

November 22, 2015 – Jude 20-27 (OT: Isaiah 51:4-6 Gospel: Mark 13:24–37)

Only God Can Keep You from Stumbling and Get You Safely to Heaven

“Safety is our number one concern.” You hear this phrase in many places and contexts. It is something we are especially concerned about when we travel. Airlines have safety cards in every seat back pocket and there is a safety briefing or video before every flight. Car makers highlight the safety ratings and features of the vehicles they try to sell us. When we drive, we often worry about driving through rain, or snow, or driving at night.

But is safety our number one concern when it comes to our spiritual life and our trip through this life to eternity? It is easy to focus on our day-to-day lives here and now and not give our eternal destination much thought. But this life is filled many spiritual perils and dangers that can get us stuck in a ditch, and there are many temptations to take the wrong path. Jesus warns that not many will find the difficult and narrow way that leads to life (Matthew 7:14). So how do we arrive safely at our eternal home?

Jude, the brother of James and Jesus Himself, wrote his letter to warn about the spiritual dangers we face. In particular he warned against those who creep in unnoticed among believers and “*turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ*” (v. 4). In the closing words of his letter, which we consider today, Jude tells us how we can withstand these people who pervert and deny the truth and avoid the wrong roads and ditches in this life. We will see that only God can keep you from stumbling and get you safely to heaven.

Jude closes with this encouragement: “*keep yourselves in the love of God*” (v. 21). This doesn’t refer to our love for God, but God’s love for us. This love God demonstrated by sending His only begotten Son to die for us, even while we were still sinners – even though we did not deserve it (John 3:16, Romans 5:8). This is the love in which we are to keep ourselves, the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord, the love that saved us from our sins.

Several years ago I rented a Prius. I don’t know if you have ever driven a hybrid vehicle. The Prius has a big LCD screen in the middle of the dashboard that shows how the vehicle is operating – when it is using the battery vs. gasoline, etc. I found it difficult to drive! I want to watch the screen rather than the road! I didn’t end up in the ditch or have an accident, but that would have happened if I wasn’t looking where I was going.

In the same way we run into trouble when we take our eyes off Jesus. Hebrews 12:1-2 encourages us to “*run with endurance the race that is set before us*” by “*looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.*” Jesus is to be our focus, because only He has taken away our sin. He took away your sin by enduring death on the cross.

It can be tempting to look at the “good” things we do and think that we deserve a reward. We can start to think that we are good enough to get to heaven. But God reminds us in His word that we are not “good enough.” In fact, left to ourselves, we would wind up driving in the opposite direction headed to hell. Because by nature, we are not good people. We do evil in God’s sight. Many today talk about karma. It is a good thing that karma is not true! If we got what we deserve, we would be in big trouble. What we deserve, because of our sins, is punishment and separation from God both here and in eternity.

But God does not treat us as our sins deserve or punish us based on our iniquities. Instead, God punished His Son, Jesus, in our place, so that our sins can be forgiven and we can go to heaven. God loved the world by sending His Son to take away your sins. He took away the roadblock that barred your way to heaven. You are justified; in God’s eyes it is just as if you had never sinned, because He has given you His perfect righteousness.

That doesn’t mean you will automatically arrive safely in heaven. As I said, there are many dangers and distraction in this world. We still have our sinful flesh clinging to us, trying to take over the wheel and turn us away from God. Because of this, we cannot be confident in ourselves and in our own ability to make it.

You may have experienced this in driving. It is raining or snowing, but the road doesn’t seem that bad, so you get confident and speed up a bit, that is, until you hit that slick spot or patch of ice and wind up in a spin. The same thing happens to us in this life when we become confident in ourselves instead of looking to Jesus. Paul warned the Corinthians: “*let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall*” (1 Corinthians 10:12). That is a good warning for each of us.

So how do we keep ourselves from falling? How do you “*keep yourselves in the love of God*” (v. 21)? These verses spell out three ways we do this. This first is “*building yourselves up on your most holy faith*” (v. 20). Here “*your most holy faith*” does not refer to the faith that you have in Jesus, but to what you believe. It refers to the holy truth that has been entrusted to us by God in His word, the Bible. The original recipients of this letter did not yet have the New Testament gathered together for them to read; this is why Jude doesn’t refer to the scriptures here, but rather to the truth that they had received from the Apostles (see v. 17). Jude wrote this letter so that the readers would “*contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*” (v. 3). Today Jude would have told us to build ourselves up on our most holy Bible.

