

## "THOSE WHO TURN BACK"

2 Peter 2:20-22

### Introduction:

Was Judas a real Christian? He was the first of a large company of professing Christians who have turned away from their commitment to Jesus Christ to walk in their old ways again. How are we to understand this? What does it mean?

Peter closes his warning about the false teachers with some helpful words. They help us understand something of the dynamic of turning away, and the consequences. They are also helpful in sobering us. They should cause us to soberly test our hearts--do we really have a heart commitment to Jesus Christ? This passage also reminds us that there is a strong moral content in any commitment to Jesus Christ. You cannot be a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ without it effecting your daily conduct. Consider with me three important things we can learn about those who turn back.

### I. THOSE WHO TURN BACK PROVE THE INADEQUACY OF KNOWLEDGE.

From the beginning there has been a rightful emphasis upon knowledge in the Christian faith. Jesus Himself was a teacher. He sought to give thorough instruction to all of those who followed Him. He made teachers out of all His Apostles. He gave them specific instructions to teach all who would follow Him. But this can lead to a misunderstanding. Some have equated Christianity with being the possessor of certain religious knowledge. If you can quote the catechism or repeat the creed, then you are a Christian.

These whom Peter accuses of turning away were not short on knowledge. "For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome." The word used for "knowledge" in this passage means to have a rather full or complete knowledge. This knowledge they had gained had even had an impact on their outward behavior. It prompted them to remove themselves for a while from the pollutions of the world. Such a phenomenon is not uncommon. You regularly find people who have been moved to reform their moral lives for a while by their becoming acquainted with the Christian faith. They give all of the outward signs of being true Christians, but then they turn back to their old ways again. Peter uses this word for knowledge three times in these brief verses so this must have been a special emphasis of this particular group.

We learn from this that knowledge is inadequate to save. You may become personally knowledgeable of the way in its most orthodox form, and still be lost. There can be no question about the knowledge acquired by Judas. He had the best of teachers for three years. He was so outwardly reformed that none of the other disciples suspected that he was capable of betraying the Lord Jesus into the hands of His enemies.

Confusing knowledge and salvation is always a danger in the church. It is a special danger to those who grow up in Christian homes. It is easy to grow up thinking you are a Christian because you have learned all the right answers. My recent visit to Pittsburg, Ks. brought something to my mind that happened in that city. Years ago the First Baptist Church in that town was rocked to its foundation one Sunday morning. After finishing his sermon, the young pastor stepped out of the pulpit and presented himself as a candidate for baptism. He explained to the church that he had just that morning come to know Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour. He would later become one of Oklahoma's favorite preachers, "Preacher" Hallock, who was pastor of the First Baptist Church of Norman for so many years. That church in Kansas almost never forgave him. They could not understand how a man could know so much about God, and not know God.

Peter is declaring this to us. Knowledge of God, no matter how complete, is inadequate by

itself to save. Knowledge becomes helpful only when it is acted upon. It must be responded to with obedience of life.

## II. THOSE WHO TURN BACK INVOLVE THEMSELVES IN A WORSE CONDITION.

"For the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them."

Jesus spoke almost these same words concerning Judas. He indicated that it would have been better if Judas had never been born. It would surely be better that a man never know the Christian way, than to know it and then not walk in it. What are the dangers? What makes the condition worse?

First, a life that has been reformed, but not reborn, is even more vulnerable to sin, than the unreformed. Jesus taught this in an interesting little parable. He told about the house that was swept clean, but was left empty. The demon that was driven out of the house soon returned with seven other demons of an even more evil nature. The end result was a worse condition morally and spiritually than before the reformation took place. This was what had happened to these to whom Peter is writing. They received knowledge, and reformed themselves, but were not reborn. So in the end they became even more entangled in the bondage of sin than they were before. They slip deeper into the mire of sin than ever before.

