

**“Backsliding”**  
**Proverbs 14:8-15**  
**July 19, 2009**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

We’re looking today at the sin of backsliding. A backslider is one who seems to make a start in walking on the path of wisdom, but for some reason leaves that path and begins walking another. There was news back in March of 100,000 Britons downloading a certificate of de-baptism from the internet as part of their renunciation of Christianity. They were obviously backsliders. Many of us can think of someone who has completed the process of backsliding. Some are hostile to Christianity, while most are simply apathetic. I can think of some who have grown up in this church but have walked away from the Lord. I can think of adults who were once actively involved in church and seemed to have an authentic walk with the Lord, but who seem now to have no interest whatsoever in following Jesus.

The sin of backsliding is mentioned only one time in the book of Proverbs, and it is here in verse 14. **“The backslider in heart will be filled with the fruit of his ways.”** Notice that he is called the backslider *in heart*. Backsliding begins in the heart long before it results in someone asking for a certificate of de-baptism. Backsliders keep attending church and keep behaving as Christians in many different external ways. But something has happened in the heart that, if unchecked, will lead to bad results. That’s what our verse is saying. The backslider “will be fully repaid in his ways” (NIV). Backsliding is like a boat drifting away after being untied from the dock. If you were on such a boat and didn’t notice that it had been untied, you would not feel anything as the boat drifted away. But if you waited long enough, you may look up and find the dock completely out of sight. That’s what happens with the process of backsliding. It is a great danger that will prevent us from living the life of wisdom Proverbs urges upon us. Notice three helps our passage gives us in delivering us from coming to that point of downloading a certificate of de-baptism.

**I. Receive the Warning**

In order to understand the force of this warning, we need to see the larger context in which this idea of backsliding appears. The larger context runs from verses 8 to 15 and talks about the paths on which we walk in life. I’ve mentioned before that the book of Proverbs is not a collection of unrelated sayings. Rather, the compiler has grouped these sayings thematically, and he lets us know what the groupings are by various devices. One of those devices is bracketing, by which he will begin and end a section with a similar statement that forms the theme of that section. Verses 8-15 form a section that is bracketed by the theme of life as a

path or way. So we read in verse 8, **“The wisdom of the prudent is to discern his way,”** and then verse 15, **“The prudent gives thought to his steps.”**

The metaphor of the path is a common one in the book of Proverbs and throughout the Bible. Life is like a path on which we walk, and the most common way people get in trouble is by choosing the wrong path. Once the path is chosen, there is a certain inevitability to the outcome, as the one walking on the path simply keeps moving along that chosen path. The path carries him in a certain direction that he no longer chooses, but one in which the path itself makes the choice. Trying harder by walking faster will only take one further from his goal if the wrong path is chosen. So the warning is to be careful about the path one chooses. The error of the backslider comes long before he renounces the Lord, but lies in the path that was chosen long before the final apostasy.

In order for a warning to be effective, two things must happen. First, there must be an acknowledgement that the warning is intended for me and not someone else, and second, there must be a danger to be perceived. So many warnings are not heard because the conclusion is drawn that they apply to someone else. There are two things in this passage that should cause us to pause and receive the warning for ourselves. There is first of all the statement in verse 8: **“The wisdom of the prudent is to discern his way, but the folly of fools is deceiving.”** The idea here is that the fool deceives himself, in contrast to the shrewd or prudent person who gives thought to his way. The fool blindly walks forward full of a false confidence. He is self-deceived. The second idea that ought to help us to apply the warning to ourselves is the last word of verse 15, the word “step.” **“The prudent gives thought to his steps.”** The step is the smallest increment of progress along the path. There is a saying in the world of finances that makes the same point. “Watch your pennies, and your dollars will take care of themselves.” So we could say, “Watch the small steps you take in life, and the overall direction of your life will take care of itself.” The errors against which we are being warned here are the daily decisions that are made by which we start along the wrong path in life. Let me say it this way. There could be a number of backsliders in this room right now, even though you have chosen to attend church this morning. You could be a backslider because your heart has chosen to take a step along the wrong path, even while the externals of life still look right.

