

Sermon for Sunday, September 21, 1975, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"WHY BACKSLIDERS SLIDE"

St. John 21:1-17

Text: "Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat; but that night they caught nothing." --St. John 21:3

Well, I can really identify with our text this morning! On my vacation I said with St. Peter, "I am going fishing." And--just like the disciples--I caught nothing.

Let me remind us of the context of the event that we read this morning. The disciples had been with Jesus for three of the most exciting years of their lives. They had sat at his feet in utter amazement as he taught them about the Kingdom of God. They had watched in astonishment as he had performed mighty miracles. They had been amazed at the incredible response of the people as they warmly responded to what Jesus said to them about the Lord. And then came that last awful week. It had started out all right--they had made a triumphant entry into the ancient city of Jerusalem. The people had spread their garments in the streets and the children had waved palm branches, and the people had cried, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." But then had followed so quickly that last supper, those awful moments when Jesus had been taken prisoner on the Mount of Olives, those last agonizing hours when he had been tried, beaten, and nailed to that cruel cross. In fear for their own lives they had hidden themselves away in some remote upper room, and there, as they cowered in fear with the door shut, the Bible says "for fear of the Jews". There to them came the incredible good news that Jesus was alive, that the tomb was empty. Then for a period of days they had been with him once more, as from time to time he had come into their midst. But those days, too, had ended, it seemed. They did not quite know what to do with themselves. They had not yet gained the courage to set out to the ends of the earth as Jesus had commanded them. They had not yet been fired with a holy zeal to tell the world what God in Christ had done for them. They had not yet been filled with the Holy Spirit. It was, then, in that context that they became backsliders. It was in that context that they reverted to an old way of life. It was in that context that they returned to where they had been three years before when they did not even know the Lord. Peter said, "I'm going fishing." "Wait a minute," said the others, "we'll go with you." And they walked away from everything about Jesus. Why do you suppose they did it? What made them abandon their new way of life? Indeed, what makes backsliders slide?

Well, one reason backsliders slide is the magnetism of an old way of life. Nothing looks as good as it does in retrospect. The disciples had been away from the sea for a long time now--three years. And memory is a funny thing. It is so selective. The disciples remembered the feel of a solid deck under their feet. They remembered the cool spray on their faces, the wind in their hair, the sails full, popping in the breeze. They remembered the excitement of a net full of fish as the catch spilled out in silver splashes on the deck. But they had forgotten some other things. They had forgotten that burning sun reflected from the waves that scorched and parched their skin. They had forgotten those times when their hands, split and bleeding from the water and the rough ropes, had pulled at the nets until their muscles ached, only to bring up the nets empty. They had forgotten a sudden stormy squall catching them far from shore when they feared for their lives. They had forgotten the awful taste of stale water from a wooden keg, the dry, hard bread baked days before. Yes, memory had been selective. They felt the magnetic tug of an old way of life.

Most of us do the same thing. I'm that way about golf. A day or two after I have played, I have forgotten all of those dreadful slices, the ball in the lake, the topped shots, the three-putted greens. Three days later the only thing I remember is that 20 foot putt that snaked its way in and that one drive that split the middle of the fairway. Backsliders slide because we forget the old way of life. We forget that before Jesus, life had no sense, no purpose. We forget how lonely it was when we didn't have God to lean on. We forget the anxieties that often gripped our hearts, the vacuum that was in the midst of us that ached to be filled. In retrospect, the old way of life sometimes looks far better than it ever was. We forget how bad the cocktail parties really were--the stale smoke in the air, the half-empty glasses, the empty conversation, never daring to be honest, wearing a mask so others wouldn't see our hurt.

Another reason why backsliders slide is the strength of an evil habit. It is amazing just how easily good habits are broken and how persistently bad habits hang on and on and on. You see, under pressure or temptation, you tend to do what you have always done. When I was a pastor in Lubbock, Texas, we had a air force fighter training base nearby. One of the pilots was a member of our choir for a time. One day in a practice flight, he had a flame-out in his jet and a minor explosion occurred in the cockpit. He was telling me about it later, and said that he was so frightened that to this day he doesn't know what happened or how he got out of the plane. The next thing he knew, he said, was that the parachute had opened above him and he was floating safely down. He had been drilled and drilled and drilled in emergency procedures. When it occurred, habit took over. When he couldn't think and his mind was frozen with fear, his reflexes responded automatically.

Old habits can make a backslider slide. The disciples came to an empty place in life. They came to a time when they were unsure, when they were afraid, when their hearts and minds were numb. When that happened to them, old habit patterns took over. Before they really knew what happened to them, they were back on their boat. Do you have that experience? When my children were small, I had a little jump seat that hooked on the front seat of the car for the smallest to ride in. That was before the days when we had these elaborate safety seats. When you set the child in there, there was no harness to hold him. If I had to make a sudden stop, I would reach across and put my hand over to hold the child to keep him from being thrown out. Today, my oldest child is 21 years old and he is about six feet four inches tall. But if I have to make a sudden and unexpected stop in the car, instinctively I still reach over and slap that seat to hold in the child that isn't even there.

