

Backsliding¹

John 6:53ff

There was once a term frequently used in the church. In the old days it was used often. You rarely ever hear it today. Indeed, in my 17 years in the ministry I have never preached a sermon on the topic until now. Despite the infrequency with which it is mentioned, the concept, I think, is still valid. It is backsliding.

The term backsliding was popularized in the 1600's by John Bunyan in his very famous allegory **Pilgrim's Progress**. In the story the characters of Christian and Hopeful are on their religious pilgrimage. While on the journey they begin to discuss an individual by the name of Temporary. He had started the pilgrimage, but along the way he fell by the wayside, or, as Bunyan worded it, backslid. With Pilgrim's Progress in mind the phrase backsliding referred to those once faithful individuals who had lost interest in their Christian pilgrimage.

There are some who do not affirm the concept. They say once saved always saved. However the Bible does not affirm this. The individual who was free to choose the way of Christ is also free to turn his or her back on it. This morning's passage supports this.

Jesus had just finished one of his more obscure teachings. He said several things, which confused some and upset others. "I am the bread of life," he said. Some objected to this language because he was comparing himself to Moses who gave the children Manna, or bread, in the wilderness. Jesus then took it a step further and declared, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." This appeared odd to some because they knew he was the son of Mary and Joseph and not some modern day Elijah sent from heaven back down to earth. And then he just flat confused many because he suggested that everyone must eat his flesh and drink his blood otherwise they would die. It sounded too cannibalistic.

You can then understand why in verse 66 of chapter 6 we read that many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. Notice what is said, they turned

¹I am thankful to a sermon by the Reverend Brett Blair for much of the content found in the first three pages of this sermon.

back! They quit following. They became Temporary. I don't think a single reason can be identified as to why so many stopped following. John doesn't tell us. No doubt it was a combination of issues probably, as we have already noted: His teaching confused some. His images offended others. But primarily, I think it was his claim to be the new source of life, his claim to be greater than Moses, a new Manna. Either way, they weren't buying it and they left. Just like that. One day they were disciples and the next they were not. They became backsliders. So with this passage in mind, let us think more deeply about this theme of backsliding.

I

First, I would suggest that backsliding is a reality. It is a proven reality in scripture. The Bible is filled with people who started out well but who ended up tragically. For the sake of brevity I will offer just one example from the New Testament.

I hold up for your consideration the person of Demas. He is mentioned only three times. The first instance is in Philemon. Paul introduces him at verse 23 by saying: "Demas and Luke, my fellow workers." At that moment we can see what great esteem he was held in. He is equal with Luke, a fellow worker, and is even mentioned before him. It is evident that at this point he is a faithful follower of the Lord. The second time he is mentioned is in the Book of Colossians, in verse 4:14 Paul now writes: "Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas." Now something seems to have changed. Luke is mentioned first, rather than Demas. Not only that, there are words of praise for Luke, but Demas is mentioned only by name. It seems that Paul is not thinking of him as warmly any more.

Later, in Paul's letter to Timothy, he writes in 2 Timothy 4:10: "for Demas in love with this present world, has deserted me." There in a few words you have the story of a man's life. What started out with so much promise ended in disappointment.

Backsliding is not merely a problem for Biblical characters; it is an issue for the modern church. I can think of a number of families who were once part of our congregation and are now not here. As far as I know they are not worshipping anywhere. Perhaps you can think of people you know who like Demas started out as faithful followers and have since fallen away. Like Paul you know someone who was a fellow believer who has deserted you. Or perhaps if you look deep into your heart you know that your faith and commitment is wavering and like Demas you are more

in love with this present world than you are with Jesus and his modern day disciples.

Yes, just as backsliding was a reality in the bible, so it is today.

II

Secondly, I would pose the question: why do people backslide? There are many reasons for backsliding. Some of it is due to incomplete conversions. I wonder if we make it too easy for people to join the Anglican church, thereby setting up a situation whereby people may not take their baptismal and confirmation vows seriously enough. When Jesus fed the 5,000 by the Sea of Galilee he told the crowd: You seek me not because you saw a miracle, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. In other words, they followed him for what they could get out of it. We live in a day of cheap grace, and far too often crowd approval and peer pressure result in conversions that are not genuine. But while incomplete conversions may explain some backsliding, it does not get to the heart of the problem. Most backsliders do so, I am convinced, simply because their spiritual buckets develop a leak and much of their commitment seeps out.