So we must first receive the warning as applying to ourselves and not another. This warning applies to us all. The second thing needed for a warning to be effective is to see the danger about which we are being warned as a great danger rather than a small one. The author is clear in his warning that the stakes could not be higher—destruction and death result from the failure to heed the warning. So verse 12 says, **“There is a way [or path] that seems right to man, but its end is the way to death.”** We should fear this sin of backsliding, because the dangers are great.

In 1974, a commercial jet operated by Avianca Airlines crashed because the pilot failed to heed a warning. The Spanish pilot was flying too low in foggy conditions. The onboard computer spotted an approaching mountain and repeatedly warned the pilot in its computer-generated voice, "Pull up, now." The pilot, who didn't speak English, finally got tired of hearing it and angrily responded, "Shut up, Gringo," as he reached over to turn off the voice. Two minutes later, the plane crashed into the side of a mountain and killed all onboard. Like that computer-generated warning, we often hear the voice of God as an unwanted intrusion into our lives, with the result that we don't listen.

## II. Don't Walk By Sight

Our passage gives us further help by telling us of the path we are to avoid, as well as the one we are to follow. Let's look now at the path to be avoided, the one of walking by sight. There are two verses in particular that warn us off this path of walking by sight. The first is the well-known 12<sup>th</sup> verse. **"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death."** The reason we are warned off the path of walking by sight is that our sight is defective, leading to poor judgments. If we believed this verse, the result would be to distrust our own conclusions about life. We are like the thirsty person adrift on the ocean who doesn't know that he shouldn't drink the salty ocean water. So in his thirst he drinks to his heart's content, only to find that the way he thought was the proper way to meet his need has in fact brought about a quicker death. So it seems right to the high school student to do whatever it takes to be a part of that popular group at school, but what feels so right deadens the soul. It seems right to structure one's life in order to make a lot of money. If family and church have to be neglected for a short time in order to do so, the promise is made to oneself and others that it will all be made up one day, once the hoped for success comes. But the way that seems right turns out to bring death to the soul. Our translation is not quite accurate here. The word for *way* is actually plural, so that it should read, **"the end of it is the ways to death."** There are many ways to destruction, but all have in common this element of self-trust, of being convinced of one's rightness.

Our memory verse this week is a verse that speaks to this area of not walking by sight. It appears in the middle of Jesus' analogy of the vine and the branches. **"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing"** (John 15:5). Like the branch of the grapevine that has been removed from the vine, we can do nothing. An important step in fighting the sin of backsliding is to agree with Jesus throughout the day. As you memorize this verse this week, try to apply it by voicing this prayer before all your activities. "Jesus, as I get up from bed this morning and read my Bible, help me to remember that apart from you nothing of significance will be able to happen." As you go to work, as you pick up the phone to make a call, as you prepare for a meeting or watching over a

playgroup for your children, pray that Jesus would help you to step away from walking by sight by agreeing with him that apart from him you can do nothing.

The second verse that helps us understand what it means not to walk by sight is one of the most pessimistic verses in the Bible. **“Even in laughter the heart may ache, and the end of joy may be grief”** (v. 13). Like the background on your computer screen, this verse says that sorrow forms the background of our lives. The first response of the baby as it takes its first breath is to cry, and the end of life is accompanied by grief. Moments of joy and laughter are merely interruptions to this overriding theme of sorrow. What does this have to do with walking by sight? Those who walk by sight will be focused on achieving personal happiness, but that is a losing proposition. Better to put our focus elsewhere, on the outcome recommended in the book of Proverbs. That outcome is to fear the Lord and love people, to be wise and godly.

