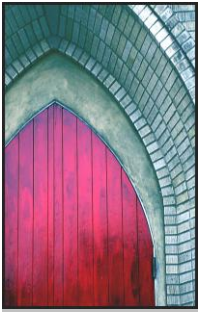


Contend for the Faith, Part 1

TEXT: JUDE 1-7 (ESV)



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JUDE? REALLY?

I am not a student of history. I know enough to know that some presidents are more important than others. One pop-culture main-stay describes the lesser-presidents this way: “We are the mediocre presidents. You won’t find our faces on dollars or on cents! There’s Taylor, there’s Tyler, there’s Fillmore and there’s Hayes. There’s William Henry Harrison, who died in thirty days! We are the adequate, forgettable, occasionally regrettable caretaker presidents of the U. S. A.” For many people, this accurately describes the book of Jude. It’s in the Bible, but we

give it little attention in large part because we’ve never given it much attention. Yet it is part of God inspired, inerrant, holy word. And there is no such thing as mediocre within God’s word.

Like most of the New Testament, Jude is a letter, addressed to a group of believers, presumably a church or a group of churches. It would have been read and passed along for others to read.^{cf. Col 4.16} The author identifies himself as “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James.” From our knowledge of the New Testament, the only James this would be is the brother of Jesus^{Mt 13.55; Gal 1.19} who was a leader in the 1st century church^{Ac 15} and the author of the letter bearing his name.^{Js 1.1} This is a brief letter that reads like a sermon. It’s addressed to believers who are facing a challenge to their faith and to their community. These carefully crafted words were written with from a Gospel-drench heart with both eyes on eternity.

JUDE 1-7

¹Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James,

To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ:

²May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you.

³Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. ⁴For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

⁵Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. ⁶And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day—⁷just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

THE GREATER DANGER

Hear these words, written by a man reflecting on his study of Jude’s letter:

“A loose owning of Christianity is honourable, since the kings of the earth have counted it one of the fairest flowers of their crowns to be stiled the ‘Catholic King,’ the ‘most Christian King,’ the ‘Defender of the Faith,’ and etc. But a true submission to the power of it is made a scorn, as being contrary to that liberty of fashions, vanity of compliment, and some Gentile customs, which, in a fond compliance with the humour of the age, they are loath to part with.” {Thomas Manton}.

It might be obvious that these words are older than our country—written in 1658—but they ring true to our experience today. The writer makes the observation that many people call themselves Christians because it is appealing on some-level, and even beneficial. But they do so ‘loosely.’ As soon as that title (and its implications) begin to impinge upon freedom, popularity, or comfort, it is set aside.

What do you hear in those words? It’s something more subtle, but no less serious than an outright rejection of Jesus Himself. It is the presumption that we get to define what it means to follow Jesus. When it gets difficult, unpopular, or simply inconvenient, we are within our rights to re-define it. When is it easy, and even beneficial, to consider yourself a follower of Jesus? And when is it inconvenient, difficult, and even painful? It’s inconvenient for me when I need to hear the command of Scripture to rest from my work and trust that God is still at work.^{Ex 20.8-11} It is easier for me to believe that I’m in charge of my finances, instead of hearing the call of Scripture to give joyfully, sacrificially, and intentionally.^{2 Cor 9} And this doesn’t even touch upon real suffering.

As we consider our own world, with its seeming disregard for people of faith, and the apparent resurgence of atheism in popular literature, we may hear Jude’s concerned echoing on the walls all around us. As much as all of this appears as a threat to a life of sincere faith, the greater danger (humanly speaking) is that we who profess to be followers of Jesus would hold on to our faith loosely. This is where we need to hear Jude’s words in our own circumstances most clearly. Jude’s approach is to begin by setting the tone of our response, summarizing the challenge to faith, and articulating in no uncertain terms what’s at stake.

FOUNDATIONS

Jude begins his letter (after the custom of the day), by identifying his readers. Within the first 2 verses, Jude lays a vital foundation for everything that will follow by addressing the Gospel identity of his readers and his own Gospel desires for the outcome of what they face. Notice the carefully chosen words of the second part of verse 1: he writes to those who are “called . . . beloved . . . kept.” Here we have the beginning, middle, and end of what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is one who has been called by God, one whose faith is a response to the initiative of God who pursues. Your faith is the answer to the powerful call of God into your life. His readers

as are also 'beloved in God the Father.' God's call to us is never impersonal or random; it flows from His love. This is the position in which the Christian remains. God's love is not dependent upon us—it is His unwavering stance towards His people. Importantly, Jude also speaks of his readers as those who are "kept for Jesus Christ." This is the other bookend of the Christian life—it shows the duration of God's call and His love toward His people. God is the author of our salvation from its beginning into eternity.

