

MCGREGOR BAPTIST CHURCH

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John 13:36 6-38
18:15-27

"THE DOCTRINE OF BACKSLIDING "

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Intro:

Backsliding... It's one of those terms that Christians use. It's one of those things you have to learn about after you become a Christian. You keep hearing people talk about "backsliding" or about someone who has "backslidden."

The very sound of it gives away its meaning. It is what happens when someone, who has been making progress in their climb of faith, begins to slide backwards. They begin to slide back into their old ways. They slip into defeat, until they are no longer recognizable as a child of God.

Some do it like an automobile tire with a slow leak. They have a tendency to go flat, unless someone is always pumping them up. As long as someone keeps checking on them, and infusing new enthusiasm into them, they seem to go along pretty well. But if others forget to pump them up, they simply go flat and sit there (warming a pew but going nowhere).

Other backsliders seem to be going great guns for the Lord. And all-of-a-sudden - whammo -they are out of it, leaving the Christ they once served, hanging around with the crowd who reject Jesus, often denying their Lord by their words and their lifestyles.

And, unfortunately, it happens all the time. Probably, we each know of someone who backslid and fell hard. It may have been we ourselves at one time. And people are shocked. They say, "I can't believe it of such a person. They were leaders in the church. They were so actively involved for Christ."

Who knows; but, by this time next year, some in this auditorium could be numbered among the former deacons, and former Sunday school teachers and former choir directors and former soloists, and former pastors, with whom this

town abounds, who never darken the door to God's house nor have any positive witness for Christ. They were once in the Lord's army. The battle is still waging for the kingdom of God. And they are AWOL.

And, if you have trouble believing that this sort of backsliding can really happened, may I ask you to concentrate your attention on the Lord's leading disciple, Simon Peter. Yes, Peter, the one who tried to walk on the water to Jesus, the first one to make the great confession: "Thou art the Christ, the son of the Living God," the one who would not leave at Jesus' arrest, when all the other disciples fled ... Yes, Peter the rock, the one whom the Catholics claim for their first Pope ... Certainly one of the leading forces in the kingdom of God ... And yet we have just read that He denied his Lord three times. He would not even stand up for Jesus when a young girl asked him, point blank, if he were not a disciple. He even cursed and used language, which he had not used for three years, to prove his point. He got so out of it then he went back to fishing for fish instead of fishing for men.

Don't kid yourself. Backsliding can happen to the best of us! But it is so tragic. It disgraces our Lord. It hurts His cause of sharing the Gospel with the world. And it can put us behind the eight ball spiritually.

Why does God allow us to backslide? How does backsliding happen? Is there any way we can avoid it? I'd like to try and answer these questions, from the story of Peter, this morning.

I. The first question we might want to ask is:
WHY DOES GOD ALLOW HIS PEOPLE TO BACKSLIDE?

God did allow it with Peter. I know He did, because Jesus foretold it. It was no surprise to the Son of God, and yet He allowed it to happen, anyway! (John 13: 36-38) Why? I believe He allows us to backslide, if there is no other way to wake us up.

Look with me at Luke 22:30 31-34. It was Jesus' Last Supper with His disciples. He said that His disciples would be offended by His arrest and desert Him. And Peter said: "Not me, Lord. Though all men forsake thee, yet will I not." And Jesus, "Simon, behold, Satan has desired (demanded) to have you and TO SIFT YOU AS WHEAT: but I have prayed for you that your faith fail not ... the cock shall not crow this day before you deny me three times."

Here is the key to why God will sometimes allow His disciples to backslide: TO SIFT THEM. "Satan has desired to sift thee as wheat."

When you sifted wheat, in those days, you threw it into the air with a big fork (winnowing fork). The wind would catch the light husks (or chaff) and blow this worthless part away; and the good wheat, which was heavier, would fall to the ground. This was the way they separated the good from the undesirable.

Now, for the Lord to do great things with our lives, He must somehow separate from our lives. The undesirable things that would make us ineffective -- things like pride, selfish ambition, sinful desires and offensive habits.

He tries to cleanse out these undesirables first "with the washing of water by the Word" (Ephesians 5:26). That's why we preach the Word of God around here and we really "pour it on!" That's why we urge you to have a quiet time each day and read the Word and let it sink in! That's the way God would like to cleanse the undesirable things from our lives.

But a lot of Christians, apparently just won't wash. They don't pay much attention to His Word. They sit in here and let it roll off like water off a duck's back and it doesn't jar loose the undesirable things in our lives. Like Peter, they may go through the motions of church and may do their job to some extent -- but they are asleep spiritually and get more and more loaded down with chaff -- undesirable things in their lives that keep God from doing something great with them.

