

Keeping the Faith

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In a football game, the players on defense have a number of different goals and responsibilities. Ideally, their actions on any given play will have a negative result for the offense. The defensive end will sack the quarterback, or the cornerback will intercept a pass, and so on. If that doesn't happen, the next goal is to frustrate the offense's efforts on that particular play. For instance, the linebacker might stop the running back for a one-yard gain, which makes it harder for the offense to make a first down on succeeding plays. However, at the very least, the players on the defense want to prevent the big play. The linebacker can't fill the wrong gap so that the running back scoots into the secondary. The safety, whatever else he may do, can't let the wide receiver get past him, or the result will be a 70-yard touchdown pass.

In many ways, the same analysis applies to our lives as Christians. Once we have obeyed the gospel, we're basically playing defense against the devil, because as long as we don't let him win, we get to heaven. Sometimes, we hope to strike back, by bringing a lost family member to the Lord or some other great success. At the next level down, we look to grow spiritually. However, like the free safety on the football field, our most basic goal is to prevent the big play. No matter what else we do, we must take the steps that are necessary to keep Satan from pulling us away from God.

The devil doesn't want us to think of life in those terms. Just like the offense will often fake a running play and throw a play-action pass instead, in the hope that the safety will be fooled by the fake and allow the wide receiver by him, Satan wants to distract us. He wants us to focus on other things while he destroys us spiritually. We can only prevent this by living fundamentally sound spiritual lives. No matter what, we must do what is necessary to keep the faith.

Basic Principles

The first thing that we must do to protect against the spiritual big play is to **LOVE GOD**. No lesser authority than Jesus tells us that this is the most important thing, in Matthew 22:37-38. This seems like a very abstract thing to say, but in reality, whether we love God or not will determine more than anything else whether we will inherit eternal life. If we don't love God, the Bible becomes nothing more than another self-help book, and we can use our own wisdom to accept or reject its teachings. Unless we love God, we no longer have a reason to obey Him, no matter what.

The first path to loving God is admiration. When we are awestruck by the beauty of the stars at night, or when our spirits are stirred by the nobility of character displayed by Jesus, the things that we learn are teaching us to love. Similarly, we learn to love God through gratitude. When we think about how insignificant we are, and how great He is, we soon realize that we have no right to expect anything at all from Him. However, that's not what we get. God, in His mercy and His love, provides for us far beyond what we need in this life. Even more impressively, He gave His only begotten Son so that we could have eternal life, even though we deserve death for our sins. The only honest response to love like that is love in return, and love for God is essential if we wish to reign forever with Him in heaven.

The second thing that we must do is nearly as important as the first. It is to **LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR**. Jesus teaches us about this in the same context we looked at a moment ago, in Matthew 22:39. For one thing, love for mankind is inseparable from love for God. As John tells us in 1 John 4, if we don't love our brother whom we have seen, we cannot love God, whom we have not seen. We learn to love by loving one another. Furthermore, we will never understand the spirit of the law of Christ unless we love other people. Loveless Christianity is a loathsome thing to behold. Christians like this may hold to a form of godliness, but they will always find excuses not to help others or be kind to others. In addition, when they consider the conduct of their brethren and neighbors, they will usually be harsh and judgmental about any sin they see, and will show the sinner no mercy in either word or deed. Although people like this may wear the name of Christ, they actually contribute to the negative stereotype of Christians that drives others away.

If we wish to avoid that spiritual dead end, we must learn to see others as God sees them. Unlike the self-righteous, God actually is perfect. He sees us in all of our disgusting imperfection. And yet, His response is understanding, pity, mercy, and love. We must learn to see others the same way. We must be compassionate people who long to help others, even, and perhaps especially, when we don't see them as deserving help. Instead of going through life focused on our own good, we must focus on the good of others. That's the only path that leads to life.

If we want to put these things into practice, it is essential that we **STUDY**. In the same context once again, Jesus emphasizes the link between law and love in Matthew 22:40. As we said earlier, it is impossible to rightly understand the law of God without love. However, the opposite is also true. It is impossible to rightly understand love without the law.

Consider how badly love is misunderstood in the world around us. Just about everybody out there is pro-love. Few people will say that they are motivated by hate, and that they believe others should do the same. However, because they don't know what God means by love, what they think of as love leads them to act in ungodly and unloving ways. The fornicator, the advocate of gay marriage, even the suicide bomber, all of these claim to be guided by love, and yet their conception of love leads them to do things that the Scripture condemns. We can easily fall into the same trap.

The only way that we can lead a life that is truly filled with love is by following the path God has set forth in His word. Nor should we think that if we read through the Bible once, then we've got it figured out. It's difficult to keep God's definition of love in mind all the time. Like a sensitive radar set, we constantly need recalibration, and we can only recalibrate ourselves by returning to the word over and over again, so that we can renew our minds in God's image.