As Jude continues in verse 2, he doesn't move far from the Gospel identity of those who belong to Jesus when he describes Gospel desires for his readers. He puts into words a simple yet world-impacting prayer: "May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you." In order to go forth in life, we need God's mercy, we need His peace, and we need His love daily. We need to know that these things are what He's about in us and in this community. He is changing us to be people of mercy, He is working out among us peace in our relationships, and He is calling us to love as we have been loved by Him. Jude's prayer is that each of these would prevail in our lives—that mercy would win the day over the lies of condemnation we believe, that peace would appear and grow in the midst of conflict, and that love would flourish over and above indifference.

This is the Gospel at its core for us. God's people are called, beloved, and kept, and He is working out in their lives mercy, peace, and love. We may believe we need so much more as we watch see devastation around us and shattering within, but without this foundation, anything else is meaningless.

THREAT

The reason Jude gives for writing this letter is that the believers to whom he writes are facing a serious challenge to their faith and they must contend for what is true. Jude's summary in verse 4 tells us two things that we are to contend against: a false understanding of the Gospel, and a life that rejects the authority of Jesus. The threat is that some people have moved in who "pervert the grace of God into sensuality." This is living without moral restraint—anything and everything becomes fair game. This is a problem of understanding because it is a changing of the meaning of grace. This does not mean that they are talking about grace too much and need the healthy balance of a few rules. Instead, they have changed the meaning of grace to suit their ends. Jude adds that they are denying "our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ." More subtle than denying His existence, they are denying His authority in their lives. By their lives, they are not believing in a grace that is teaching them to say 'no' to sin and to live a life in which sin is put to death daily.^{Rom 6.11-14; Tit 2.11-14} Instead, sin runs rampant.

Jude illustrates these issues by drawing connections for his readers to what they already know.⁵⁻⁷ He mentions the disbelief of their ancestors who wandered in the wilderness and grumbled, worshipped idols, and rejected God's authority through sexual immorality.^{6; cf. 1 Cor 10.1-13} He also references the first century understanding of Genesis 6.1-4, in which the angels rejected God's authority over them by pursuing relationship with human women and were punished. He ends the section by speaking of the rank immorality of Sodom and Gomorrah.^{Gen 18.16-19.38} This puts on display the rejection of God as the authority over His creation, and the outworking of that rejection in a way of life. The bottom line is that our knowledge of God—what we understand Him to be like, how

we understand His work in the world, and His presence in our lives—matters.

GRAVITY

The other set of observations we can make with regard to the problems that exist show up in particular in the examples given in verses 5 through 7. The theme that is present in each example is that reality of judgment. God is in control. Humanity will give an account to Him. Within this theme though, we see the extent of God's judgment: those who appear to be His people but are not, His supernatural servants, and the unbelieving world all fall into judgment. Appearance is not enough; 'specialness' is not enough. And ignoring Him altogether won't work either. The people who are threatening the Gospel for his first century audience were "designated for this condemnation" long before the first century; they follow in the line of Israel, rebellious angels, and Sodom and Gomorrah. Jude's means of conveying this drastic extent of judgment is to draw the line from the past to the present as if to say "this judgment is no less real after the cross."

The other observation that shows up under the theme of judgment is that this is all about eternity. Israelites have been destroyed.⁵ The angels are in 'eternal chains.'⁶ The inhabitants of these cities are suffering 'eternal fire.'⁷ Over the course of 4 verses, Jude mentions judgment 4 times and twice he speaks of eternity. Not only are there immediate consequences to sin; there are ends that we cannot escape apart from Grace. There is gravity to these examples that Jude will not let us ignore. By Jude's example, this line continues to this day. Changing the Gospel, denying the authority of Jesus, and living for ourselves have eternal consequences.

CONTEND

With this foundation, light of the threat, and because of the gravity of these matters, Jude calls us to "contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."³ This is a call to struggle for 'the faith'—for what God has revealed regarding His ways, and especially His Son. It includes the teaching of the Apostles, which these believers would have received directly—and which we receive as the New Testament, and by extension, the whole Bible. At the heart of a loose owning of our faith is the willingness to do absolutely nothing.

Recently I read a story about a young man who was the son of a traveling preacher. As the pressures of the ministry grew, the preacher began to drink too much, and his marriage felt strain. Eventually he was forced to leave the ministry altogether, and within a few years left his wife. This son's response is sobering: "I was going to be a preacher—it was everything I knew. My heart got broken, seeing that it was impossible to be perfect. So I said to myself, 'I have to go the opposite way.'" I wonder what else is behind this. What would we say to a father in that situation? What about this son?

Jude's words meet us right here. We 'own' our faith 'loosely' by moving away from foundations by stepping aside from truth, and not caring what our words and our actions might convey, and by presuming God couldn't mean 'us' and losing sight of eternity. But even as we contend for the faith, we must never forget the heart of that faith. We need the Gospel because apart from the God's call, His love, and His keeping us, we are "prone to wander" away. We are part of the threat, and we deserve judgment. But in Jesus, we know Grace.