

## RESTORING GRACE

Many of us can remember when we were in elementary school of what would happen as soon as the teacher left the room. She would have to go out for some reason and would always tell the class, "Be quiet while I am gone and study!" However, as soon as the cat was away the mice would play. People would be running around throwing erasers and drawing funny pictures on the blackboard. And then she would return. There was always that last minute adjustment as we scurried back to our seats and pretended like nothing had happened.

In the book of Exodus we remember when Moses was called by God to go up into Mount Sinai. While he was away, the Israelites grew restless. They forgot everything that God had been trying to teach them and ended up making a golden calf as an idol and dancing around it in worship. How quickly the human heart can change. How easy it is to fall away.

Like the hymn that says "prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love." Today we are continuing in our series Amazing Grace. We have looked at saving grace and sustaining grace. Today I want to look at restoring grace. Peter understood what it was to fall away from Jesus;

Mark 14:27-31 You will all fall away, Jesus told them, "for it is written: " I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' 28 But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." 29 Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not." 30 I tell you the truth, Jesus answered, "today -- yes, tonight -- before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times." 31 But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

Your relationship to Jesus Christ is like any other relationship. 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 just become a Christian and that's it, any more than you get married and that's it. You're either having your heart grow warmer every day or it's growing colder.

Why do people turn away from God? Looking at the life of Peter we see four things;

### 1. Over Confidence

We begin to think we can handle everything on our own. We begin to think we are so strong we could never fail. We begin to say, "That would never happen to me!" Anytime you hear about someone else's stumbling and you say, "That could never happen to me" you're setting yourself up for a fall. Given the right situation, any of us in this room, is capable of any sin.

1 Corinthians 10:12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!

The disciples spent 3 years walking with Jesus. They saw the miracles and heard His teaching. When He told them the night He was betrayed that they would all fall away Peter speaks up and says;

Mark 14:29-30 Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not." 30 I tell you the truth, Jesus answered, "today -- yes, tonight -- before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times."

The Bible says that the heart is deceitful. That means we lie to ourselves as much as lying to others. We don't always know why we do what we do. You should never say, "I could never fall for that." That's called overconfidence and that's the first step in falling away.

The way you spell ego -- EGO stands for Edging God Out. When I get overconfident, I let ego into my life, I'm edging God out and I'm already backing away and heading down the slippery slope of falling away from Christ.

When the king of Austria died in 1916, it was the last of the very extravagant imperial funerals. A procession of dignitaries and elegantly dressed members of the imperial court escorted the coffin draped in the black and gold imperial colors to the Monastery in Vienna. To enter the monastery you had to pass through a large iron door. When the officer leading the funeral procession came to the door he cried out "Open!" The Cardinal of Vienna appeared and asked "Who goes there?" The officer responded "We bear the remains of his Majesty, Franz-Joseph. Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, Defender of the Faith, Prince of Bohemia-Moravia, Grand Duke of Lombardy ..." and on and on he went. At the end, the Cardinal replied, "We know him not" but then asked again "Who goes there?"

The officer spoke again, this time saying simply "We bear the body of your ruler, the king of Austria." "We know him not," the Cardinal said again. "Who goes there?" This time the officer knelt down and said, "We bear the body of Franz-Josef our brother and a sinner like the rest of us" At that the doors swung open and Franz-Josef was admitted. Over confidence will destroy us.

## 2. Compromise

It is important as believers to develop healthy habits. Things like praying every day, reading the Bible every day, being in a small group. They are things that help us. However, we all know that life can get busy. We grow tired, and when we get tired we start overlooking these healthy habits.

After having a Passover meal with His disciples and warning them that they would all fall away, Jesus takes them to the garden of Gethsemane to pray. He takes his closest friends Peter, James and John and asks them to keep watch and pray with Him. When He returns He finds them sleeping. He warns them,

Mark 14:38 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.

He goes off and prays a little bit more and comes back and finds them sleeping again.

Mark 14:40 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

Again He went off to pray and again they fell asleep. Suddenly an angry crowd appears and Judas is there to betray Jesus. The disciples were completely unprepared for it so they all run away. So what can we learn from this? When you get tired, you are setting yourself up for major temptation.

It's more difficult to do the right thing than it is to do the wrong thing. Doing the wrong thing is easy. It just means going with the flow. Last week we talked about the fact that the more tired we get, the easier it is to just compromise our faith. It is hard to go against the flow.

Back in 1988 I went on a summer missions' trip to teach English in China. We had been staying a few days in Beijing but it was time to leave. We had to take the subway, but it was rush hour and it was completely packed. We all had our luggage with us – huge backpacks. There were 20 of us, and we were worried that not everyone would get off the train in time because there was such a flow of people in as soon as the doors opened. One of the guys on our team was 6'5" and played football, he was huge. When the doors opened he just put his elbows up like a football blocker and started moving. Everyone grabbed the backpack of the person in front of them and he dragged us through the crowd. That picture always stayed with me.

If you do not know how to recharge yourself emotionally, spiritually and physically, then fatigue is going to set in. Fatigue should always be a warning light that something's going wrong, something's out of order. When you're tired, that's when you're most vulnerable to temptation.

When I speak with Christians who have stumbled in major areas in their life, it is often when they were in a time of great stress. It was when they were tired, and they ignored the warning signs. The devil loves to hit us when we are most vulnerable.

We've got to keep our guard up because when we start letting it down through over confidence and compromise, we're starting on the slippery slope to falling away. Over confidence and compromise.

