

“ALL WE LIKE SHEEP”

Jeremiah 2:31-37

by Rev Alan Jackson

During the 1930s many people wanted to believe the best about Adolf Hitler. Few could stomach the thought of another war. Memories of the Great War were still fresh in the minds of many in Europe and America. Consequently, some simply denied Hitler’s megalomania, his raw hunger for German expansion. More distressing, however, were those public figures who, despite acknowledging some of Hitler’s sick character, nevertheless found ways to accept him.

On May 19, 1933, columnist Walter Lippman wrote an article in the *New York Herald Tribune*, reporting on a speech he had heard Chancellor Hitler deliver in Germany some days earlier. Lippman praised Hitler’s statesmanship, claiming that Hitler was the embodiment of that civilized people who had produced Bach, Beethoven, Goethe, and Schiller. Lippman noted that Germany did seem hungry for territorial expansion. And yes, there was some fairly obvious harassment of Jews going on. But Lippman soothed his readers’ minds by saying that those Jews were serving a useful purpose by slaking the German thirst for conquest. The Jews, he suggested, were a “lightning rod which protects Europe.” In essence Lippman was saying, “*Better the Jews in Germany suffer than the Dutch in Holland or the Poles in Poland. And so if Hitler needs someone to slap around, let him pick on the Jews.*” (Incidentally, Lippman was himself of German-Jewish descent.)

Sometimes sin is unmistakably aggressive. It will launch a frontal attack – as in the case of outright blasphemy, for example. But there’s another kind of sin that can be just as devastating – perhaps because it’s devious. You see it in people who wander off, or who turn aside and just let evil do its thing. You don’t have to attack the truth in order to do it violence. Often simple evasion will do the trick. All you have to do is deny what you know, shirk responsibility, and bury your head.

The so-called “sins of omission” happen through sheer inactivity. Later we claim we didn’t notice what was going on, or we did notice but didn’t want to interfere. The Lippman incident is a classic example of this kind of sin, and it involves conniving, minimizing, and insulating. First Lippman looked the other way in the face of glaring evil. And at the same time, even though he acknowledged what Hitler was doing, he then minimized it. And finally, he encouraged his American readers to believe that, as long as we and most of Europe were safe, we could ignore what was happening in Germany.

Lippman, of course, wasn't alone. England's Neville Chamberlain persisted in such thoughts for years until it was finally too late. Winston Churchill could not get his countrymen's attention in those years leading up to WWII. Members of Parliament likewise preferred to connive and minimize and insulate themselves, leaving London for their country houses each weekend and ignoring Hitler's repeated invasions of other nations. That led Churchill to note caustically, *"Members of Parliament take their weekend in the country while Hitler takes his countries on the weekend."*

Jeremiah knew all about this kind of sin. Israel's great prophet of lament was painfully aware of how God's people could willfully wander off and forget God's directions. In this state of self-imposed spiritual amnesia, once they felt at a safe distance from God, they would engage in terrible sin, and then deny any responsibility. *"After all,"* they would protest, *"it's not our fault. If God had just stayed close to us he could have kept us on the straight and narrow."* Israel was like the man who murdered both his parents, then begged the court for clemency because, after all, he was an orphan!

But it's not just Israel's problem. We all know about wandering away from God. And I think we also know deep inside that this aspect of sin wouldn't work without self-deception. The more distance we put between God's Spirit and us, the easier it is to convince ourselves that no matter what happens in our lives, we are not at fault. How could we be expected to know or do any better? We wander off into the darkness and then blame God for not providing us with any light by which to see.

How do we get ourselves into such a predicament? Well for one thing, whenever we wander off and put distance between ourselves and God we're a lot more vulnerable to peer pressure. We'll conform to the group we're in. We go along to get along. We surrender our conscience to the larger group and later claim we really had no choice. *"Everybody was doing it, Mom,"* the adolescent cries. Incidentally, there are lots of adults who say the same thing – in slightly different terms. *"Someone's responsible – maybe even someone in the pack we were running with – but it's not me."*

Of course, it's not just an individual problem. Big corporations are able to function as well as they do because they employ large numbers of people who are organized in a complicated hierarchical structure. But that very same structure can be used to let responsibility fall between the desks when something goes wrong. When Firestone tires were rolling along nicely, the company had no difficulty claiming full credit for their longstanding, superior product. You don't produce quality tires like that by accident, after all.

Then a few years ago SUVs started rolling over in fatal accidents. Highways were littered with rubber that had peeled off Firestone tires. Suddenly

the folks at Firestone all but claimed they had nothing to do with tire production! It was Ford's fault for making those unstable SUVs. It was Ford's fault for telling people to under-inflate the tires. Meanwhile Ford said that Firestone said it was fine to under-inflate. (And by the way, didn't most of those bad tires come from a Firestone factory that had been run for weeks by temporary workers while the regular employees were on strike?) Both firms claimed they did nothing wrong. And yet, despite millions of recalled tires and a \$51 million settlement, at least 148 people are dead. And why? Well, the answer seems to be the collective shrug of hundreds of shoulders.

