

The Practice of Truth

Jude 17-23

Two not-so-bright counterfeiter brothers were pleased with themselves because the crisp detail of their freshly-printed \$11 bills made them seem so authentic. They hatched a plot to pass one off at a hick little country store. One brother walked in. The other waited in the car.

Did they change it?" the brother in the car asked the first upon his return.

"Yeah, this is the place to bring them. The clerk didn't even bat an eye when I asked her for change. She just handed me a seven and a four."

Not all counterfeits are particularly dangerous. Jude wrote his letter to address one that was. Last week, we dissected what I called Jude's "sanctified tirade," and I stand by that description. The "faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" was under attack. False teachers were assaulting the apostolic testimony about Jesus and they were twisting grace into an argument that justified their sins. The Holy Spirit had use for Jude's blistering rage directed against these distorters. But now, he turns his attention to counseling his readers as to how they might respond to these deceivers. He commences with these words:

¹⁷But, dear friends ...

After enduring Jude's heated diatribe against the false teachers, his audience must have welcomed the words, "dear friends." I know I feel better. Jude adopts a less severe, more pastoral tone. He has unabashedly condemned the deceivers, but his purpose all along has been to protect his "dear friends" (the actual word is "beloved"). Given the inevitability of false teachers, Jude writes to show us how to respond to error so as to protect ourselves, our fellowship and one another.

Let's explore together Jude's counsel. In response to the inevitable presence of those who attack orthodox Christianity, Jude's readers and we, their modern counterparts, must respond with ...

I. Renewed Expectations of the Infiltrators (17-19)

A. False Teachers Should neither Surprise nor Cripple the Church verses 17, 18

¹⁷But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. ¹⁸They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires."

Jude's words are probably a summary of several things stated in the scriptures. Paul wrote about men who would distort the truth just to secure a following. They would speak what "itching ears want to hear" (2 Timothy 4:3). Peter and John addressed "false teachers" (2 Peter 2:1-3) and "antichrist(s)" (2 John 7) similar in their content to the ones about which Jude was warning.

There is any number of things that might motivate false teachers. There is any number of heresies to be advanced or orthodox teachings to be attacked. But, the simple fact that the Apostles announced that false teachers would appear to cause problems should be enough to shelter us from being shocked or taken back by them. The best thing we can do is to proactively learn and teach what is true. The appearance of false teachers should not overly distress a church that is already faithfully contending for the faith. Of course, if that church is indifferent to teaching and instilling truth in its members, deceivers will be a source of profound distress.

Jude calls these false teachers “scoffers” or mockers, which have always been among the greatest perpetrators of false ideas *WITHIN* the church. They never directly mock Jesus, because they would never secure a following among Christians. Instead, they misrepresent Jesus and mock you; your scruples, your view of sin, your backwardness, your out-of-touch and out-of-date irrelevance. Of course, under a guise of “spiritual insight,” they are really just rationalizing either their own sins or their unwillingness to address the sins of others. They are driven not by truth but by “their own ungodly desires” – desires to do as they please or desires to be liked by those who do as they please.

B. Such Infiltrators Should Really Not Be So Hard to Spot verse 19

... ¹⁹These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.

Jesus prayed for unity. Paul urged believers to do all they could to maintain the unity of the Spirit. Any man who openly works to divide Christians into camps should stick out like a sore thumb. No ploy for dividing people has more appeal than inviting them to be a part of a “spiritual club.” In Corinth, believers were split over who followed what teacher. Apparently, one camp was more “spiritual” than the others. They were divided according to “gifts.” Obviously, some gifts seemed better than the others. These men that Jude was concerned with invited others to be a part of their camp. The bait was a pearl of false insight that puffed up the spirit without feeding it.

It is good to not be overly-steeped in the traditions of men. It is good to want to present ancient truth in a style and manner that is not so archaic that it fails to communicate. But, to recklessly attack orthodoxy in the pursuit of newness, freshness or relevance steps over the line into an arrogant confidence in human methods and an arrogant mistrust of “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” Nothing divides God’s people quicker than delusions of special insight.