And isn't that one of the reasons we backsliders slide? We start out in this business of being Christians in deadly earnest and with the very best, the noblest of intentions. But in a moment of weakness, in a moment of forgetfulness, in a moment when our hearts are numb and our minds won't function, in a moment when we are clutched in the grips of an unmanagable passion, we slip. We don't mean to, but habit is strong. Old ways take over. Suddenly we awake to the realization that we have sinned, that we have done the very thing we never meant to do.

Incidentally, that is why it is so very important to develop strong spiritual habits. Prayer, study, Bible reading, worship--all of the facets of the Christian life must be so drilled and hammered and beaten into us that when temptation comes, and when our reason fails us, when our hearts are numb, a divine habit will see us through life's darkest moments. You know, sometimes the things we do seem just empty ritual.

Our prayers don't seem to reach higher than the ceiling. The sermon leaves us cold. In church our minds wander off. We wonder, is it really worthwhile? Let me assure you that it is. Many times I have people say to me, "Your sermon met a need for me today." Or, "Today I really worshipped." What they are really saying is something like this: "I was in trouble, or my heart was uneasy, or my soul was worried. Habit brought me to church, or habit sent me to my knees or habit brought me to my Bible--there, in the exercise of my habit, my need was met. When we Christians are fixing our spiritual habit patterns, when temptations come; we will find ourselves automatically reaching for God. And when we stretch out our hand to God, we discover that God has already reached down to us.

Another reason backsliders slide is because of the insecurity of the unknown. You see, when we are faced with the threat and anxiety and insecurity of something unknown, when there is something out there that we are not sure about, we will revert to something familiar. Even if the familiar is not what we really want, even if it is painful in some ways, psychologically, we feel more secure and safer with the known than we do with the unknown. That's part of the reason the disciples fled back. Their relationship to Jesus, the most important thing in their lives, had been broken by the crucifixion. Their physical lives were in danger from the Jews. They had been commanded by their Lord to strike out to the unknown world, and they had no idea what terrible things might lie ahead of them. In that terrible insecurity, they retreated to something familiar.

All of us are guilty of that from time to time. Over the years I have counseled with couples who have a dreadful relationship to one another. From my vantage point, I can hardly understand for the life of me how they have stayed together as long as they have. Yet, the uncertainty of breaking up a marriage, the uncertainty of not having any relationship to anybody (because, you see, a bad relationship is better than no relationship)--these uncertainties are more fearful, more painful, than the pain of staying with each other. So in spite of how bad their marriage is, they stay together often because of the insecurity and the uncertainty of an unknown future if they break up.

Not long ago a lady came to talk with me about her husband. They had been married for a number of years but he had grown restless and discontented and unhappy with the marriage and they had separated. Now, out of the blue, he called and said to her that he wanted to renew the relationship. As it turned out, the call came just after he had received a promotion and was transferred to a new job in a new city. He was surrounded by the uncertainties and anxieties that come to all of us when we have a new job in a new situation, and you have the need to succeed. There anxieties were pouring in on him. There in a strange city, with no real friends, he wanted to reach back to something familiar and secure. Even though that relationship had some pain to it, even though it had been far from perfect, the insecurity of where he was made him want to reach back to something familiar. That's how the disciples found themselves on that boat.

Well, can a person not slide back? In counseling they teach us that a person will not make significant personality changes unless the pain of being as he is is greater than the pain of changing. For example, if a person is an alcoholic, he will never quit drinking unless the consequences of his drinking are much more painful than the pain of giving up the crutch of alcohol. Apply that principle to the disciples. Yes,

That's true for most of us. To radically change our life styles, to really be different from what we are, is highly unlikely. You see, the pain of making dramatic or drastic changes is often so much greater than the pain of being as we are that we are not likely to change very much. And even when we try to change, as all of us do from time to time, (like the disciples), we will discover that we slide back.

But something happened to those disciples. They did leave that boat. They left the security of the past, and it wasn't the pain of being there that made them leave it. It was something else--love. There on the beach that day, Jesus said to them, "Do you love me?" Peter spoke for them all when he said, "Lord, you know that we love you." They left the boat that day--the sea, their nets, everything. As far as we know from the Bible, they never went fishing again. What changed them? What power motivated them? When pain wasn't enough to get them off the boat, what did? It was love. When they knew that Jesus loved them, and they let their hearts be filled with love for him, love drew them to him.

Do you want to get your life changed? If it is painful enough to be as you are, you might make some changes, but probably not. But, if you will let your heart and life be filled with love for Jesus, you will love him so much that you will want with all your heart to be different from what you are. When the disciples knew that Jesus loved them and they loved him, a power was unleashed in their lives. They went out into an unknown world, an uncertain future, and they never once looked back. One of them was to die by the sword, one was to languish in prison, one was to be crucified head down. All of them, with the exception of John, were to meet a violent end. They never slid back again. The power of love drew them to Jesus and changed them.

There is only one power that can radically alter who and what you are. There is only one power that can change you. It is the power of love. Jesus loves you this morning. I don't care who you are, I don't care what you have done. He cares for you. Today he wants to fill you with his love so that you can be changed. Today he says to you as he said to his disciples long ago, "Do you love me?"

Do you? That's the only power that can really change you.