It is important for us to hear and read God’s word. In it God reminds us that we have sinned by failing to do what He desires, but that He has given us forgiveness through Jesus Christ. He reminds us that we cannot stand on our own, but that He is able to make us stand (Romans 14:4). So build yourselves up on your most holy

faith; eagerly read and hear the Scriptures which is able to make you wise for salvation through Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:15).

The second way we have here to keep ourselves in God's love is prayer. We are to pray in the Holy Spirit. This does not refer to praying in tongues (a "spirit language"), as the Pentecostals teach, but to praying in connection with the Holy Spirit. It refers to praying with the Spirit's help. Often we don't know what to pray for. Romans 8:26 tells us that the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us and helps us pray as we ought.

And prayer itself requires us to focus on God, does it not? It leads us to focus on God's love. When we pray, we turn God to thank Him for what He has done for us and to ask His help. Prayer reminds us that we cannot do it ourselves, but need His mercy and aid.

Which brings us to the third way. We are to look "*for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life*" (v. 21). Because Jesus came to earth and died on the cross, we can expect and wait for Him to help us in mercy. That does not mean His help will always come as soon as *we* want, but He knows what we need. We can look for His mercy, knowing that it is coming. And it will be what we need to lead us safely to eternal life.

I always used to think of God's mercy as referring to His forgiving our sins. That is why I was confused by our order of service in which we pray, "Lord have mercy" *after* the absolution (the announcement that our sins have been forgiven for Christ's sake). But mercy refers to the pity that a person has on someone in need. While we do need forgiveness, we already have that in Christ. God's mercy extends beyond forgiveness. Our prayer for mercy reminds us that we still need God's help and compassion each and every day. Jesus will help you – not because you deserve it (you don't); He will help you because of the love He has for you, which He demonstrated by dying on the cross.

Last week I talked about the importance of gathering together to encourage one another with God's word. Here we see another reason that God has called us to come together as a congregation: we are told "*And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh*" (vv. 22-23).

When you are traveling, isn't it better to have someone with you, especially on a long trip? They can help keep you awake. If you start to drift out of the lane, they can warn you. And they can help keep you from making a wrong turn and wind up someplace you don't want to be. That is a picture of what we are to do as a church. We are to have compassion (literally mercy) on one another. We are to help keep one another on the narrow road that leads to everlasting life. This compassion and mercy will lead us to encourage those who are doubting (see ESV v. 22) and pull

people “*out of the fire*” by calling them to repentance when they are caught up in some sin.

But just as we do not like “back seat drivers”, we don’t like it when someone calls attention to our sin. And our sinful nature is eager to point out what others are doing wrong in the hopes that our sins will be overlooked. That is why God encourages us to deal with one another with mercy and compassion. We are to restore someone overtaken by sin with a spirit of gentleness (Galatians 6:1), remembering Jesus’ warning about looking at the speck in your brother’s eye and ignoring the log in yours.

But God still calls us to exhort and encourage one another. It may not always be pleasant, but the stakes are high! Straying from God’s road leads us away from eternal life to eternal damnation. The fire referred to here is not hyperbole or metaphor, but we are literally snatching people from the everlasting fire reserved for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41, Revelation 20:10, 14-15; 21:8).

All this may seem like a lot to do. It is overwhelming when we focus on what *we* do. But that isn’t the point of these words. The closing words of Jude’s letter remind us to make God our Savior our focus. He is the only one “*who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy*” (v. 24).

If the road seems long and hard, remember: it isn’t up to us, and that is good news! God is able to guard you and protect you on the way. He keeps you from stumbling. He presents you faultless before His glorious presence through the perfect life, innocent death and resurrection from the dead of His Jesus. Look to Him to bring you safely home.

To God our Savior, Who alone is wise, Be glory and majesty, Dominion and power, Both now and forever.

Amen

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