

Restoring Grace

Your relationship to Jesus Christ is like any other relationship in that it has to be maintained. No relationship ever stays the same. You're either growing closer to the Lord or you're drifting away. You never just stand still. You don't become a Christian and that's it. You don't reach a point where you're stable with God. Your heart is either growing warmer each day or it's growing colder.

We've all known Christians who are no longer walking with the Lord. They've fallen away. At one point their hearts were on fire for God but now they're just not. We all know the struggles in our own heart. We face temptations. We have ups and downs; days when we just don't follow thru with our faith.

The good news is God offers us a kind of grace that can restore; renew; revitalize us. When we drift, walk away, stumble, we can come back. We can pray like Lamentations 5:21: *"Restore us, O Lord, and bring us back to you again! Give us back the joys we once had!"* That's what I want to talk about this morning. Getting joy back in your Christian life. You may have been a believer for months, years or decades and maybe it's gone a little stale or you're not feeling as close to the Lord as you once did. How do you get joy back?

Well, first, let's cover three common causes of why people drift or fall away. There are many reasons people backslide, but these are the most common.

Matthew tells the story of Peter's denial of Jesus on the night Jesus was betrayed and arrested. In that story, we have examples of these common reasons for backsliding. Jesus has been in the upper room with the disciples and they're going elsewhere to pray. Matthew 26 says, *"On the way, Jesus told them, 'Tonight all of you will desert me. For the Scriptures say, 'God will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have been raised from the dead, I will go ahead of you to Galilee and meet you there.' Peter declared, 'Even if everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you.' Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, Peter—this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me.' 'No!' Peter insisted. 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!' And all the other disciples vowed the same."*

Right there is the first reason many people backslide: We tend to backslide **1. When We Become Over-Confident**. We start thinking we can handle things on our own. We begin to think we are strong enough so we'll never fall away. We look at other people and think, "That would never happen to me!" But if you see someone stumbling and think, "That couldn't happen to me" you're setting yourself up for a fall. Given the right situation, any of us is capable of any sin. The Bible says, "The heart is deceitful." We lie to ourselves as much as we lie to others. We don't even always know why we do what we do. Overconfidence can be the first step in falling away.

1 Corinthians 10:12 says *"If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall."* It's the moment when we feel we're doing pretty good when we're most vulnerable to falling into a trap or making a misstep. Proverbs 16:18 says a proud attitude leads to ruin. *"Pride goes before destruction, and haughtiness before a fall."*

We also tend to backslide, **2. When We Begin Slacking Off**. We get lethargic or weary. All the good habits like praying every day, reading the Bible every day, being in a small group start to fade. We say, "I'm too tired for that right now." Or "It's just too much for me to do." That's a warning sign – a symptom. We see this happen to Peter. He just got tired.

Matthew 26:35-38 says, *"Then Jesus went with them to the olive grove called Gethsemane, and he said, 'Sit here while I go over there to pray.' He took Peter and Zebedee's two sons, James and John, and he became anguished and distressed. He told them, 'My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.' He went on a little farther and bowed with his face to the ground, praying, 'My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.' Then he returned to the disciples and found them asleep. He said to Peter, 'Couldn't you watch with me even one hour? Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak!'"*

Jesus knew he was going to be arrested and then executed. He had told them what was going to happen. Even if he hadn't, they were well aware of the hostile environment they were in. But even with all of that, they fell asleep.

When you're tired, you're way too likely to let things slide and set yourself up for temptations. In life it's almost always more difficult to do the right thing than it is to do the wrong thing. It's typically easier to do the wrong thing - it's usually the easiest thing. If you really want to do the right thing, it takes effort, determination and stamina. As a Christian you're meant to try to do the right thing all the time, so you're going to get tired - emotionally, physically and spiritually. If you don't work on recharging yourself emotionally, spiritually and physically, fatigue sets in. Tired people are vulnerable to temptation.

When Christians stumble in major ways in their life, it's often during times of stress, fatigue or exhaustion, when they're tired they ignore warning signs; don't take time for their faith life; don't put a real effort into prayer; don't get into the Bible as much. They set themselves up for failure. Fatigue lowers defenses and makes you vulnerable. As Jesus said to Peter: "*Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak!*"."

We also tend to backslide, **3. When We Become Concerned About the Cost.** We worry about what we might lose. We want to keep our control over our lives. We like the teachings and the reassuring feelings we get from Jesus, but we don't like the idea of the price we may pay for being his follower. We worry about what other people think. We're afraid they'll reject us, won't accept us, make fun of us, put us down.

After Jesus was arrested Matthew 26:57-58 says, "*Then the people who had arrested Jesus led him to the home of Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of religious law and the elders had gathered. Meanwhile, Peter followed him at a distance and came to the high priest's courtyard. He went in and sat with the guards and waited to see how it would all end.*" So Jesus has been arrested and Peter is staying just far enough back so that nobody could identify him with Jesus.

