transient amendment, produced rather by some temporary cause, such as a sermon, or an alarming event—rather than by a renewed exercise of penitence and faith.

May this not be the case with me or with anyone reading the words in this article!

Re: - posted by hmmhmm (), on: 2007/8/21 4:24

Quote:

You must be satisfied with nothing short of a complete recovery
