

082519 1 Tm. 1:15 “What About ... My Spiritual Missteps?”

Pastor Wayne Puls, Senior Pastor at Hope Lutheran Church

Picture a large camping trailer, with an aluminum ladder on the back, providing access to the roof. Now picture a 6’-3” guy dangling off of that ladder. His feet are flailing around wildly, trying to get a foothold. And all of his body weight is being held up by the wedding ring on his finger, which is caught on a protruding screw on that ladder.

That was me, several years ago. That was a painful, scary moment. I was helping my dad fix something up on the roof of his trailer; and, while climbing down the ladder, I took a misstep, slipped off the ladder, and ended up somehow hanging there for a few excruciating seconds held up only by my wedding ring.

Now there’s probably a cautionary moral to that story for all husbands, about the power of their marriage bonds. But that’s a sermon for another time.

Here’s what I want to talk about today. Taking a misstep on a ladder is a very dangerous thing. Taking a spiritual misstep is even more dangerous.

Have you ever misstepped spiritually? Ever done something to mess up your relationship with God? Ever failed in your faith life? Faltered in your beliefs, or acted completely contrary to God’s will? Lord knows, haven’t we all?

Let me tell you a story about a person who’s dangling from a spiritual ladder. It’s a sad story. But it’s a common story in the Christian world.

There’s a person I know, who’s not from this church, who’s an active Christian believer. This person grew up in a Christian family, and is a lifelong member of a church. This person’s church preaches the Law constantly. This person’s

church tells the people every week how they should be living, how they should be thinking, how they should be reacting to life situations. This person's church makes it clear that if you're not measuring up, in all those ways – if you're not climbing steadily up the spiritual ladder -- something's really wrong with you. Your faith is faulty. Your salvation is phony.

This person I know has shared these thoughts. "If I have faith," this person expresses, "If I have enough faith, I shouldn't be having doubts or uncertainties. If I really have faith, I shouldn't have failures and backsliding going on in my life. But I do. I shouldn't let life situations depress me. I should be happier in my marriage. I shouldn't have all these sinful thoughts and behaviors going on inside me. But I do."

"And when I do" – and here's the really sad part of the story – "When these missteps happen in my life, I question my faith. I question my salvation. I doubt my standing with God. I'm constantly condemning myself. Because I'm not measuring up. My performance as a Christian just isn't good enough. So maybe I'm not really a Christian at all. Maybe I should just give up."

I told you it was a sad story. But I've heard this story, or a variant of it, so many times. And maybe you've heard it, too. Maybe you've lived it.

I'm not here to judge other Christian churches. But it bothers me that there are so many preachers out there who are just nailing people into these boxes of despair. "Your missteps prove you're not a Christian," they say.

What about our missteps? What does our church have to say about them?

First, let's be clear, spiritual missteps happen, to all of us. We are all born into a fallen humanity, the Bible tells us. Our very human nature is sinful, damaged, tainted. And no

matter how hard we try, we can't stop sinning. We can't avoid sinning. Humans like us can't possibly rid ourselves of our sin thoughts, our sin deeds, our sin words, and our sin consequences.

St. Paul, in our Epistle Lesson for today, reflects on this reality. He's a saved Christian. He's a baptized, passionate, deeply-devoted disciple. He's a Christian superstar, an apostle personally chosen by Jesus Christ himself.

And, yet, how does Paul identify himself in 1 Timothy 1? A sinner. He's painfully aware of the reality, and he owns it. He not only labels himself a sinner. Paul actually says, "Of all the sinners in the world, I am the foremost. The worst! I'm the chief of sinners."

Paul's point is this. When it comes to sin, there's no distinction. There's no one better or worse. We're all the chief of sinners. We're all the bottom of the barrel, and nothing more, because of our sin.

For the Bible teaches us that all sins – little or big, those committed by pagans or those committed by believers – all sins are repugnant to God. All sins are taken seriously by him. All our sins will be accounted for, will be judged, will separate us from our holy God.

Just like brother Paul, every one of us take spiritual missteps every day. And our sins really do leave us dangling in a painful, scary way. Is there any way to get down? To be safe?

There is! There is a way! And it's not you and me struggling to get a new foothold every time we make a misstep, fighting to get ourselves right with God.

St. Paul gives us the answer. "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance," he writes, "that Christ Jesus

came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners! Let this shining Scriptural truth dawn upon your heart again today, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has already done what sinners like us can never do. Christ paid for your sin, for my sin, for St. Paul’s sin, for my dangling, despairing Christian friend’s sin. Christ’s righteousness is applied to us, through faith. And that’s the only way to be saved.

God is the one who does it. God is the one who plucks us off the ladder, and preserves us safely. His Spirit, working through the Word and Sacraments, guards and protects our faith and our salvation, through all the perils of this world, despite all the temptations we face, in spite of all the ridiculous missteps we take.

So what does our church teach about spiritual missteps? Keep admitting your sin, and how dangerous it is. But keep confessing boldly: my only hope is in Christ; my only strength is in Christ; my only salvation is in Christ.

“Chief of sinners though I be, Christ is All-in-All to me!”
Amen.