We need to understand that there are certain periods in our lives when we are more susceptible to doing what these disciples did, turning back and no longer following him. The college years, for example: Out of earshot and eye range of mom and dad, the college student is often tempted to drop church. When a couple first gets married. So often love is blind concerning the spiritual relationship of marriage and faith is ignored. The promotions years, when we are focused on work: God so often gets crowded out of the picture. When we are suffering and we can not make sense of the suffering we can become angry towards God and so begin to backslide.

Perhaps most of all, however, people turn back because our priorities get flipped. Increasingly people resort to excuses as to why they cannot come to church. It's an indication of a dwindling spiritual life, hobbies, jobs, even family crowding God out of the picture. The road to backsliding is paved with excuses. It will cripple the Christian life.

All living things can die through neglect. A plant in a garden, a friendship, a

marriage--all can wither if not nourished. I have never met a person who crashed out of the Christian life. By that, I mean that I have never personally known an individual who woke up one morning and announced: From now on I will not be a Christian. I will turn my back on God, on the Bible, on the church. I have known people who oozed out of a once vital faith with the Master. It was done simply through neglect and inattention. The flame of faith was extinguished through neglect.

III

Third, I would warn that there is a consequence to backsliding. Perhaps no other story in scripture explains it better than the story of Samson. He once had such a rich vital relationship with the living God, but ever so slowly he went the way of backsliding. One day Samson got up to do battle with the Philistines and in Judges 16:20 we read the most salient verse in his life's story. It reads: He did not know that the Lord had departed from him. Suddenly Samson found himself in the midst of battle and he called upon his reservoir of faith, only to discover, much to his surprise, that it was empty. Only then was he awakened to the reality that his relationship with God was not a burning fire, but a cold ember.

Far too many repeat the story of Samson. But the Good News for today is that when we become aware of why we have backslid and can identify that our relationship with God has grown cold we can come back to a closer walk with God. Remember the distance that you have put between yourself and God means nothing. The tragedy is not the distance; it is that your love is no longer vital. We can return when we evaluate our closeness to God and the church and repent our sinful excuses. When this happens we can draw close to Jesus and recognize that the only way to have a vital relationship with him is when we feed on him regularly and with others

Please follow along with me at verse 53 of chapter 6:

“Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.⁵⁴ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;⁵⁵ for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.⁵⁶ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not

like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

Do you notice the repetition of the word "eat" in this passage. It is used five times. The Greek word used here is the word, trogan -- used for the munching of feed by animals. His use of the word here is shocking -- attention-getting. This is the opposite of backsliding. This is a person who is attentive to their relationship with Jesus.

Know think about cows with me for a minute munching their grass in the field. Do you see solitary cows feeding? Not usually. They are together munching away. Cows in the fields chewing their cud is as much a part of an Alberta landscape as our the Rocky Mountains and prairie fields. It is a picture taken from our everyday life here.

When Jesus says that we to feed on him, to eat his flesh, keep before you he picture of cows in the field. Look at the Eucharist as one of the places where he feeds us in this way. For just as the cow can chew on the same bit of grass for hours because of how God has designed their digestive system, so to when we choose to make the Sunday Eucharist central to our lives we can chew on Jesus and receive that food which is true food and that drink which is true drink. Like cows each one of us has to take the food for ourselves, but also like cows, we don't do this alone but together. It is also worth mentioning that there will be those Sundays when you won't want to come to the Eucharist. You will perhaps want to make excuses. But ask yourself honesty "Is my excuse legitimate. If it isn't be here.

Jesus says we need this meal if we are going to stay close to him and growing in our relationship with him.

Yes the scripture and experience make it plain that backsliding is a reality, that has numerous causes and results in the Lord departing from us. Jesus by using the word eat repeatedly in this morning's passage makes it clear that such a departure is not his will for us. No he want us to munch, to feed on him in the company of others. If we do this attentively and regularly we will not be like the majority who that day turned away but with Peter we will say: "Lord to whom shall we go. You have the words of eternal life.