

What is the most serious sin a Christian can commit? If we had an open debate this morning, I'm quite sure we would list sexual sins - such as homosexuality, adultery, promiscuity, fornication, and any kind of illicit sexual behavior - and certainly sexual sins are serious in the life of any Christian. Relational sins would also be listed - such as malice, gossip, anger, bitterness, envy, backbiting, slander - and certainly sins which destroy our relationships with other people are serious sins in the life of any Christian. I'm quite certain that spiritual sins would be identified- such as lack of faith, prayerlessness, ingratitude, greed, arrogance, neglect - and surely all spiritual sins are serious in the life of the Christian. And by the way, the Bible speaks clearly regarding sexual sins, relational sins, and spiritual sins. But no sin is more destructive to the cause of Christ and the health of the church than the sin of backsliding. I'm proposing this morning that backsliding is the most serious sin a Christian can commit. Our Scriptural focus this morning is Hebrews 3:7-13

7) Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: *Today, if you hear his voice, 8) do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, 9) where your fathers tested me, tried me, and saw my works 10) for forty years.* Therefore I was provoked to anger with that generation and said, *They always go astray in their hearts, and they have not known my ways.* 11) So I swore in my anger, *They will not enter my rest.* 12) Watch out, brothers and sisters, so that there won't be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. 13) But encourage each other daily, while it is still called today, so that none of you is hardened by sin's deception.

Backsliding defines an unbelieving heart that departs from the living God. In the Old Testament, backsliding is the term used to describe a person or a nation once close to God but now having moved away from God and gone astray. 2 Chronicles 29:6 declares, *"For our fathers were unfaithful and did what is evil in the sight of the LORD our God. They abandoned Him, turned their faces away from the LORD's tabernacle, and turn their backs on Him."* The prophet Jeremiah was sent by God to speak to the sin of backsliding. Listen to Jeremiah 2:19 – *"Your own evil will discipline you; your own apostasies will reprimand you. Think it over and see how evil and bitter it is for you to abandon the LORD your God and to have no fear of Me."* When Jesus speaks to the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2, He confronts them, *"I have this against you: you have abandoned the love you had at first."* Backsliding is abandoning God – turning away from a complete commitment to God.

Now, let's be clear – **All Christians backslide.** Christians aren't perfect or sinless. Christians are just forgiven. Because the Christian life involves growth and discipleship, the possibility of regression and failure also exists. How far can a Christian wander away from God and still rightly be called a Christian? I don't know. How deep into sin can a believer fall and still be called a believer? I don't know. How long can one stray away from God and still be called a child of God? I don't know. Only God can judge a person's heart and a person's decision. But I do know that a true Christian who abandons God and departs from a Christian way of life will either repent and return to fellowship with God, or face the stern discipline of God. Hebrews 3 affirms three reasons why backsliding is such a serious sin.

1. Backsliding Provokes God's Anger. Hebrews 3 personalizes God's anger. Verse 9 implies God's irritation with Israel in that they tested him. In verse 10, **"Provoke" induces God grief or disgust.** (Herschel Hobbs, *Hebrews: Challenge to Bold Discipleship*, p. 35) In verse 11, the word **"Anger" defines Gods abiding wrath.** (Hobbs, p. 36) What in the world could cause God to be irritated, grieved or angry? This warning comes from Exodus and Numbers, when Moses led Israel out of Egyptian slavery, through the waters of the Red Sea, across the Sinai peninsula, to the borders of the Promised Land. In their journey through the wilderness God demonstrated His sufficiency to meet every need. When they were hungry, He rained manna and quail from heaven. When they were thirsty, He poured water from a rock. When they faced impossible odds in battle, He forged victory. In every circumstance God provided for their needs. God's provision defined one of the greatest mathematical miracles in the history of the world. How do you feed over one million people (some historians estimate the number of Israelites during the exodus to be closer to three million)? According to the Army Quartermaster General, it would take 1500 tons of food daily, enough to fill up two freight trains, each a mile long. It would also require 4,000 tons of firewood daily to cook that food. If they only had enough water to drink and wash a few dishes, it would take 11 million gallons each day, enough to fill up a freight train with tank cars 1,800 miles long. Every time they camped at the end of the day, a campground two-thirds the size of state of Rhode Island was required, or 750 square miles. Do you think Moses figured all of this out before he led them out of Egypt? I doubt it. Moses trusted in the mighty power of God and God provided the basic needs of food and water.

So that when they come to the Promised Land, instead of responding in faith and obedience to enter, they refused to listen to the voice of God and they rebelled against the will of God. They turned back into the wilderness where they would

wander for forty years. The Lord was so angered at their disobedience and lack of faith that He swore that the adults of that faithless generation would never inherit the land. During those forty years of wilderness wandering, an entire generation died. Every person age twenty and older died in the wilderness and never entered the land God promised, except for two: Joshua and Caleb, the only ones to believe God.