Do you ever try to follow Jesus at a distance? You want to be a follower, but let's not get fanatical about it! Let's not get radical. Someone might think you're a nut case. One of the signs that you're slipping away is you start to feel uncomfortable about expressing your relationship with God. You want to follow at a distance. You're slow to represent your faith in public, to talk about faith, to invite other people. What would they think? You're embarrassed you might be thought of as a nutty religious person. So you keep it quiet.

There's an epidemic of this in America today. Oh, people will stand up for political things - on whatever side of things they're on. Nobody wants to stand up for the things Jesus stood up for. Proverbs 29:25 says, "*Fearing people is a dangerous trap, but trusting the Lord means safety.*" When you start worrying about what other people think; when it becomes more important than what God wants; more important than getting God's message out, you're headed for trouble. It's a trap and it's going to catch you.

In Mark 8:38 Jesus said, "*If anyone is ashamed of me and my message in these adulterous and sinful days, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.*" That's powerful stuff. There are no secret agents in God's army, no closet Christians. A lot of Christians talk about anything BUT Jesus.

We want to have a faith but we want a comfortable faith. Sure I want to follow Christ as long as it doesn't cramp my style. Look what happened to Peter. It says, "*He went in and sat with the guards and waited to see how it would all end.*" Mark's version of that scene says, "*...Peter was in the courtyard below. One of the servant girls who worked for the high priest came by and noticed Peter warming himself at the fire.*" Jesus is about to be executed and Peter sits there in the crowd, just one of the gang, warming himself at the fire. The very people who are going to torture and execute Christ and he's sitting around a campfire with them. Hanging out, wanting to be comfortable. This is basically saying, "I want to follow Christ when it's comfortably safe. But if it's not, forget it."

If you try to enjoy the world's campfire, you're going to get burned. You're not in the that kingdom, that world, that same lifestyle any more.

I've been in vocational ministry now for over 30 years and I've seen a lot. I've seen people flame out, people sidelined, people who were once strong believers but today can't be found anywhere. I've seen disciples who walk with Christ as long as it's comforting and safe for them. Then they start to fall away. Sometimes they leave the church, sometimes they go somewhere less demanding, sometimes they stay but they don't do much. Whatever they do, there's a pattern that tends to happen when people fall away from Christ. It's not always exactly the same but it's pretty consistent.

When a person's real active in a church and they start falling away the first thing that starts to suffer is their giving. The first thing that fades is giving. Jesus said where your treasure is your heart will be. Your giving indicates your heart.

The second thing that tends to fade is real, heartfelt, committed daily prayer. They don't pray on a conscious, habitual basis as much.

The third thing is they stop attending as regularly.

What happens to them? What happens to someone who's a genuine believer, who's committed their life to Christ, but for one reason or another they've backslidden and they're not walking with the Lord as much or as well as they use to?

Well, you don't lose your salvation simply by sinning. Aren't you glad for that? If you could lose your salvation every time you sin you'd lose it a few times an hour at least! Let's say you lived for Jesus Christ your entire life and five minutes before you die you blow it, you commit some sinful act and then you walk out the door and get hit by a bus and you go to hell. If that were true you'd live in fear your entire life!

If you were saved by your works, you could lose it if you simply stopped working. But you're not saved that way. Romans 8:1 says, "... *now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.*" That word "no" is the strongest possible negative in the Greek language. There's no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. This isn't a universal promise. It's not saying anyone can do whatever they want and there's no condemnation. It's for those who are in Christ Jesus. If you've put your trust in Christ and remain a genuine believer in Christ, there's no condemnation.

But you CAN stop being a believer, and that becomes easier and easier to do the further you drift away from him. It's like when a couple drift further and further away from one another in their relationship. They're still married. They still relate on some levels. But if they continue to let things drift, the time can eventually come when they've drifted far enough apart so that the relationship has really ended, despite the fact that they're still nominally together. That can happen with your faith life too. You can surrender your salvation.

And notice that it says "*There is no condemnation*" it doesn't say there are no consequences. There are a lot of consequences for sin. When I get out of God's will for my life, when I ignore God's will there are major consequences. Every time you disobey God, every time you ignore God's will, every time you backslide, you lose big time. You hurt yourself and other people. The most miserable people on earth often aren't unbelievers – they're believers who know better but are acting like unbelievers.

So How Does God's Grace Respond When We Backslide or Sin? God could let us go, but God doesn't just dump us. What does God do when we sin or fall away?

1. God Continues to Love Us. God doesn't say, "I love you if..." you're good, perfect, whatever. He doesn't say, "I love you because..." God loves you ... period God loved me before I ever did anything for God. God loves all of us that way. Romans 5:8 says, "...*God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.*" And God will never stop loving me. Romans 8:39 says, "*No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" God will never stop loving you because we're recipients of God's grace. Jesus Christ came to love us. John 1:17 says, "*For the law was given through Moses, but God's unending love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ.*"

2. God Continues to Give Us Mercy. Lamentations 3:22 says, "*The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease.*" God doesn't reject believers when they sin because salvation isn't based on performance. Romans 9:16 says "...*it is God who decides to show mercy. We can neither choose it nor work for it.*" We covered this in detail in the very first message in this series on Saving Grace. I'll say it again: The only hope you have of getting into heaven is by the grace of God. You can't earn your way in, buy your way in, work your way in, bluff your way in, whatever. If you don't get saved by grace, you're not getting saved.

