

Recidivism By Steven Harper

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, about two-thirds of all individuals imprisoned after conviction of a crime, and later released after serving some portion of their sentence, are convicted of another crime and imprisoned again. The ten-dollar word for this is recidivism, which basically means “a tendency to lapse into a previous pattern of behavior, especially a pattern of criminal habits.” [The American Heritage Stedman’s Medical Dictionary] Some states have introduced programs aimed at reducing recidivism for young offenders and have been successful because they give the previously-convicted individuals something worthwhile to do after release and teach them they can do something more productive and can make a positive impact on the lives of others. One young woman who was given the task of working with young patients suffering from cerebral palsy said, “I couldn’t believe how much trust they gave us. Imagine being told that you’ll never amount to anything, and then having a total stranger love you for just who you are.” That individual is married and entering law school now.

The study of recidivism is basically a study of human nature and of habitual behavior. The key word here is habitual; individuals get into a habit or pattern of behavior and, once entrenched, it is difficult to change without replacing the behavior with something positive and convincing the individual the new behavior will have a positive outcome far more valuable than the old behavior. Unless and until the previous offender believes the new behavior is going to positively impact them personally, they will not make a determined effort to change. One who believes he cannot escape from poverty or a crime-filled neighborhood will often return to a life of crime simply because he sees no other way; it is when he believes there is a better way that he gives up the life of crime and begins to do something productive.

The real point of this article is not to talk about criminal recidivism, but spiritual recidivism, the habit of falling back into bad spiritual habits and putting our souls in danger by doing so. Recidivism is not just a problem of the criminal justice system; it is a spiritual problem that touches every man and woman who has ever walked the face of this earth [with one obvious exception].

The apostle Paul reminded the Ephesian brethren that prior to their obedience and conversion to Christ, they all “were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience — among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:1-3). The ‘habit’ of the old man was to simply do what we wanted to do, following after our fleshly desires without restraint; that way of life was now unacceptable behavior for one who was now in Christ. Later, Paul would remind these same brethren that they needed to “put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (4:22-24). In other words, they needed to replace those old, bad habits with a spiritual mind set and a

life of holiness and righteousness. The important part to note is that they had to replace the bad habits with the good.

Paul would write similar commands to the brethren at Colossæ saying, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (Col. 3:5-10). In reality, there is no conversion without change and the change that must be made is from bad habits to good.

Jesus once told a story of a man who had an evil spirit who left him, only to come back later, finding "the house empty, swept, and put in order." He goes out and find seven more spirits more evil than himself and the man's end is worse than in the beginning (Matt. 12:43-45). The point we should note from this is that we cannot simply get rid of old, bad habits; we must replace them with spiritually-good habits or else we will slip back into the old ways.

Peter also warned that spiritual recidivism is a most dangerous position when he wrote, "For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them" (2Peter 2:20, 21). Please do not take this matter lightly! If we were called the enemies of God to begin with, imagine how much worse the state of spiritual recidivism must be to God!

Right about now you might be thinking that you would never go back to the old ways and would never abandon the Lord for the world. I hope and pray that you are correct, but I also know that when we get into habits, we often do not realize that we are; sometimes, it takes an outside view to see the reality of what we are doing. To help you to make an honest self-examination, consider the following:

In Speech. When we lived in the world, it is likely that we didn't think too much before we opened our mouths. All kinds of rude, crude, insulting, and hurtful words were likely coming out of our mouths and if someone didn't like it, we probably just threw out a few more 'choice' words for them! That was merely a reflection of what was in our hearts, just as Jesus said (Matt. 12:34-35). In Christ, however, such things should not be coming from our mouths because we were supposed to have had a change of heart. What kind of words are coming out of your mouth? Do curse words 'slip' out from time to time? The truth is, they don't 'slip' at all; if they are coming out of our mouths, it is because they are in our hearts. Make a determined effort to rid those thoughts from your mind, else they will soon be coming out of your mouth and others may think you've gone back to the old ways!

In Deeds. Again, we may remember that before we obeyed the gospel, we lived essentially for self and did whatever we pleased. If we wanted to indulge in things we now know as 'sin,' we just did it; if we wanted to sleep in on Sundays, we did; if we wanted to knock back some beers, go out and hit the clubs, or party all night and wake up in a strange bed, that was what we did. Maybe we were not so far into worldliness,

but we just stayed home on Sundays and watched football on TV, went out to the lake, or caught up on chores and shopping. 'Going to church' and anything 'religious' was not on our minds. Whatever it was, we did it because it was what we wanted to do and no one was going to make us do anything we didn't want to do! Our 'habit' was selfishness.

Now, in Christ, it is different. Now, those who are disciples of Jesus Christ "no longer live for themselves but for Him who for their sake died and was raised" (2Cor. 5:15). Now, we wake up early on Sundays and prepare our minds for the worship assembly where we meet with brethren of "like precious faith" that we may honor and worship God; now, we set our minds on spiritual things and no longer have a taste for the worldly ways and fleshly pursuits; now, we are known for our godliness, modest dress, and desire for spiritual conversations and Bible studies; now, we put God first and others second. Now, our 'habit' is selflessness.

That is what we're doing, right? Is that what we think, or would those in the world think differently? Are we truly following our Lord faithfully, or have we slipped back into some bad habits? And if the charge was made against you that you were just as worldly as everyone else, would you be found guilty?

A Moments Wisdom

There are people who, instead of listening to what is being said to them, are already listening to what they are going to say themselves.

A hero is no braver than an ordinary man, but he is braver five minutes longer.

In the absence of clearly-defined goals, we become strangely loyal to performing daily trivia until ultimately we become enslaved by it.

Experience teaches slowly and at the cost of mistakes.

Rudeness is the weak man's imitation of strength.

The secret of being a bore is to tell everything.

Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage.

I have always thought the actions of men the best interpreters of their thoughts.

A positive attitude may not solve all your problems, but it will annoy enough people to make it worth the effort.