So, if we don't respond any other way, the Lord gives us "over to Satan" temporarily, so he can shake us up and sift us. He allows Satan to really toss us around for a while. And, by this means, He "gets the lead out" -- or the chaff, if you please! God allows us to backslide, if there is no other way to shake us up.

I believe this idea is clearly taught in the Bible. I Corinthians 5: 5 "deliver such a one (immoral Christian who won't repent) unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh (ly pride), that the spirit may be saved..." Jeremiah 2: 19 says "Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backsliding shall reprove thee."

You see, God always has our ultimate good in mind. He never wants us to be hurt, only helped. But, with a "tough love," He will let Satan shake us up, if all else fails. He will not sit idly by and watch us settle into mediocrity and defeat!

When I was a kid, I kept wondering: "Why doesn't God just kill the devil?" Someday, God will put him in his place, but right now God may as well take advantage of him and use him indirectly to sift us. The God, who can make the wrath of men to praise Him, can also use a rebellious Satan to serve His purposes.

But this is always a last straw! Please, do not force God to resort to this. Wake up. Hear the Spirit and He speaks through the Word. There are some of you that I love so dearly, and you scare me. You are so great in some ways, but are so indifferent and apathetic in other ways. Please wake up and let God deal with you the easy way! Backsliding is the tough way. It is the school of real-hard knocks. Yield to God's Word, and God's Spirit now!

II. A second question is: HOW DOES BACKSLIDING HAPPEN?

Is it sudden? Does a person just one day "flip out?" Is it something that happens in a weak moment, or is it the climax of a long process?

Peter's story shows us that it was a process. When Peter denied Jesus and cursed, and left the ministry to go back to his fishing business, he was hitting bottom after a long slide that had been going on for a long time. Backsliding is not sudden. The final fall may seem like it. But behind it is a process that could have been noticed and stopped.

Backsliding is not due to any particular happening or set of circumstances. People act like some crisis got the best of them one day. A job disappointment, an economic crisis, a preacher disappointed them, a hypocritical deacon cheated them in business, a beautiful woman gave them a come-hither look. And that's why they backed off on God.

That's a lot of mallarky! Sure, these crises may have been the straw that finally broke the camel's back, but that crisis only brought out a weakness that had been developing already. Peter was well on his way long before the crisis of Jesus' arrest.

I believe I can show you how Peter backslid -- possibly even where his slide started. Do you remember in Matthew 16, when our Lord asked: "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter gave his great confession: "Thou Art the Christ, The Son of the Living God." Wow! That was some insight. Only God's Spirit could have convinced Peter of that. What a breakthrough! Jesus commended Peter. Peter was

the first to really see that Jesus was God. It was one of the high points of Peter's life.

And sometimes that's where backsliding starts ... At a high point in our lives. I've seen ministers hit the top and after a while, ruin in their lives morally. I've seen men elected to be deacons -- when the Bible calls a great honor -- and before you know it, they are drifting away from the very consecration they got them chosen to be one.

When we reach some great high point or victory, there is the danger of spiritual-pride, of self-satisfaction, of confidence in ourselves ... a kind of laid-back indifference to God's further working in our lives. Backsliding always begins with pride and self-satisfaction. "Pride comes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall."

Now a haughty spirit does not mean swaggering or walking around with your nose in the air. It just means that you are satisfied with yourself the way you are, and no one else better even insinuate you should be doing more or doing differently. This turns Christian living from a careful, step-by-step following of the Holy Spirit into a practice routine.

That's why Paul never backslid. Listen to what he said: "I count not myself to have arrived ... but I press for the mark ... Of God's high calling in Christ Jesus." When we stop pressing, that's when we've started our fall! People act surprised when I visit or call them. "I didn't know the pastor of a big church like that has time to visit the little people. Listen, when the day comes that I'm too big to care about little people, this church is on the skids. When your business is going so well that you don't think about improving your service, you are heading down. When you are content with your marriage and put it on the back burner and don't work at it, you've pointed it toward destruction. And when we take a laid-back professional Christian attitude about our walk and service with Christ, we have started to backslide!

From that day on, you can see Peter slide. Every time he opened his mouth, he said the wrong thing. His words came from the wisdom of a proud flesh.

He told Jesus not to go to Jerusalem, and Christ had to tell him "Satan, get behind me -- you don't understand the things of God." At the Transfiguration, he missed the point and wanted to build 3 churches. At the Last Supper, he said: "Not me. I won't deny you."

The final proof of his self-satisfaction and apathy came in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he fell asleep while Jesus sweat blood in prayer. Or what about the sword incident, where he cut off the soldiers ear, trying to defend Jesus. It's like so many people, confident of their own ability, trying to carry on the Lord's work in the power of their own flesh. They feel no need to repent of known sin, to pray, to fast, to witness. Yet they are always telling us how to run the church like they run their business. Friends, pride is always the beginning of backsliding ... the pride that defends our way against any change.