Another thing that makes the condition worse is that all of his knowledge and religious involvement becomes a barrier to ever coming to know the salvation of the Lord. He wrongly concludes that since he tried reformation, and it did not work, that there is nothing to the Christian faith. Since he did not find any moral power to overcome the sin nature, he concludes that there is none. The worst critics you will find of the Christian faith are just such men. They have had a knowledge of the way, but have never been born again. Their knowledge becomes a barrier to ever coming to know the Lord. Psychologically some of this can be explained by the guilt that such a turning away creates. They will see themselves beyond hope many times. They are in a much worse condition than they were before.

Another aspect of this worst condition is that of their responsibility. They are under a great condemnation. This is why Jesus indicated that it would have been better if Judas had never been born. When you come to a knowledge of the way, you become responsible for that knowledge. When you turn away from that knowledge, you bring down upon yourself a greater judgment. Jesus emphasized this often as a principle of the divine judgment.

Does this mean that those who have turned away are without any hope? I would not say without any hope, but it does mean that it is highly unlikely that they will ever come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. The writer was probably referring to people like this in those sobering passages in the book of Hebrews. Many souls have been shaken and sobered when reading about the judgment that falls upon those who turn away. The truth that we need to see is that your knowledge of the truth has put you in an important position. It has put you in a position to know God's salvation or to undergo God's condemnation. The thing that will determine which you shall know is what you do with that knowledge of the truth. Will you commit your life to it, or will you turn back to the old way. To turn back is the worst thing you can do for the welfare of your soul.

## III. THOSE WHO TURN BACK CONFIRM THEIR REAL NATURE.

Some of you will probably be offended by the closing statement of Peter. It sounds rather uncouth at first, but you will have to admit that it makes the point. "But it happened unto them according to the true proverb, the dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire."

The proverb about the dog is a quotation from the Proverbs of Solomon, but the proverb about the sow is probably taken from the Gentile world. Both of them make essentially the same point. You can expect an animal or a man to act in accordance with its true nature. Both the dog and the hog were considered to be terribly unclean by the Jewish world out of which Peter came.

The proverb presents the dog as lacking discernment in what it chooses to eat. He cannot tell the difference between good appetizing food, and what has just been vomited because it made him sick. Could not the point of Peter be that the readiness of men to accept into their minds false teachings is a sure sign of their nature. They lack moral and spiritual discernment because they are still in their sins. Paul declared that the natural man receives not the things of God. They are known and appreciated only by those who have the Spirit of God dwelling in them. So the willingness of men to follow false teachers is an important sign of their true nature. The preference of the false teachers for false teachings over against the truth is a sure sign of the true nature of the teachers. They are still under the control of a sinful nature.

The second proverb about the sow deals with the preference for outward behavior. How true the proverb is! You can take a sow out of the wallow, give her a bath, trim her toenails, put a ribbon on her tail, and spray her with perfume, but the moment you turn her loose she will return to her old favorite wallowing place. It is her nature to prefer the wallow to the parlor. You can take the sinner out of the world, reform him, teach him religious truths, and give him all of the outward signs of the way, but in the moment of temptation he will return to his old ways. Before you can ever really change the behavior of the sow you must change her nature. Before you can ever really effect the behavior of man, you must change his nature.

These proverbs would seem to remove any doubt about who Peter is talking to. It makes it rather obvious that he is not discussing Christians becoming lost. He is rather writing to people who have been reformed, but never reborn.

What is the nature of unsaved man? It is such that he cannot submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ unless a work of grace is done in his heart. This is the reason that no one can really confess Jesus as Lord apart from the Holy Spirit. Man is naturally at enmity with God. He cannot please God.

#### Conclusion:

Have you been reformed, or reborn? Those who have been reborn have a heart to submit to the Lordship of Christ. They find within themselves the constraint of the Holy Spirit. They find themselves under the discipline of a loving heavenly Father. While they may stumble for a while, they will not turn back. They have it in their hearts to go on with the Lord. They persevere in the faith. You and I need to check ourselves. Those who are only reformed need to move on to a complete commitment to the Lord. They need to open their lives to the presence of the living Christ. Will you do it today?