In spite of their claims of knowledge, the deceivers were simply slaves to their “mere natural instincts.” They argued from a position of spiritual insight, but Jude concluded they did not have the Spirit at all. Their twist on grace argued that the more one sins, the more God’s grace is showcased. Sinning Christians actually brought glory to God according to their logic. But, when the veneer of enlightenment was stripped away, the truth was, they just liked their sins. Now, I have never heard anyone today suggest that sin brings glory to God, but I have known many who cheapen grace to the point that it is no longer a deterrent to sin, but a safety net for it.

A Christian is to love light and to hate darkness. He is love truth and to hate falsehood. He is to love righteousness and to hate sin. So, in light of the inevitability that false teachers who harass the church will come and go, how are we to keep ourselves safe? We must engage in the ...

II. Regular Exercises of the Invulnerable (20, 21)

²⁰But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. ²¹Keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.

It is inevitable that false teachers will appear, but it is not inevitable that they trip us up.

A. Build Your Life on the Holy Faith

Again, Jude is using “the faith” in terms of a body of truth proclaimed by the Apostles. This “holy faith” is the only suitable foundation for building one’s life. There are many things to be said about why this faith is called “holy.” It reminds us that truth descends from God; it is not of human origin. It emphasizes the holiness of the life into which this faith leads, a life different than others, set apart for God’s pleasure and purposes. “Holy” emphasizes that this faith is different from any other “faith mechanism” dreamed up in the mind of a social critic like Mohammed, a philosopher like Confucius or a contemplative guru like the supreme Buddha or any of his successors. This “holy faith” is a matter of revelation, not imagination. It is more than a dogma that fills the head and gins up the emotions. It is a dynamic that can transform lives.

So, what does it mean to build oneself up in the faith? It means allegiance to God’s Word. Not every Christian is equally gifted to explore the Bible, but every Christian is expected to learn, believe and apply all that he can grasp. Are you part of a setting where you can learn more of God’s Word? Building oneself up means being connected to others in fellowship and worship. We can learn some things on his own, but God has given equippers to His church to prepare us for service. We can worship to a point on our own, but there are benefits to community that cannot be realized in isolation. We can obey God to a point on our own, but when we live unaccountably to others, it is only a matter of time before we crash and burn.

B. Pray in the Holy Spirit

This phrase is often sensationalized as if it refers to some advanced level of prayer. Jude has just indicted the false teachers as not having the Spirit. It is natural that he now exhorts those who *DO* have the Spirit to pray in, or, according to that Spirit. Sometimes, we don’t pray as the Spirit teaches us to pray. We pray selfishly, desperately or with a man-centered perspective rather than a kingdom perspective. Man-centered prayer is preoccupied with wrenching something out of the clenched-fist of God. It is the prayer of the student who did not study for his geography exam: “O God, please let Paris be the capital of England!” Spirit-centered prayer, if we’ll just hang in there, changes us to the point that we gladly receive what the Father knows is best.

C. Keep Yourselves in God’s Love

This means obedience. We like to think we cannot wander from God’s love. Let the theologians argue whether or not a man can abandon his final salvation. We all know this much: We have the power to utterly destroy intimate communion with Jesus. The blessings of the old covenant were based on obedience to the Law. Our blessings in Jesus are realized as we remain or abide in Him. Only by remaining in Jesus can we bear fruit for the kingdom and the fruit of Christ-likeness. How do we remain in His love so that we bear such fruit? Jesus linked “abiding” to “obeying”:

... ¹⁰If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. – John 15:10

D. Live this Life in Expectation of the Next

Positionally, God reckons us as righteous because we are cloaked in Jesus’ righteousness. In practice, we’re not even close to such righteousness. If our agenda *WITH* God in this life is to “work out our salvation” as He finishes the work He began in us, then, it is fair to say that this life marks a transition from captivation by “things below” to captivation by “things above”? And, if that is a fair statement, then, we need to be mindful of what gospel we really proclaim.