Titus 3:5 says, "...*he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.*" God doesn't reject me because God's love is unconditional and my salvation isn't based on my performance.

3. God Continues to Forgive Us. God doesn't reject me when I sin because Jesus has already died for my sins if I've accepted that as a believer. Two thousand years ago, Jesus paid the price for you; served your sentence; took the death penalty for you. I don't know how to say it any clearer than this. If you are a Christian and you've received the grace of God, God does not punish you when you sin. That punishment was already taken by Jesus on the cross.

1 John 2:2 says, "*He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.*" That's why grace is available to us - even when we're unaware of it. Jesus made it so that grace is available to everyone, all the time.

Some people might ask, "If Jesus has already been punished for all the things we're going to do then does that mean we can do whatever we want? If all my sins have already been punished and paid for then why can't I can go

out and do whatever I want to. I can cheat on my income tax. I can lie. I can steal. I can do whatever I want. It's already been punished so I'm not going to have to pay for it."

Grace isn't a license. While God doesn't condemn or punish you, as God's child you'll be disciplined. What's that? Punishment is retribution for the past. Discipline is correction for the future. Punishment is done in anger. Discipline is done in love and for our good. 1 Corinthians 11:32 says, *"...when we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned along with the world."*

God will use the consequences of sin to teach or discipline. God wants you to learn, to grow and move closer and closer to what God meant for you to be. Proverbs 15:32 says, *"If you reject discipline, you only harm yourself; but if you listen to correction, you grow in understanding."*

4. God Continues to Understand Us. God's sympathetic and understanding. God knows my frailties, my faults. Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus *"...understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin."* When Jesus Christ was here on the earth, he fully experienced the temptations human being face. He understands what it's like to be a human being because he lived in human flesh. He's sympathetic. He understands your weaknesses. He knows what you're going through.

5. God Lovingly Calls Us Back. In Jeremiah 3:22 God speaks to those who had fallen away: *"My wayward children,' says the Lord, 'come back to me, and I will heal your wayward hearts.'" When we sin, God calls us to repent and return. When we fall away, God wants us back.*

We don't have to fear God we feel like we can't be a part of God's family if we've failed to live up to our faith - our failure or success isn't what made us members of God's family in the first place. When John was writing to the early church he told them in 1 John 2:12 *"I am writing to you who are God's children because your sins have been forgiven through Jesus."* We have been forgiven. Like prodigal children, God always calls us to come back home.

Psalms 103 says this: *"God will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever. He has not punished us for all our sins, nor does He deal with us as we deserve ... He is like a father to His children, tender and compassionate to those who fear Him."* This is the benefit of being a believer. God doesn't hold a grudge toward me. If you are a believer, God is not angry with you. All of the punishment was taken on the cross.

What Should I Do When I Sin or Backslide? Just Return! Come back to Christ. No matter what you've done or haven't done, God can restore - restore your joy and wipe out your guilt. God says in Isaiah 1:18, *"Come now, let's settle this,' says the Lord. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool.'" Romans 4:7-8 quotes David in Psalm 51 and says, "Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sins are put out of sight. Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of sin."*

There's a happy ending to the story of Peter's denial. If ever there was a sin you'd think was unforgivable, it's denying Jesus three times on the night he's betrayed. But Jesus knew Peter would deny him and knew he would come back. Before it even happened, Jesus said to Peter in the upper room, *"...Satan has asked to sift each of you like wheat. But I have pleaded in prayer for you, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen your brothers."* He knew he would return. And Jesus knew that Peter's ministry would be more effective after his denial than it was before. And sure enough it was.

On Easter morning when the three women went to the tomb, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, the stone was rolled away and an angel was sitting on it. The angel said, He's not here. He's in heaven. In Mark 16:7 it says they said, "Go tell his disciples and Peter." Jesus knew that Peter was devastated by his denial. Now he singles out Peter's name in particular. That's the grace of restoration.

Later in John 21 during one of the many times Jesus appeared to people after the resurrection, Peter and the fishermen are out fishing. They see Jesus on the shore. Peter doesn't wait and dives in and swims to shore. Jesus has a conversation with Peter. Jesus says, "Do you love me?" Peter says, "You know, Lord, I love you." Jesus says, "Peter, do you really love me?" Peter said, "Lord, you know I love you." And Jesus said a third time, "Peter, do you really love Me." Peter said again, "You know Lord, I love you."

Jesus gave Peter three opportunities to affirm what he had denied three times. That is the restoring grace of God. You may think God's forgotten you. God hasn't. If you're not as close to Christ as you used to be, pray the prayer David prayed when he came back to God. In Psalm 51 David prayed, *"Restore to me again the joy of your salvation."* Over the next few weeks, take the opportunity to build, rebuild or grow further in your relationship with God thru God's grace. Let's pray.