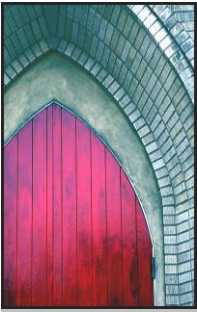


Contend for the Faith, Pt. 2

TEXT: JUDE 8-19 (ESV)



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WHAT DID HE SAY?

My sophomore year of high school we had to read a collection of stories of Greek myths. We often asked our teacher why we were being subjected to this. One response was so that we would do well if we ever appeared on TV's Jeopardy. That didn't help us. Now I understand the value of reading Greek myths, as well as other classic literature. The value lies in the the elements of truth located in it—even when the stories aren't historical. Many fictional stories are given authority because they reflect truth.

In this passage, we'll hear things that sound odd to us. What's happening is that Jude is quoting religious literature of his day—most notably a writing called *I Enoch*.¹⁴⁻¹⁵ At several points in this letter, Jude draws on that writing¹²⁻¹³ along with another work: *The Assumption of Moses*.⁹ He writes using literature of his day his audience would have known, though this does not mean he understands these other writings to have the same value and authority that the Old Testament has. He is making connections that would have made sense to his readers.

JUDE 8-19

⁸Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones. ⁹But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you." ¹⁰But these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively. ¹¹Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error and perished in Korah's rebellion. ¹²These are blemishes on your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, looking after themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; ¹³wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.

¹⁴It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, "Behold, the Lord came with ten thousands of his holy ones, ¹⁵to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him." ¹⁶These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires; they are loud-mouthed boasters, showing favoritism to gain advantage.

¹⁷But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁸They said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions." ¹⁹It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.

WHY?

So, why do you think Jude wrote this section of this short letter the way that he did? That might be one of several questions going through your mind right now, along with "what does all of this mean?" We approach a text like this and we can't help but ask about meaning. On one level, we ask ourselves "what did he say?" and then "what does that mean?" What does he mean when he talks about "Balaam's error"¹¹ or why does he talk about "wild waves of the sea"¹³? Much of this gets filled in for us as we read and re-read, look at the context, and search the rest of the Bible for help—which is basically a brief outline for helpful Bible reading.

We can ask another level of questions of these words, questions in the realm of "why?" On first reading, this reads like a rant something akin to AM sports-talk radio. It sounds like the ravings a rabid fan the day after his team lost again or traded away its best player and he wants the world to know how mad he is about the whole thing. To some of us, that's exactly what this is. All of this talk of judgment, along with words like 'ungodly', 'defile', and 'worldly' is exactly what you expect from the church. You hear in these words a religious rant intended to make you feel guilty enough to try and make up for what you've done. Some of us have gotten really good at trying to make up for our sin; others simply ignore what's perceived as an uninformed rant.

But Jude isn't a bitter fanatic (as the beginning and end of this letter shows). He says in verses 3 and 4 that he's writing to contend for the faith against error and destructive living. He is writing to persuade—to convince his audience to hear his concern—and his way of doing that is by helping them see what they may not be able to see. It's possible that those teaching and living error are doing so on the presumption that they are the truly spiritual ones, who have received a special insight and therefore should be followed.

The intention of these words is to convey to his audience the weight of what's at stake. We need to see these words as a whole and to allow them to have their intended impact. It's possible to lose the overall impact of the message by focusing too closely on the details. Why did Jude write this way? To help us understand the destructive nature of sin, and the danger it poses to every one of us. He's writing to a group of people in a specific circumstance, but at the same time gives us a window into the broader picture of what's wrong with the world in which we live. He does this in these middle verses by stating, developing, and expanding upon four basic themes that outline for us the nature of sin in our lives.

UNGODLINESS

The starting point for us to understand sin (what's wrong with us) is the word "ungodly."^{4, 15, 18} We start here because 'ugodly' is the broadest category that Jude uses for describing sin. Back in verse 4, it was the first description he used for those he was writing against. To our ears this word may sound hollow and pretentious, but it has broad implications. To be 'ungodly' is in effect making a declaration to live apart from dependence upon

and devotion to God. He makes a reference to those who have “walked in the way of Cain.”¹¹ This is a reference to Adam’s first-born son, who in an ultimate expression of autonomy runs from God’s pursuit of him and murders his own brother.^{Gen 4.1-16; cf. 1 Jn 3.11-15} Cain put himself in the place of God, but as a result had to face God’s judgment. As Jude uses it in these verses, it works itself out in our words and actions¹⁵ but it stands behind those specific occurrences. It is a way of life that seeks to keep God at arm’s length. Jude’s use of this word is a judgment that stands against any claims to spiritual authority or superiority that opponents of the Gospel claim.

