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Series on Jude: The Beloved

Jude 17-23

Title: Remember the Signs!

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The Big Idea: Rather than getting sidetracked with diversions, remember Christ's signs of faith and compassion!

Time with Young Christians:

Oh, hello everyone! I was just finishing brushing my teeth, just to make sure that, you know, I don't have any bad breath for our zoom time together today!

How many of you kids like brushing your teeth?

How many times a day do you have to brush your teeth?

Who makes you brush them?

Do they have to remind you to brush them at night as part of your bedtime routine before stories and kisses?

Seems like a lot of instructions and rules, huh?

But what would happen if your parents didn't make you brush your teeth?

That's right! They'd turn all brown and gross! So do you think its loving for your parents to teach you what is right and how to take care of your body—even your teeth?

Do you think it's the same with our Heavenly Father? Are there things God asks us to do that might not be what we like to do or want to do, but are part of learning what it means to be his children?

- Saying sorry
- Loving people who are mean
- Learning to give our tithe to the Lord; it's like training wheels for generosity

Now, do you think God teaches us because he wants to punish us or because he loves us?

Jesus, would you make us teachable children who love you? Amen.

Message:

Have you ever been frustrated when somebody gave you a shortcut to a destination only to find that it made you get lost? "It'll be so simple," they said. "It'll be fun," they said. "It'll be easy" they said. Yeah right.

There's a brilliant story about some children in a fantastical world who get sidetracked by shortcuts. You might know it . . .

A young boy, whom some teased as “useless” due to his name being Eustace, and a young girl with determination, named Jill, set off on a great adventure in the fourth Chronicle of Narnia *The Silver Chair*.

These two children are called upon by Aslan to rescue the lost Prince Rillian, son of King Caspian, who was kidnapped by the Emerald Witch and is being held captive in an underground lair. Before Jillian and Eustace set out, Aslan gives them four clear signs to follow. These signs are: 1) watch for an old dear friend 2) go north from Narnia until coming to the city of ancient giants 3) find writing on stone in that ancient city and do what it says 4) when they find the prince, they will know that it is him by asking him to do something in the name of Aslan. Eustace and Jillian were to memorize these signs and then Aslan gave them this warning,

“Remember, remember, remember the Signs. Say them to yourself when you wake in the morning and when you lay down at night and when you wake in the middle of the night. And whatever strange things may happen to you, let nothing turn your mind from following the Signs. And secondly, I give you a warning. Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain the air is clear and your mind is, but as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the Signs which you have learned here will not look at all like you expect them to look when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay not attention to appearances. Remember the Signs and believe the Signs. Nothing else matters.”

It seems clear enough to translate this story to our series where we’ve been told by Jude to be on the look out for false teachers. But like Narnia, the air is not so clear for us on earth. It can be thick and can confuse our minds. That’s why we must remember what Jude tells his readers: to follow the sign Jesus told in warning us about false teachers. What was the sign we were to look for?

To answer that, turn with me to Jesus’ warning about false teachers from Matt. 7:15-20.

15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? 17 Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”

Jude ends his letter about false teachers with circling back to Jesus’ own warning because the way Jesus sets up the ultimate test for false teachers is really quite simple. Test the fruit, Jesus says. Test the fruit. Sometimes, though, this testing can be made more difficult by cover up.

Take for example, the horrifying scandal that is filling evangelical media right now around the renowned apologist, Ravi Zacharias’ sexual abuse that is only being brought to the light now that he is dead. When this man died last year, I remember many friends heralding him on social media in the days following his passing. They quoted sections of their favourite books he wrote, spoke of meeting him in person at conferences, and deeply admired the impact this man had on their life. It would seem that Ravi’s fruit was evident for all to see.

But, we all were shocked to learn that this man carried out sexual abuse of many women and then developed a masterful plan of coverup. Rape, exploitation, objectification, and a list of other sins have utterly ruined any testimony of Ravi’s life. Jesus says, “These false prophets come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.” Now, what Ravi taught was great, but his inward man was utterly corrupted and the double life he lived leaves all of us who learned from him torn and feeling utterly betrayed, led astray. Indeed, remember this metaphor Jesus gives of men like

Ravi in Matthew 18:6, *“If anyone causes one of these little ones--those who believe in me--to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”*

And so Jude’s warning 2100 years ago is just as important today as ever! Beware of those on the inside—and follow the warnings Jesus gives about these people! Twice in these verses Jude will start his warnings with, “But you Beloved!” And this is the first warning: But you, beloved, watch out for false teachers.

Well, hang on. Is that all we’re to do? Is the antidote to false teachers simply to be on the lookout for them? I think Jude has more for us than just that. And so, here’s my bid idea from Jude today:

Rather than getting sidetracked with diversions, remember Christ’s signs of faith and compassion!

The antidote to false teachers, Jude says, is following the way of Jesus, which also has very clear road signs for us. And so, we come to Jude’s second herald of, “But you Beloved”

Let’s read verses 20-23 again:

20 But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; 21 keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. 22 And have mercy on some who are wavering; 23 save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.

Do you get the sense that Jude is driving us towards relationship rather than rules? Remember, last week we learned that rules and regulations will not save us from the tidal wave of false teachers or the call of the world. No, we must cling to the Beloved, we must hold fast to Jesus. If we’ve been led astray—whether by someone who let us down, or by the call of the world—it would be a horrendous error to think God’s response to our homecoming would be the rigidity of religion.