Noticed the steps that follow.

1. Peter "FOLLOWED JESUS AFAR OFF" - (vs. 15 -compare Mark 14:54). He got out-of-step with the Master. He didn't follow as closely as he once had. In fact, he became "stand-offish." (Vs. 16).

This is when I, as a Pastor, began to pick-up on the problem of backsliding. I notice friends who aren't with it like they used to be. They are letting down, dropping back, and staying away. If you are, I pray about it. It is a pretty firm symptom of trouble.

Now, I had sense enough to know that we all have busy times and emergencies. But I also remember when some of us were so in love with Jesus that it didn't matter. We were here and working for Jesus, anyway. I'd show some alarm over this situation. Peter "followed afar off" and "stood outside."

2. Then he tried TO WARM HIMSELF AT THE WORLD'S FIRE (vs. 18). That's right, Peter actually stood around with the enemies of Jesus and tried to get-in with them and find enjoyment from their pastimes.

This is pretty far along for the backslider. By this time, the warning light should be flashing. But, it is inevitable, if we keep sliding back. As soon as he gets away from Jesus' work ... maybe he's tired of serving ... watch him. He'll get just as busy or busier with some worldly activity.

Now there's nothing especially wrong with a lot of those worldly activities .. It was not evil to stand around the fire and warm your hands, except that it did not accomplish anything for ETERNITY. And followers of Jesus are to be laying up treasures for eternity.

That's why the world's fire never really warms a true Christian down deep for very long. A little bit of self-centered living goes along way with me. It leaves me cold!

And, if someone can go back and be comfortable for long, I fear that he has not backslidden -- he's lost. He never was "saved," regenerated, to begin with. It is just a case of the dog returning to his vomit and the sow to her mud hole (2 Peter 2: 22).

And, isn't it interesting, the people of the world sooner or later recognized us as not being them. We don't seem to fit. They asked Peter 3 times if he were not a disciple of Jesus. And, like Peter, we will do anything to prove we are regular guys, even to the point of denying our Lord.

3. Peter eventually WENT BACK TO HIS OLD WAYS (Matthew 26:74). He cursed. He declared to the other disciples: "I'm going back to fishing" (for fish-not men).

III. WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO STOP THIS BACKWARD SLIDE?

If we see that we are in one of these phases already, is there anyway to stop and turn around? I believe there is. That's why I'm preaching today.

If we can only HEAR THE COCKCROW (vs. 27). (Compare Mark 14:72) Peter remembered something Jesus said. It rang like a siren in his head. It showed him how far down he had come since that day, in his confidence, he had felt so self-secure. He wept bitterly. It was the first genuine heart-felt thing he had done for weeks.

I wish I knew what it was that would set off that reaction in your heart and mind. Perhaps, just my sermon will trumpet the truth. I'm giving the only sound I know to give, because I truly care. My Pastor's heart is breaking at some of the things I see. Please wake up to your condition!

Then TAKE ANOTHER LOOK TOWARD JESUS. Dare to look your Lord in the eyes again. Don't let church or its activities or Christian friends get in the way. No, personally, look into Jesus' eyes. See what He sees when He looks at you. Do you see disappointment in His eyes? Do you see rejected love? Or concern for your well being? Look at Him, my friend!

Luke tells us (22:61) that "the Lord turned and looked upon Peter." Their eyes met. No one had to give Peter a lecture. That look broke his heart. He saw the real issue: He had let down his Lord. "And he wept bitterly." It doesn't matter what I think about your condition or what the Baptists think about your lifestyle. Look at Jesus' eyes my friend. What do you see reflected there?

Then ACCEPT JESUS' SPECIAL OFFER. After Jesus arose, He left a message for the Angels to tell Mary: "Go your way, and tell His disciples and (especially) Peter ... that you shall see Him." (Mark 16:7)

Now why did He add "and especially Peter?" Doubtless, He knew how wretched and unworthy Peter felt because of his backsliding in denial. Jesus wanted to make sure that Peter knew he was forgiven and still wanted in the Lord's work.

Today, I'm delivering this same message to you. Jesus said: "Tell my disciples, and (especially) Jim, or Joe, or Helen, or Russ, or Susan ..." He's making it so personal to you. Don't let your guilt and embarrassment keep you from returning to His work.

Peter accepted Christ's invitation, got back with Him, and he became the leading disciple. His best days were ahead!

Confess your backsliding and accept His forgiveness. Turn around. And start moving forward again. Like Peter, your greatest days are still ahead!