### 3. Cowardice

After running away from Jesus when He was arrested, Peter wanted to know what is happening so he went to the courtyard outside the High Priest's home to see if he could find out what was going on.

Mark 14:66-68 While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. 67 When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. 68 But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway.

Peter was hiding. He wanted to know what was happening to Jesus, but he was afraid that he too would be arrested, so he hides the fact that he is a disciple. Have you ever been like that? Have you ever been hesitant to tell someone that you are a follower of Jesus because you are afraid of what they will think of you?

Mark 14:54 Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire.

Do you ever try to follow Jesus at a distance? You want all the benefits of being a Christian without any of the cost. It's like the old statement: If all of a sudden they outlawed Christianity and they made it illegal and you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Would your neighbors know you were Christian or simply that you always seem to be gone on Sunday mornings but they don't know why?

One of the ways that you can know that you're slipping away from Christ is that you start to become embarrassed by your faith. You start making excuses. You are following from a distance. You are ashamed to be seen reading your bible at school or having a bible on your desk at work. You are ashamed to pray over a meal in a restaurant in public. You are ashamed to be seen with a group of other Christians in public.

Proverbs 29:25 Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.

When you start worrying about what other people think, you are headed for trouble. It is a snare that will eventually catch up with you.

Mark 8:38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.

Ouch. That's powerful stuff. There are no secret agents in God's army, no closet Christians. It's time to come out of the closet. A lot of Christians can talk about anything except Jesus. They are Arctic River Christians -- frozen at the mouth.

The teacher asked, "Can someone tell me the lesson we have learned from the book of Jonah?" A little boy raised his hand and said, "I know what I have learned from the book of Jonah: backsliders make whales sick!" You cannot follow Jesus from a distance. Jesus is Lord of all, or He is not Lord at all.

Over confidence, compromise and cowardice – but there is one more;

#### 4. Convenience

We want to have faith but we want to have a comfortable faith. We want it to fit our schedule. Sure I want to follow Christ as long as it means I do not have to change.

Peter was following Jesus from a distance. The verse we read says that "he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire." That must have been an amazing scene. Here is Peter surrounded by the people that had just arrested Jesus. Why? Because it was warm. He is hanging out with the very people that are about to beat Jesus and hand him over to be crucified, because it was comfortable.

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

I have been a pastor now for 35 years. During that time I have seen a number of people who were on fire for God who suddenly got sidelined. I have noticed a pattern when people fall away from Christ. When a person is real active in a church and they start falling away, often the first thing they stop is their giving. Jesus said your giving indicates your heart. He said where your treasure is your heart will be. It's a thermometer of what is going on inside you. When you are walking in faith and trusting God you give. When you start doubting and get lazy, you stop.

The second thing that stops is prayer. They stop praying.

The third thing is they stop attending.

What happens to those people? What happens to a person who's a genuine Christian, who's committed their life to Christ, but for one reason or another they've backslidden and fallen away? How does God respond to those kind of people? When a Christian sins, does he lose his salvation? When a Christian sins, does he go to hell?

How does God respond? He responds the way He always responds to His children. By grace. People sometimes ask me "Can a person loose their salvation?" For me this is not a theological question, but a pastoral one.

If someone comes to me and says "Pastor, I have really blown it. I have sinned, does that mean I have lost my salvation?" No, you do not loose your salvation just because you sinned. Aren't you glad for that? If you could lose your salvation every time you sinned you would loose it every 15 minutes. Let's say you lived for Jesus Christ your entire life and five minutes before you die you blow it, you go to hell. You would live in fear your entire life. Paul reminded the church in Ephesus that;

Ephesians 2:6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus

If you are in Christ then you are already seated with him in the heavenly realms. Past tense. There is no condemnation when a Christian sins. They are covered by the blood of Jesus.

However, there are also those who think that just because they sometimes go to church or once said a prayer that they can just live however they want for the rest of their life with no consequences. To them I say that you cannot be a Christian and still live like the devil.

Matthew 7:16-20 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Don't claim to be an apple tree if all you are ever producing is pears.

To all who have fallen, Jesus wants you to know today that God is a God of second chances. And third, and fourth... If you have blown it, Jesus wants to heal you and forgive you. If you have fallen away, or you feel like you are falling, God has not rejected you.

You may be thinking, "I've gone so far down the slope there's no way back. It's just going to take too much effort, too much energy. It's too long. I've gone too far away." You're wrong. Very wrong. Returning to Jesus is not this long, drawn out, complex process that's going to take years for you to get back in fellowship with God. It's just one step. What should I do when I sin? One word: Return! Come back to Christ. It's that simple. I blew it and I'm back.

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 even knew he would come back to Him. In fact, before it even happened, Jesus said it would happen.

Luke 22:31-32 Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. 32 But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

After the resurrection, Jesus shows up on a beach to spend time with Peter and restore him. He allows him to reaffirm his devotion 3 times, to replace every betrayal.

Of course, we know the rest of the story. Peter would be filled with the spirit in that upper room and go out and proclaim Jesus to Jerusalem and beyond. Jesus knew that Peter's ministry would be more effective after his denial than it was before. And sure enough it was. Peter wrote two of the books of the Bible called 1 and 2 Peter.

Maybe you are here today and you also have betrayed Jesus. Maybe you have also denied Him many times. Come home to Christ today. God still wants to use you.

A.W. Tozer said, "In every Christians heart there is a cross and a throne and the Christian is on the throne till he puts himself on the cross; if he refuses the cross he remains on the throne. Perhaps this is at the bottom of the backsliding and worldliness among believers today. We want to be saved but insist Christ do all the dying."