

Sermon for Sunday, March 29, 1981, by Andrew A. Jumper D.D. Pastor  
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### STANDING ON THE RUNNING BOARD

Philippians 3:7-16

Text: "...but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Philippians 3:13b-14

Back when I was a boy not many people had automobiles. It was the depression years and people were poor. I always got to visit my grandmother in the summer and miracle of miracles, she owned a car. Now, the wonderful thing about cars back then was that they had running boards. If you put the windows down so that you could hold on to the post that supported the roof of the car, you could stand on the running board and ride down the road that way. Believe me, that was exciting. Somehow it seemed awfully daring and with the breeze blowing your hair and whipping your clothes we felt very brave. Sometimes, if she wasn't going very far, my grandmother would let my brother and me ride on the running board. I realize now she would drive very slowly, but that was always some adventure. Once when we were riding that way, my brother and I started letting go of the support post just to show how daring we were. My brother shouted, "Look at me!" and about that time we hit a big bump in the road. I looked, but he was gone. My grandmother came to a quick stop and there was my brother back on the edge of the road sitting in the dirt. Fortunately, he wasn't hurt but grandmother made us get in the car. She said, "get in the car, young men, you are standing too close to where you got on."

Now, the fact is, a lot of people today are still riding on the running board of the Christian faith. Getting on the running board in the first place is an exciting experience. Do you remember when you first became a Christian? That was an exciting experience, wasn't it? You made a decision about your relationship to Jesus and you invited him into your heart. Suddenly all of life was different because you had a new purpose, a new intention, and a new love for everybody. Back then you meant to serve Jesus with your whole heart. Back then you meant to be God's man or God's woman and to be the kind of person he wanted you to be. Yes, getting started as a Christian was great. Being on the running board of the Christian faith was a thrilling experience.

But the fact of the matter is, a lot of us are still there. Many of us have never moved on in our spiritual growth. Many of us have never gone on to maturity and development in our Christian lives. We are still standing on the running board.

Is that true in your life? There are two things that usually happen to people who stay on the spiritual running board. One thing that happens is they keep looking for that first spiritual thrill. The first time you ride on the running board it is tremendously exciting. But you can ride on the running board for the first time only once. After that, it is never quite the same. But people keep looking for that same spiritual thrill. That's one of the reasons there has been such a proliferation of things like the Children of God, or the Eastern religions, or the religion imported from Korea called Moon-ism. People who are spiritually immature are looking for a religious thrill. I know people who run from church to church and from meeting to meeting. They are looking for some-

thing new and exciting; they are looking for some new experience. And that's always a sign of spiritual immaturity. They are still standing on the running board of the Christian faith. A second thing that can happen is what happened to my brother. You fall off of the spiritual running board. Has that happened to any of you this morning? People sometimes make a commitment to Jesus Christ and they have the best of intentions. But if they don't press on in the upward call of God, if they don't continue to grow and mature in Jesus, riding on the running board gets boring. And just to create a little excitement in life, they begin to go a little. The next thing you know, a bump in life comes along and suddenly they have fallen off. They were standing too close to where they got on.

Well, what about you this morning? Where are you in your spiritual growth? Have you gotten off the spiritual running board and moved on to maturity in your faith? Let me suggest several things you can do to grow as a Christian so that you don't keep on standing too close to where you got on.

First, you have got to keep yourself open to the power of the Holy Spirit. You see, the fact is I can't live the Christian life in my own strength. I can try, but it won't work. In my own power I just can't do what God wants me to do and neither can you. St. Paul once said, "the things I would not do is what I do and the things I want to do, I don't." I can sympathize with that, can't you? No matter how hard I try to be God's person, if I do it in my own strength, I fail. That's why the Bible says, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit." (Eph. 5:18) And the Greek there means not only to be filled but to keep on being filled. Maturing in Christ means to keep my heart open to God's power; it means to keep on being filled with spiritual power so that the Holy Spirit controls my life and helps me be God's man or God's woman. Are you doing that? Are you constantly opening your heart and asking God to control your life?

A second step in Christian maturity is to put my money where my mouth is. If I do not practice the kind of stewardship God teaches in the Bible I will never grow very much as a Christian. I suspect there are a lot of us this morning who have been Christians a long time but who have never had the kind of spiritual growth we should have had. And one of the biggest reasons is because we never have gotten our stewardship right with God. You see, two of the most precious things I have are my time and my possessions. If I am shutting off those two things from God, I am not letting him into all of my life. A person can pray, study the Bible, go to Church and Sunday School faithfully, and do charitable deeds. But if he is not practicing Biblical stewardship, he will always remain immature in the faith. If your Christian faith does not mean as much to you as you wish it did it may very well be because you are not giving God what belongs to Him, it may be because you are shutting Him out of a very important area of your life.