Finally, if we want to keep our love for God intact, we must **PRAY**. This too was something that Jesus stressed. Look at Luke 18:1. If we are truly His disciples, we will look to pray at all times and not lose heart. The logic here could not be simpler. Prayer is talking to God, and any relationship depends on communication. What do we think would happen to our marriages if we didn't speak to our spouses for a year, or if our communication was limited to who should go to the store to buy some eggs? I guarantee you, friends, that after a year of that, there wouldn't be much of a marriage left. And yet, so many Christians make the same mistake in their relationship with God. They think that if they go through the rote repetition of hymns in the assembly, or give God a Christmas list every now and again, that they're communicating with Him like they should. Instead, we should learn from the example of Jesus. Jesus had an amazing relationship with God, and He had it because He spent hours at a time in prayer. Let's pray like Him.

Advanced Principles

Once we have that spiritual base defined, we can protect ourselves even more if we **ASSOCIATE WITH THE RIGHTEOUS**. Paul encourages us to do this in 2 Timothy 2:22. Whether for good or ill, we can be certain that we will be influenced, and influenced powerfully, by those around us, and the best way to make sure that this influence is positive is by associating with Christians. In my life, I've been a member at seven different churches, all around the country, from New Jersey to Texas, and everywhere I've been, the single best predictor of whether a Christian will remain faithful is how many Christian friends he has. If there's a brother who spends a long time talking after services, who spends his free time with the brethren, who prefers the company of Christians above all else, I've never seen a Christian like that fall away. I've seen Christians like that make disastrously stupid spiritual decisions, but I've never seen them leave the Lord entirely. On the other hand, if there's a sister who really doesn't have friends or connections with the congregation where she worships, she's like a sick deer in one of those nature shows who can't keep up with the herd anymore. It's not going to be long before the wolves show up to collect her. The point is, friends, that every one of us needs to seize the opportunities we have to grow closer to our brethren, whether that's after services, or at one of our prayer breakfasts, or on our own time. That's not guaranteed to make us Satan-proof, but it's one of the best answers we've got.

Similarly, we must **ASSEMBLE**. Consider the example of the Jerusalem church in Acts 2:41. They spent time with each other socially every day, but they also assembled together in the temple to edify one another and glorify God. Sometimes, I fear that brethren develop a one-or-the-other mindset about social interaction and the assembly. Some brethren think that as long as they show up at services, they don't really need to associate with Christians outside of the church-building walls. That's wrong. However, others think that as long as you've got the association, the assembly isn't important, and that's wrong too. God's plan for Christians has always been that they assemble together, and the more we assemble, the better God's plan works in our lives. We are edified by the preaching, the teaching, the singing, the Lord's Supper, the prayers, and even by the simple act of worshiping with other Christians. We need the assembly.

Outside of the assembly, we must **AVOID DISASTER**. Paul describes two Christians who failed in this in 1 Timothy 1:18-19. The language that Paul uses here is telling. A shipwreck isn't a slow, imperceptible process. It's a sudden disaster, and even though Satan is fond of the death of a thousand cuts, he's willing to use disaster too. In a moment of weakness, any of us can make a decision that will ruin us eternally. When we decide that yes, we are going to try alcohol for the first time, or have sex with our girlfriend, or express our feelings for our married co-worker, that's Satan hitting on the 70-yard touchdown pass. Of course, while there's life, we have the chance to recover from our disastrous decisions, but they often make our lives far more difficult than they would have been had we stayed righteous. In many cases, once people start down the road of illicit sex, or drugs, or crime, they don't ever come back. When we are presented with decisions like this, we must learn to recognize the disaster and stay away from it at all costs.

Finally, we must **THINK AHEAD**. Paul points to an area where this is important in 1 Timothy 6:10. There are some games out there that I'm good at—Lauren won't play me at Scrabble, for instance—but there are some games that I'm terrible at, and one of those games is chess. I'm not any good at planning my moves five moves in advance, and so I get clobbered. In life, though, thinking ahead is important because the devil loves to lure us into traps and clobber us.

In this specific verse, the lure is love of money. Satan was able to use the appeal of wealth to sucker these first-century Christians into a situation where they would lose their souls. This is why whenever we're making any decision, we must ask ourselves first and foremost what the long-term spiritual impact of that decision is going to be. Sure, we'll get a nice raise if we move to Nowheresville, Nevada, but the nearest church is two hours away. Sure, this girl is cute, but she's a hard-core atheist, and she'll try to persuade me to become an atheist too if I date her. If we don't keep our eyes open for the traps, that makes Satan's job that much easier. However, if we spot the traps, we can avoid them.