

RELIGIOUS QUITTERS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on July 10, 1955 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

We are all very much aware that the church has a front door. We are not as well aware that the church has a back door. When someone becomes a Christian we are very much aware of his coming and we rejoice in it. We listen reverently, as he confesses his faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. We rejoice as he is buried with his Lord in baptism for the forgiveness of sins. In various ways we show our happiness that he is now a Christian. But are we even partially aware that not all of those who come to Christ stay with him long enough to grow into full grown Christian men and women?

When I think of those who earnestly and sincerely have given themselves to the Lord, and then have faltered along the way, I feel a deep responsibility and a deep sorrow. I think of a man who came to this congregation less than a year ago. He was baptized and came perhaps a dozen Sundays, but I do not see him any more. My mind goes back some years to the time when I preached for a small congregation of about a hundred members in Southern California. It was in the North Hollywood-Burbank area, just over the mountains from Hollywood. I remember how in those years we were especially eager for the help of those who were already members of the church. They would help form the nucleus of the new congregation. We began in a rented hall and while the growth was pleasing in many respects there was one deep disappointment--a great many people who were already Christians and who lived nearby never came. Recently, in examining some records of that period I found a listing of twenty-four families, who lived within one mile of the place where we were meeting, who had been Christians in other areas, but who no longer attended the services of the church.

These Walked Not With Us

One was a man who was baptized back east. He moved out to California, took a good job in the aircraft industry, but attended services only twice. He had a wife and a daughter who were not members. Another was a mother who was a member when she lived in one of the eastern states, but she never came. Occasionally she would send her two children to Sunday School. Then there was a husband and wife who moved out from the east. Both of them got good jobs. They came twice. When we would go by and urge them to continue their work for the Lord, they would make glowing promises but they never came again. Another was a family who had lived in California for quite a few years. They had two children. The mother attended only once. Then there was a young couple who had a new baby. They had been members over in another California city, and when they moved into our area they came regularly for a time. Then the baby became ill and they never came again.

A few weeks ago some of our warmest friends from that area came through this part of the country and stopped to visit. We asked about the many friends that we had known and they would tell us, "Oh, they are fine. So-and-so has grown up and is now in college. Or, such-and-such a youngster is now grown and married." Later, I asked about a man who was a particular friend, a man whom I had admired in many ways. They said, "Oh, didn't you know? They moved back into the desert country, and he quit going to church." Yes, there is a back door to the church.

It Is Possible To Fall Away

The Bible speaks of the possibility of falling away. There are some who would tell us that it is impossible to fall away after once becoming a Christian. I wish they were right, but the Bible tells us in very plain terms that it is easy for a person to become a Christian and then to falter by the wayside. Remember the closing verse of the ninth chapter of I Corinthians where so great a Christian as the apostle Paul said, "I buffet my body, and bring it into bondage: lest by any means, after that I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected." (I Cor. 9:27). In the letter to the Hebrews, there are three verses in chapter six that bear on this point. "For as touching those who were once enlightened, and tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the age to come, and then fell away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance; seeing they crucified to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame." (Heb. 6:4-6). Some of you are salesmen. It is a wonderful thing when you have a satisfied customer to whom you can refer when you talk with others. "You talk to so-and-so; he uses my product." It is a terrible thing when someone who once used your product has changed to something else because he did not like it. Wherever he goes, his negative influence is as the influence of ten. How do you suppose the Lord feels when someone quits being a Christian? A moment ago we read the words, "Seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame." This is how he feels. What a terrible thing it was when the Jews crucified Jesus. When we leave him we crucify him again, and in a certain sense this is even worse than when it was done originally.

In this same book of Hebrews there is another passage on this theme, "For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and a fierceness of fire that shall devour the adversaries." (Heb. 10:26-27). Some have found this hard to understand. All that it means is that if a man rejects Jesus--his life, his death on the cross, his resurrection--there will be no new incarnation, no second coming of the Lord to live on the earth to redeem man. God's offer of salvation has been made. If man turns his back on that it is impossible to renew him to

repentance. If we turn our backs on the way of the cross there remains only the judgment and the fierceness of the fire that follows. A third passage in this same book of Hebrews says, "Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things that were heard lest haply we drift away from them." (Heb. 2:1).

Strong Language

In that last great book of the Bible, Revelation, Jesus says concerning the church at Laodicea, "I know thy works, thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth." (Rev. 3:15-16). Christians? Once they were, but they became careless and casual and lukewarm. That is strong language and it isn't very pleasant language, but it was justified. The apostle Peter also used some strong language to describe those who turn away from Christ. It is raw and almost uncouth language, yet it is justified because it is describing something so terrible. "For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein and overcome, the last stage is become worse with them than the first. For it were better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment delivered unto them. It has happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog turning to his own vomit again, and the sow that had washed to wallowing in the mire." (II Peter 2:20-22).