Do you remember the story of the Prodigal Son? For him, it wasn’t false teachers who led him astray, but the hope of easy money and the allure of gluttony. After finding all of this to be like sand that slips through his fingers, the prodigal returns. And when he comes home does the Father say, “Okay, Son . . . you bad boy! From now on, you will be my servant and religiously obey my every command, because you are nothing more than the scum of the earth?”

No, when the Son returns, the father embraces him, gives him his best cloak, and throws a party for him! As redeemed children of God, brothers and sisters, we are welcomed into relationship, into friendship, into communion with God—and this is what keeps us from going astray. We stay in the Beloved because of love.

It would be a horrendous error to think that the antidote to getting lost or led astray is rules! No friends, we are called to Jesus himself—the God who calls us Beloved and who is himself the Beloved. To illustrate this, let me show you a painting of the parable of the Prodigal Son by Rembrandt.



Just let your gaze settle on it for a moment. (pause)

A humble man who was a priest and left a career at Norte Dame University to live among the disabled found himself staring at a copy of this painting in his small room for weeks on end. This priest, Henri Nouwen, went on to write two beautiful reflections on Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal* and *Home Tonight*. In these Nouwen writes,

"The farther I run away from the place where God dwells, the less I am able to hear the voice that calls me the Beloved, and the less I hear that voice, the more entangled I become in the manipulations and power games of the world."

And so the question is: how do I live out that big idea of **remembering Christ's signs of faith and compassion? Hey Jude, how do I stay close to the Beloved?**

I want to suggest that the two signs of faith and compassion Jude gives us are vertical and horizontal in how they actually work or function. Faith is vertical—it is based on our relationship with God. Compassion is horizontal—it is based on our relationship with our brothers and sisters.

So first, this vertical way of faith is marked by three things in Jude: praying in the Spirit, keeping yourselves in the love of God, and looking forward to the mercy of Jesus.

To pray in the Spirit is to pray in harmony with the leading of the Spirit, rather than according to my own agenda. I'm not taking my roadmap for life to Jesus and asking him to bless it. I am saying with the Psalmist, the very song we sung earlier this morning in the service, from Psalm 25:

“Show me your way O Lord, teach me your paths.” (Psalm 25:4)

Next, Jude says we are to “Keep ourselves in the love of God.” All throughout scripture you see this motif of covenant: God promises us life with him to the full as we choose to freely love him. To keep a covenant is to keep our end of the deal. And we must remember the covenant if we're going to keep it! Do you remember how C.S. Lewis, the author of *The Silver Chair* put it,

“Remember, remember, remember the Signs. Say them to yourself when you wake in the morning and when you lay down at night and when you wake in the middle of the night.”

Here, Lewis is directly lifting his words out of scripture to help make them alive for us through story. These words are found in Deuteronomy 6, the opening of the covenant between God and Israel. God says,

“These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, 2 so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life.. [...]

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”

And then the third thing Jude says about this vertical relationship is that we are “to look forward to the mercy of Jesus.” All of our journeying is leading to a destination, friends. As we stay with Jesus through this journey, we rest in his promised mercy that at the end of all things, Jesus will present us before his Father without having gone astray and without being marred with fault. But, now I'm getting ahead of myself because all of that is what's coming next week . . .

And what about what Jude says about our horizontal compassion—how we live in relationship with others?

First of all, Jude says, “Go easy on those who hesitate in the faith.” Wow, I wish I had seen this exemplified more when I was a kid, because growing up, there seemed to be truly little room in Christianity for those with doubt. But Jude says to go easy on those who hesitate in the faith.

Let's look again at that painting by Rembrandt, because there's more here for us to see.
(pause)

Do you notice the loving hands that are on the Prodigal's back? Nouwen was fascinated by these, even as one appears feminine and one masculine, exemplifying the robust fullness of the God who loves us. And Nouwen reflects,

“I now see that the hands that forgive, console, heal, and offer a festive meal must become my own.”

Friends, to go easy on those who hesitate in the faith is to love others with the same affection of the Father. And Jude commends us to this very thing when he says that not only are we to go easy on those who hesitate but that we need to “Go after those who take the wrong way.”

What, friends, does this compassion look like as we go after those who take the wrong way? Are we to be like the Prodigal’s brother who scoffs and is jealous of the brother who returns? Certainly not! Friends, we take our queue from the Father who is not sitting at home just waiting for the wanderer to return. He is looking for him, ready and longing for his return. Nouwen has a beautiful word to say here to us, too. Nouwen writes,

“Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you are called to be the father.”

The pathway of Jesus is marked by compassion. This compassion is seen in going easy on those who hesitate, going after those who take the wrong way, and lastly, Jude says, being tender with sinners but not soft on the sin. Friends, if we are ever to get what it is like to live like the Beloved, we can’t miss this. In story after story from the Gospels, Jesus welcomes the sinner, forgives them, and says, “Go your way and sin no more. Go your way your sins are forgiven you.”

And so, dear friends, there are no shortcuts to learning to live with faith and compassion, but we press on with Jesus who calls us Beloved, just as he pursues and leads us safely home. Our destiny is to be conformed to the image of Christ—to live cruciform—to live as ones who are crucified with Christ. Brothers and sisters, the cross of Christ is itself vertical and horizontal to show us that life with Jesus is the life of the Beloved where we are saved and sustained through faith and that we live out that faith through uncommon, pursuing, forgiving compassion.

Jesus, would you increase our faith and fill us with this compassion we pray?

Benediction:

Children of God

Called to a life of faith and compassion

Remember that it is not by works, not by religion, and not by wishful hoping that we are called into the Beloved, but by the dying and rising of Jesus, who calls us, redeems us, and makes us like him.

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace. (Numbers 6:24-26 NIV)