Sometimes we connive or minimize or scapegoat. But at times we simply hit the road. Absentee fathers leave town and never again speak to mother or child. And there are those who, although they don't leave home, nevertheless become so wrapped up in their own little worlds that they might as well not be physically present.

We wander, we flee, we run and hide, all in an attempt to put some distance between ourselves and our responsibility. And the tragedy is that, in the process, we put distance between ourselves and the God who knows just how responsible we really are. We may want to claim, "*I didn't know any better.*" And yet God replies, "*By my Word and Spirit I told you better!*" We might want to say, "*I didn't realize what was happening.*" But God says, "*I made you smarter than that!*" We might protest, "*It was someone else's fault.*" And God says, "*I was watching you the whole time. Do you need me to tell you what I saw?*"

The scary thing is that, even those of us who would never dream of attacking God or actively doing anything to alienate ourselves from God may nevertheless find that by evading the truth we end up evading Him who is the truth – and the way – and the life. So how can we combat this aspect of the sin, this tendency to wander that is constantly making a play for our hearts? Let me make four practical suggestions.

First, if letting yourself wander away from God leads to the kind of spiritual amnesia that Israel claimed to have in our lesson from Jeremiah 2, one thing you can do is keep in touch with God. And one of the best ways you can do that is by immersing yourself in his Word, studying it, thinking about it, talking about it. Face it: you are less likely to forget God (and therefore less likely to pretend ignorance) if you are a faithful student of the one book in which God reveals his heart to you.

Second, in your day-to-day life avoid using self-deceptive patterns of speech. Do you sometimes find yourself saying things like, "*I was just following orders. Business is business. Everybody's doing it. That wasn't my area of responsibility. I didn't want to make waves. It wouldn't have made any difference if I had spoken up. It's not my problem. These things happen – what do you want*

me to do about it?” The more we find ourselves saying things like these, the more likely it is we are evading something – including God.

Third, don't try to fight your battles with sin on your own. Seldom does evil attempt a wholesale takeover of a person's heart. Satan's preferred style is to whittle away at us, slicing off a sliver of conscience here and shaving a wisp of integrity there. We're enticed to make little compromises with the larger deceits around us until one day we discover that we have abdicated the control center of our hearts. We find it more and more difficult to distinguish the truth from a lie, and not surprisingly we find that we don't want to look God in the eye.

So how can you combat such a gradual takeover? I can tell you one way. Day by day you quite literally invite the Holy Spirit to help you combat those sins large and small. If you really don't want to evade God, ask the Holy Spirit to invade you. God has given you a marvelous capacity for imagination. Use it! Come up with ways when sitting at your desk, or fixing something in the shop, or working in the kitchen to invite thoughts about God to intrude on your mind. The more you develop ways to connect your identity as a Christian with your day-to-day world, the less likely you will be to claim ignorance or to just let things go to hell day after day, week after week.

Fourth, if you have not already done so, get yourself into a small group of Christians who will covenant to pray for and encourage each other, and hold each other accountable. None of us is perfect or all-knowing. There are plenty of things of which we may be genuinely ignorant, and plenty of times when we make mistakes out of ignorance. But what we dare not forget is that God has designed us in his image, and we are therefore undeniably, unavoidably responsible. We may not know everything, but we know a lot – particularly when it comes to our work, to our own families, and to the people with whom we associate. We can't always claim ignorance. We can't always say we didn't know any better, because often we do – and deep down we know it. And that's why we need brothers and sisters in the faith with whom we covenant to hold each other responsible for what we know.

These might not be easy suggestions. Many of you find your plate full. The last thing you may want to hear is your pastor suggesting still other ways to be occupied when a million other things are clamoring for your attention. Hearing this message may tempt you to think, *“Give me a break. You can't expect me to try seeing everything through the lens of faith. Oh, I'll admit it's a good idea. And I'll get around to it when I have time. But right now I've got enough going on.”* That's what Israel was saying – and it's a dead end. Don't go there. We're talking here about your spiritual life – which, I would remind you, will last infinitely longer than your physical life. Let's be clear. Satan is making a play for your heart and soul. This is a matter of eternal life and death.

According to an old legend, three demons came to try to conquer the world. The first one tried to sway people's hearts by proclaiming, "*There is no God!*" Most people frankly didn't believe such an obvious assault on God. The second demon wooed people with the cry, "*There is no sin!*" But while his message had a definite appeal, what was in the news every day kept people from fully buying that line. The last demon, however, took a different tack. He knew how many people believed in both God and sin. So he didn't cry out anything. He simply whispered, "*There is no hurry.*" That demon won the hearts of untold numbers who were only too happy to take their time – until they discovered one day that time was up.

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