There is another passage that I should mention to you. When Jesus was still living on the earth he walked one day from Galilee southward, and as he did so he met three men. Here is Luke's account of what happened: "And as they went on the way, a certain man said unto him, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest. And Jesus said unto him, The foxes have holes, and the birds of the heavens have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head. And he said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. But he said unto him: Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but go thou and publish abroad the kingdom of God. And another also said, I will follow thee, Lord; but first suffer me to bid farewell to them that are at my house." (Luke 9:57-61).

Notice what these men represent. One faltered in following Jesus when he learned he would have to give up his material goals. Another dropped out because of family. Another because of friends. Yet each one of them was sympathetic to Jesus. Each of them believed in him, and if anyone had said something against Jesus each of these men would have stood to defend him. They were followers--but only up to a certain point. Jesus closes the story with the words, "No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62). Actually, these men were religious quitters.

Young People

Who are the religious quitters in our age? Sometimes they are young people. They are nurtured in Christian homes. They have been brought to Sunday School through the years. They became Christians. Then, as they grow older in the very nature of things they have more freedom. After a while their faith, which seemed so promising in earlier years, wanes and there comes a period of drifting, of going to church if it is convenient, and of not going if it is not convenient. There is still some loyalty to the Lord, but it is only a second-hand loyalty. The period from about eighteen up to the mid-thirties has been described by some as the lost generation. It is when young people are out finding life partners, and that looms so large it crowds everything else out for a time. It is a period when they are getting their education and deciding on their vocations. After marriage the children come along and it is not convenient to go to church for a while. The period from about eighteen to the middle thirties, not just in one but in thousands and thousands of cases, is a period when God is left out. Many of them come back when the children are old enough to go to Sunday school. but some never return. Some of you young people who are hearing me now will be tempted to quit along the way, but I hope that you will have the strength to keep the faith and to continue to work for the Lord.

Mature People

Who are the religious quitters in our age? Well, some of them are mature people. As they become more prominent and as they have more responsibilities the Lord gets left behind. They are blessed with great ability, so everyone calls on them when something needs to be done. They serve the various community organizations, they serve their employers in ever increasing ways, and it is all good work. But it crowds Christ out. The church takes a back seat, and after a while they who were faithful in early years, aren't so faithful in attending the services. Some of them drop out all together.

Jesus was thinking of these when he described the sowing of the seed. "He that was sown on the rocky places, this is he that heareth the word, and straightway with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but endureth for a way in while; and when tribulations or persecution ariseth because of the word, straightway he stumbleth. And he that was sown among the thorns, this is he that heareth the word; and the care of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful." (Matt. 13:20-22).

Old People

Who are those who quit? Some of them are young people, and some of them are mature people, and some of them are old people. The other day I was sitting in Dr. Binkley's Bible class on Sunday morning and heard him say something I had never thought of before. He

spoke about elderly people and how that sometimes as infirmities of the flesh creep upon them, they feel that they are unable to come to services, and unable to work for the Lord when really they are not unable. They stop too soon. He went on to say that it is not very kind to point this out to someone, and so usually we don't say anything about it. We don't even think of it. Of course, we would not judge someone else. It is a matter for every man to decide for himself.

I do know some wonderful examples on the other side. I think of Mrs. Daisy Booth Newson, who has lived four score years and more, and who now lives at 15th and Woodland in east Nashville. Even though she must come by bus you will find her here every Sunday and for Ladies' Bible Class, too, except when she is sick in bed. We have admired the way she has kept coming, even when we thought she wasn't able to come. By making these specific efforts she gets spiritual blessings, and other blessings, too, because she keeps on keeping on.

Have You Moved recently?

Who are the quitters of our time? Often they are those who have just moved. The old ties with the old church have been broken. A few Sundays go by and then they lengthen into months. It is easy to drop out of the church when you move to some big city. If you move, ask for a letter from the church, and the first Sunday you are in your new home take it to the nearest church of the Lord and say, "I come from the Hillsboro church and I want to be known as a member here, and I want to be put to work. Some of you need to do that here. Others of you have done it already, and you know that by tying yourselves to certain God-given responsibilities you are more likely to keep on being faithful to the Lord's work.

Conclusion

What does all of this mean? It means first of all that the Lord needs you. There is work to be done, the most important work in the world, and he can't spare any one of us. Think of two men carrying a heavy log over their shoulders. What would you think if one of those men dropped out? The Lord's work needs your shoulders, so when you get tired, or when something comes along that disturbs you, or when someone judges you unjustly, or when you see a hypocrite in the church, just keep on keeping on. The Lord needs you and it is the Lord you are serving.

A second thing that I want to say by way of conclusion is that you need the Lord. You need him while you live, but you are going to need him especially when you come to the end of life. What a tragedy it is when you get to the end of the road, and the people who know you say, "He used to be a Christian, but he hasn't been active in recent years." You will need the Lord then, so keep on keeping on. There is a passage in Galatians which says "Ye who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness." (Gal. 6:1). We Christians ought to do all we can to encourage each other to keep on, but ultimately it is really within the man himself. No one can make us go; no one can make us work for the Lord. We must want to. It must be from inside. So resolve with me that not only now will we be faithful, but as the years come and go with their contrary currents we will continue faithful to the end and hear the Lord say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."