REJECTION OF AUTHORITY

The second theme that runs through these verses is that sin is about rejecting God’s authority. Jude says this explicitly.⁸ This theme underlies the dreams (understood as prophetic oracles) of these teachers.⁸ The rejection of God’s authority is a primary result of a life dedicated to living without Him. The curious passage in verse 9 that describes what happened after Moses died is in part a reference to this idea. While this group of people has been found to speak against the angels (a reference to those who brought God’s law^{Ac 7.35, 38}), Michael the archangel is commended for not overstepping his boundaries as a servant of God (a reference to *The Assumption of Moses*). This theme appears again through the reference to Korah.¹¹ Korah led a rebellion of tribal leadership against Moses and Aaron (those God chose to lead His people), and was judged by the opening of the ground.^{Num. 16} He had determined that the leadership of Moses and Aaron was unfair—that they had wrongly exalted themselves above the rest of Israel. We see this theme is the description this group as “grumblers, malcontents.”¹⁶ The rejection of God’s authority over our lives assumes that we see what He does not, and therefore that we have a right to complain as an act of defiance against Him.

These first two themes reflect the part of the story of the Bible that shows humanity’s repeated efforts to live without God and His authority. As sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, we are committed not only to ourselves, but to living our own way. Jude is not simply identifying isolated behavior and making a blanket declaration—and neither should we. This is about a pattern of living that at best sees God as powerless and unimportant, and at worst, non-existent.

SURRENDERED TO DESIRE

The third theme that shows up in this section of Jude is that of the willingness to surrender our lives to our own desires. Echoing the immorality mentioned in ver. 5-7, Jude describes his opponents as those who “defile the flesh.”⁸ This idea shows up again in the phrases “following their own sinful desires”¹⁶ and “following their own ungodly passions”¹⁸ In the contrast made with Michael, Jude describes a people who live by instinct, and that which they don’t understand, they condemn.¹⁰ Their only standard isn’t even intellectual honesty. It is brutish rejection. While there are sexual overtones in Jude’s wording, he takes us beyond that. Jude is talking about those who live for themselves, whose standard for right and wrong is limited to “what can I gain?” And so it shows up in the reference to Balaam,¹¹ who was hired to curse Israel^{Num 22-24; Dt 23.4} and was ultimately judged as the one who advised Israel’s enemies against them.^{Num 31.8, 16; Josh 13.22} Skillfully, Jude echoes this sentiment when he describes their opponents as “loud-mouthed boasters, showing favoritism to gain advantage.”¹⁶

This all falls in line. Once we live a life of ‘practical atheism’—trying to live without God and away from His authority—this is all we have. We have uninformed instinct. We have the survival of the fittest. This is subhuman at best. When we strive to live without God and we deliberately stand against His authority to speak into our lives, with what are we left other than to follow ourselves? At the same time, this is where sin begins to fall apart on us. Don’t dilute yourself with thoughts of authenticity by stepping away from the church. Set aside the arrogance of you your idealism that demands an impossible level of freedom. You won’t find freedom there. You will find your own slavery to that which makes you less than human.

Before moving to the final theme, we need to acknowledge something about these first three themes. The problem the Christians who first read this letter faced was not sin in their midst. The problem was not that they were flawed people. The problem was that a group of people were not only okay with their sin, they didn’t see anything wrong with it,^{12, 16} and were teaching others to follow their example. This distinction is vital for us to understand.

IT DOESN’T WORK

The final theme in these 12 verses is that for all its claims, sinfulness simply doesn’t work. This is articulated in the repeated themes of judgment.^{10, 13, 14-15} Notice the illustrations in the middle of the passage.¹²⁻¹³ Clouds that promise rain, but are swept along by the winds before delivering. Trees that bear no fruit when they should have fruit are thus uprooted. Like waves of the sea, all these people do is continually gloat, but only put their shame on display. Having wandered off-course, all that is left is the judgment of darkness. Ultimately, as predicted, they will only cause divisions among God’s people.¹⁹ When we claim to understand the Gospel, and yet we contradict the Bible in both understanding and lifestyle, our self-molded religion will not deliver what it promises. In fact, it will lead to destruction.

It sounds too simple, but if our theology—our understanding of who God is and what He’s about is either inconsistent with Scripture, or results in behavior that is inconsistent with Scripture, we must go to our knees in repentance. Every time. If our understanding of the Gospel leads us to a lifestyle rooted in our authority (and not God’s), or that sees little need for the cross, we can wait for our self-implosion and the trail of destruction it will leave around us. .

CONTEND FOR THE FAITH

Do you see why, in a letter written about contending for the faith, so much space is given to putting sin under a magnifying glass? Jude assumes that sin is deceitful enough that we cannot see it on our own. We can see the impact of sin on the world around us. We can hurt because of our decisions and the decision of others. And yet, we cannot begin to grasp the depth of our sin until we see God at the center of the equation. We need the Spirit of God speaking through His word to help us understand what is truly wrong with us, and to convict us of our need for Jesus. We don’t simply need to be put back on track. We need more than a tune-up. We need to know this at our core. In our ungodliness, in our rebellion, in our self-feeding, we need to be subdued and conquered. Beloved, as God to show you your need, and contend for the faith that was one and for all delivered to the saints.