C. S. Lewis has a well-known and helpful illustration about this in his book *Mere Christianity*. Using the analogy of a house, he says inviting Jesus into our lives is like inviting a contractor into your old house. You think that he will help you by painting a few walls and cleaning up some nasty things that you have long recognized as needing attention. But then he starts removing walls and making changes far bigger than you had anticipated. It soon becomes evident that he has in mind a much grander vision for your house than you had imagined. That’s the case with Jesus. We often want him to come in with the modest goal of making the existing purposes of our lives work better. He comes in with a different idea, wanting to change our purposes to his grand purpose. Unless we are ready to submit to him in this, we are going to bolt when he gets out his sledgehammer instead of the paintbrush we expected.

### **III. Walk By Faith**

The proverb writer is urging us not to walk by sight because he wants us to trust something other than ourselves. To walk by faith is to seek the wisdom that God has for us in his word. True wisdom cannot be acquired through human reason, but must come by revelation from God. If we are to avoid the danger of backsliding, we are going to need to renounce walking by sight and embrace walking by faith through God’s revealed word. These two elements of walking by faith instead of by sight go together. Wendy went to college at Covenant College on top of Lookout Mountain. She reports that there were times when the fog would descend in such thickness that you couldn’t see more than a few feet in front of your face. On one particular occasion, she said that she was in a car with someone else when such a thick fog descended. The only way they could get to their destination was for her to open her passenger door and guide the driver by the line marking the side of the pavement. Just as she submitted to that line, so we must submit ourselves to the word of God. The path that doesn’t lead to backsliding is the one marked by our submission to God’s word at every step.

The first parable Jesus told was about this topic of backsliding. The parable of the seed, the soils and the sower was one that speaks of our need to walk by faith in God's word. A man goes out to sow seed in his field. As he casts the seed by hand, some falls on the hard ground at his feet. The birds eagerly devour it. Other seed falls on rocky soil, which refers not to soil with lots of rocks in it, but to shallow soil with a rock base only a few inches deep. Those seeds germinate quickly, but because the soil is shallow, they also die quickly. Then there is the seed sown in the soil that is filled with weeds, which choke out the word. Finally, there is the seed sown in the good soil, seed that bears abundant fruit. It's not hard to know what this parable is about, because Jesus interprets it for his disciples. It describes how the kingdom of God comes to us. It does so as we are changed by the word of God coming to our hearts like a little seed coming to the soil. It may seem inconsequential at first, but in time it bears much fruit. But Jesus spends three quarters of the parable talking about the obstacles to this process happening. In other words, in mentioning the three soils that prove less than fruitful for the flourishing of the seed, he is talking about the three most common reasons we backslide. The hard soil shows that a lack of understanding is the first obstacle. The shallow soil demonstrates the obstacle of failing to submit to the word, and the soil with weeds demonstrates the obstacle of failing to apply God's word.

When we walk by faith through receiving God's word into our hearts, we bear much fruit. I like the way our text talks about that in verse 11. **"The house of the wicked will be destroyed, but the tent of the upright will flourish."** Surprisingly, the house, which will be destroyed, is less secure than the tent of the upright. The word that is translated 'flourish' is literally to bud. The household of those who walk by faith, despite an appearance of vulnerability, indicated by the metaphor of the tent, will spring forth in new life and prosperity.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Specifically, then, how do we respond to the sin of backsliding? Just as the backslider begins his descent into this sin with a small step, so he can return with a small step, as long as that step is toward the Lord. If you've ever used a GPS device and have made a wrong turn, what does the voice say? "Recalculating" is the response it makes. It calculates a new path to your destination. You don't have to go back, you need only to go forward properly aimed to your destination. What does that look like as backsliders return to the Lord? It looks like walking by faith as we listen to the Lord's word. God's word is a little seed that is filled with potency. Jesus' word is potent when he says, **"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned."** If you believe that, abundant fruit will spring forth in your life. You will begin to love God and love people more intimately.