A third step in Christian maturity involves communication. Are you in communication with God? Do you maintain a God consciousness? You see, it is fine to have special times when you pray, but your prayer relationship with God really needs to be continuous. I try hard in my spiritual life to keep an open line with God. He wants to give us continuous guidance and direction, but God can't do that for me unless my prayer line is open. So when I'm stopped at a red light, or waiting for an elevator, or waiting for someone to answer the phone, I use those moments to sharpen my God-consciousness and to talk with God.

If you meet someone socially from time to time you may have opportunity to chat and visit and you may become casual friends. But if you really want to get to know someone and to develop a deep relationship, you have to spend some time together getting to know one another. The same is true of God. The more time you spend with Him, the better you will know Him.

A fourth step in growing as a Christian involves getting to know God's word. Too many of us Christians today are Biblical illiterates. I suspect at least half of us present this morning haven't read the Bible this week. Is that true for you? In the book of Colossians St. Paul writes, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly..." (Col. 3:16). You see, you can't live God's word unless you know God's word. Jesus once said that what is in a man's heart is what is important. If God's word is in your heart then you are far more likely to do what God wants you to do. Last weekend I was preaching at the First Presbyterian Church of Knoxville. They were having a missions conference and I was the preacher. There were a number of missionaries there and one couple was from Korea. I don't know if you are aware of it or not, but one of the greatest spiritual explosions of the Christian faith in the whole world is happening in Korea. The largest Presbyterian church in the world is in Korea with more than 20,000 members. Those Korean Christians feel that days of persecution are coming. They are afraid the time will come when they will not have the Bible to read. So they are memorizing scripture. People are memorizing whole books of the Bible. I tell you, when you have God's word in you like that, it makes a tremendous difference in your spiritual life. Try getting deeply into God's word and see what a difference it makes in your life.

A fifth step in Christian maturity involves fellowship. It is hard to be a Christian alone. It is hard to be a Christian when you miss the inspiration and reinforcement that comes when you join with other Christians to worship. We need each other. You see, Jesus makes an unequivocal promise. He says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." When you and I get together in the name of Jesus something special happens. That's because Jesus is a promise-keeper! When we are together here, he is here. I suppose the single greatest event in history outside of Jesus himself was Pentecost when God gave the Holy Spirit in power to the world. But do you remember what was going on when Pentecost came? The Bible says, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." (Acts 2:1) Yes, we need each other because when we gather in fellowship in the name of Jesus, he comes to be with us.

Finally, growing as a Christian means holding on. My brother never would have fallen off the running board that day if he had held on. You see, sometimes life doesn't work very well. Life doesn't always come up roses. It has its bumps and potholes. Sometimes the only thing we can do is just hold on. You see, if we hold on to Jesus, he will hold on to us; if we abide with him, he will abide with us.

Let me tell you the story of a Scottish preacher named Henry Lyte. After he graduated from seminary, he was jostled from one little church to another until finally he went to a little coastal village in England called Brixham. It wasn't much of a parish, but he felt God had put him there. So he began to abide in Jesus in the work God gave him. He gave his life fully and without reservation to ministering to the simple fisher-folk and the soldiers from the near by garrison. But Henry Lyte worked too hard and his health broke. Finally

the doctor told him that if he wished to live he would have to go to a warmer and sunnier climate. He put it off as long as he could, but finally one Sunday he preached his farewell sermon to the people for whom he had poured out his life. That afternoon, sitting in his study for the last time, he wrote the words of a beautiful poem. The next morning he started for Italy, but he never completed the journey. By the time he reached Nice, France his strength was gone.

He had waited too long to leave. So, on November 20, 1847, he died. The poem he wrote that day has meant a lot to Christians ever since. Many repeat it when they go to sleep at night. Edith Cavell sang it before she was martyred in Belgium in 1915. It is frequently sung at funerals, a time when people need something to hold on to. It goes like this:

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;  
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide:  
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee;  
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

You see, you will never fall off the running board if you are growing in your faith, if you are holding on to Jesus and he is holding on to you.