With that illustration from the past, the author of Hebrews sounds the **WARNING: Nothing angers God more than a Christian turning away and going astray.** You say, "*But the Bible says that God is patient and long-suffering and slow to anger.*" Absolutely, and aren't you glad that He is. However, the Bible also defines a limit to God's patience. Hebrews 12:29 describes God as a consuming fire, and Hebrews 10:31 warns that it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Paul Powell is right – "*Gods wrath is not a divine temper tantrum.*" (*If the Dead Could Speak*, p. 86) God takes rebellion seriously. When a Christian, a believer, a child of God, backslides, turns away and goes astray from God, it is a serious sin before a holy God.

2. Backsliding is the most serious sin a Christian can commit because it **produces a hardened heart.** If it were true that God never becomes angry, we must still deal with the reality that our hearts would eventually harden. Twice in this text the hardening of the heart is mentioned. In verse 8, we are challenged, "*do not harden your hearts*", and then in verse 13, we are warned not to be *hardened by sin's deception*. Which is it? Do we harden our own hearts or does rebellious sin harden our hearts? The answer is "Yes!" Willful disobedience and rebellion can lead to a hardened heart. But it's also true that sin's deception produces a hardened heart. When Satan tempts us with sin, he never tells the whole truth. If Satan were to expose the consequences of our sin, I am certain we would not yield to the temptation. James 1:14 reminds us that "*each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desires. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it give birth to death. Therefore, don't be deceived.*" The word "entice" means "to bait the hook." No fisherman drops a bare hook into the water. He baits the hook to entice the fish. The bait can be a brightly colored plastic worm, a fancy lure, a wiggling shiner, a live shrimp. The baited hook is cast into the water.

One individual sin does not disqualify, but a lifestyle of sin leads to rebellion. The restoration of Simon Peter in John 21 proves that one failure is not final. However, one sin, one rebellion, one decision can lead to a lifestyle of falling back or going astray – abandonment, and that journey eventually hardens a Christian's heart. **The heart of every problem is a problem of the heart.**

At the same time, God sends the Holy Spirit to convict us of sin. Every time we ignore His conviction, our hearts become more hardened to the things of God. To our spiritual ears, God's voice grows weaker and fainter until we hardly hear it. The more we backslide, the easier it becomes. Herschel Hobbs tells about moving to a new pastorate. The church buildings, including the pastor's home, were located right next to the train tracks. He said their first night there, he and his wife were fast asleep and were suddenly awakened by a deafening noise. The house shook and the window rattled. Then they realized that it was the nightly train. For the next few nights, they were awakened by the same train as it rumbled through town. But after a few weeks, they became so accustomed to the sound that they would sleep right through it. Dr. Hobbs said that one morning he awakened to hear voices outside his bedroom window. He peered out, and to his astonishment, that nightly freight train had derailed right behind his house. There were several overturned freight cars in his back yard. First responders were gathered at the scene. And he had slept right through it! The same thing that is true about our physical ears is true about our spiritual ears. As it is with trains, so it is with the voice of the Holy Spirit. When we hear the voice of God, but we do not respond to it, we become insensitive to it. Our hearts become hardened. Backsliding is serious because it produces a hardened heart.

3. Backsliding is a Christian's most serious sin because it **presumes a guaranteed future**. Twice in this warning, the word "*today*" is used. In verse seven is the warning, "*Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.*" And in verse 13, we are to encourage one another "*while it is still called today.*" Verses 7-11 in this text is a direct quote from Psalm 95. When the Psalmist wrote about the events of the Exodus Israelites, several hundred years had passed. Likewise, when the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 95, several hundred more years had passed. In verse 13, "*while it is still today*" shouts the urgent warning that **Today will not last forever, and tomorrow may never come.**

In Luke 12, Jesus told a story of a rich man who lived only for materialism. His fields produced so abundantly that he tore down his old barns and built new and bigger ones. He felt secure and self-assured so that he said to himself, "*You have many goods stored up for many years. Take it easy; eat, drink, and enjoy yourself.*" Little did he know that he had no future on this earth, for God said to him, "*You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you. And the things you have prepared – whose will they be?*" Tony Campolo affirmed, "*It was better when we used hourglasses to keep the time. Clocks, with their revolving hands or their continuous rotation of time, create the illusion that time goes on forever. Hourglasses remind us that time is running out.*" **A backslidden Christian lives with the risk that today may run out.**

Get Right with God and Stay Right With God. This sermon is intended to be an urgent warning to all of us who live out our Christian faith. You may not be like the many people who wander so far from the Lord that they never return. But to wander away from the Lord, to abandon faithfulness, to fall into a pattern of casual and convenient Christianity, is to live on the edge of committing the most serious sin a Christian can commit. May we leave today with the words of Robert Robinson's great hymn on our hearts, *"Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God, He to rescue me from danger, interposed His precious blood. Oh to grace how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be! Let thy goodness like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee, Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love. Here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for they courts above."* (Robert Robinson, *Come, thou Fount of Every Blessing*)