

# THREE STEPS DOWN

Dr. Roy O. McClain

## THE BAPTIST HOUR

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The heathen had a saying, "Count no man happy until he is dead." Then the Psalmist came along and told how to be happy while living—happiness here and now. The first Psalm strikes a vibrant note of real living, "Happy is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful."

All of us are going in one of two directions: either we "climb the steep ascent of heaven with peril, toil, and pain," or we walk down the grade to certain destruction away from God. The Psalmist says that the first step is walking in the counsel of the ungodly.

### The Happy Man

Few things in life are more significant than beginnings . . . the beginning of a good habit may result in a good life. The commencement of the wrong habit may be the first step in a long life of worthlessness. Walking in the counsel of the ungodly can be the first step in the downward descent.

The Bible does not say that the counsel is with the worst sinners—one translation says the "ungodly," those who are sometimes referred to as the "respectable" sinners . . . comparatively good people who would never think of stealing a man's coat, but who find no embarrassment in stealing an industrial franchise. They would never stoop to something as crass as slander, but are never chagrined at profaning the name of God. Sunday saints and Saturday sinners. God's Dr. Jekylls and Satan's Mr. Hydes.

The New Testament makes emphatically clear the warning, "Come we out from among them." Not that Christianity is a group of exclusivists . . . not that we are to culture Pharaism among us, but it does mean that the mark of Jesus Christ will make you signally different.

If I walk with the ungodly, it is easy to become like them. Influence works in a subtle silentness. And in a fateful hour of decision, your company might influence you for the wrong. It did for Peter. Warming by the fires which the world had kindled, one curious bystander asked him, "Aren't you one of His

disciples?" And because Peter was walking for that moment with the ungodly, he answered, "I never knew Him."

Today the bookshelves are lined with many volumes on how to stop worrying and have peace of mind. It would mark us as nobler people if we would concede that most of our tensions are coming from one source. Namely, we are trying to maintain citizenship in two worlds . . . the world of the ungodly and the world of Christ's Kingdom. Few are content to be avowedly godless—that pinches too hard; yet, an equally small few are willing to go all the way and divorce their union with the world. So, in this dualism—trying to keep one foot in the camp of Satan and one in the camp of God—we have our distracting anxieties and our pagan tensions. God must be God of all or He will not be God at all. Jesus says the two are never reconcilable. The challenge is to be in the world and not of the world! When in Rome do as the Romans . . . only when the Romans do right!!!

### The Way of Sinners

When once the foot is placed on the first step down, the next step follows in fast sequence. To walk with the ungodly makes it easy to stand with the sinners. After a walk it is logical to stand. "An evil thought passes your door first as a stranger; second, it enters your room as a guest; third, it installs itself as lord and master." At this stage sin is still unconfirmed: that is, none has signed a card saying, "I pledge to be a sinner." In fact, he would be incensed by anyone who said that he was standing with sinners.

But the process is gradual, no sudden plunge, just an easing in often unawares. You do not intend—**not you**—to cast off holy things; you settle nothing by deliberate choice, make no final decisions to defy the calls of the soul and the laws of God. But time is deciding for you. While you are passive and slack, the tides are determining for you what you will not determine for yourself.

How easy it is to ask, "But what is **wrong** with my doing this or that? After all, I am young but once, why

limit myself to one person? Why not forget the structures of religious discipline and live my life while I may?" The child of God asks another question, "What is **right** with my doing that?"

It requires so little effort to stand with the sinners. The real effort comes when I realize my foot is standing on the second step down, and forthrightly leave the camp of the sinner.

Jesus defined sin as "missing the mark." Some of us feel rather righteous about the fact that we do not gamble . . . nor are we guilty of adultery . . . nor do we defile the sacred precincts. We may be above all these and still miss the mark of God. If so, that is sinning. And to stand in the way of sinners is to mark progress in the descent to hell. Standing with the sinners is the appropriate place to rationalize. To **commit** sin is bad enough . . . but to fail to **admit** it is even worse.

### **The Seat of the Scornful**

Steps one and two almost make inevitable the third step down: Walking with the ungodly . . . standing with sinners—then it is easy to sit with the scornful. Sin in three steps . . . gradual, decisive, final! The declension: bad, worse, worst—walking, standing, sitting.

Sin does its work well. It is never content with partial occupancy, it demands full allegiance in the end. It passed the door first as a stranger . . . now it has installed itself as lord and master. It writes with an infamous hand. Like the inscription over the cross in Latin, Hebrew and Greek, sin writes thoroughly.

"Why, I never dreamed of turning out this way," he says. "Who would have ever thought that this could have happened to me?" The scornful! Now in open rebuke before God, his actions are deliberate . . . no note of apology now . . . no sting of an accusing con-

science . . . a miserable picture of life hardened into a permanent seat . . . a chair of the derisive scorn. Now he sings with Tennyson in "The Vision of Sin":

"Fill the cup, and fill the can;  
Mingle madness, mingle scorn!  
Dregs of life, and lees of man.

Then comes the hollow sneer at all things.

And then the vision ends . . ."

A young person begins to hear moral distinctions dealt with lightly and the things that were holy in his home made unclean. He grows indifferent to the finer touches of life and feels himself above the standards that once were his guiding principles. It becomes his favorite pastime to chide and sneer. The world that interests him is below him; he does not stoop to lift it, he simply sits and scorns it.

He cannot look at a rose without talking about the manure at its roots. While some admire a lovely deed, he hints at a faulty motive. Whatsoever things are vulgar, he thinks on these things. Point him to the stars and he will only see the sky. This is the spirit of the scornful . . . the sinner, hardened and confirmed by three steps down.

Perhaps you have heard of the wild duck flying over with the others in formation which broke from the ranks and landed in the barnyard among tame ducks. For a few minutes it was out of place and nervously watched the other wild ducks fly away. It stayed on for a while walking around in the barnyard until a year passed, and when the wild ducks came over again it rose to fly away with them, but it came back to the tame ducks. After several years as the wild ducks came over the duck merely looked up and made no effort to fly. Sometimes I think my soul is like that old tame duck, dabbling around in the barnyard muck. To walk in the counsel of the ungodly is to stand in the way of sinners and sit in the seat of the scornful.

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**P. O. Box 12157**

**Fort Worth 16, Texas**

**REV. PAUL M. STEVENS — Director**