Again, in the quest to be fresh, relevant, hip or whatever, not many best-selling Christian authors call us to look beyond this life. Are those who suggest that Jesus offers a solution to our every felt need in the here and now being truthful? Does He really make such a promise, or does He instead call us to a holy life, one of contentment, trust and the assurance that we are His now and forever.

The appearance of falsehood is inevitable. Falling for falsehood is not inevitable. There are disciplines that keep us from being easy prey. But, we do not build ourselves up in the faith just to keep ourselves safe. We must respond to error with ...

III. Rescue Expeditions for the Imperiled (22, 23)

A. A Tip for Rescuing those Wavering in their Beliefs verse 22

²²Be merciful to those who doubt; ...

Sometimes, if a person hears the same lie enough times, from enough sources and with enough noteworthy people jumping on board - such as scientists, teachers, professors, celebrities, media - confidence in what that person believes cannot help but be shaken. He will question his faith and flirt with alternatives. If you are going to attempt to settle his doubts and fortify him in his faith, mercy is essential. Oh, you have to know your stuff. That's a given. You cannot make a case you don't understand yourself. But, mercy is a less obvious essential we could overlook.

In a *Peanuts* comic strip, Lucy is boasting to her brother, Linus. She says, "I could be a terrific evangelist. Do you know that kid who sits behind me in school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion."

Linus asks, "How did you do that?"

Lucy replies, "I hit him with my lunch box."

Mercy is not our first reflex when some brother says, "I'm not sure anymore." Mercy is the compassionate response to those who are suffering. Suffering? We don't think of doubt as suffering in the same sense that we think of hunger, thirst, poverty and disease as suffering. Still, if you have ever been in a position where you were compelled to question truths you believed from birth (if you were raised in Christ) or truths that once gave you great peace (if you came to Christ at some later point), then, you know how tormenting doubt can be. The remedy is truth, but the packaging for truth cannot be impatient, agitated dogmatism. Jude has pulled no punches describing the wickedness of false teachers, but for the lambs these wolves attack, Jude understands the place of mercy.

B. A Tip for Rescuing those Blinded by Sin verse 23a

... ²³snatch others from the fire and save them; ...

Sometimes, believers bypass doubt and swallow a lie hook, line and sinker. In their sinful, arrogant blindness, they do not listen to subtle correction. To snatch them from the fire sounds severe, but what does it look like? It could involve going after the deceivers with guns blazing. It could involve a no-nonsense intervention that points out to the fallen brother his sin and folly. Snatching him from the fire could even involve tossing him deeper into the fire, so that he learns how much he really does not like fire. In other words, church discipline could be in order. To us today, church discipline is a troublesome, and virtually, unthinkable concept.

In Corinth, a man was carrying on an illicit affair with his step-mother. He was unrepentant while the rest of the church was busy trying to figure out which of them was the most spiritual. Paul's remedy was to put the man out of the church and to let Satan have a go at him. Paul was confident that if this man was a child of God, being sealed away from Christian fellowship would drive him to repentance. This seemingly harsh response still had a redemptive intent. And, in fact, Paul later writes that a repentant man who had encountered such discipline by the church be restored. More than a few readers have surmised that this was one and the same man.

When rescuing those adversely affected by error, there is a place for the easy way and there is a place for the hard way. But, there is also a place where mercy mixed with caution is required.

C. A Tip for Rescuing those Stuck in their Mire verse 23b

... to others show mercy, mixed with fear - hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

Some people get caught up in the lie just enough to become trapped in sin. For the well-intentioned rescuer, it can be nearly impossible to determine whether they sin because they are battling something or because they enjoy the sin. They may warrant compassion or they may be manipulators. Regardless of their motives, what they are dealing with may be more than the would-be rescuer is equipped to handle. Paul also warned his readers about such rescue missions:

¹Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. - Galatians 6:1

Sin is infectious. In the Law of Moses, clothing that contacted ceremonially unclean persons was also deemed unclean. Sometimes, it was burned. Both Paul and Jude are warning us of the dangers of carelessness when ministering to those stuck in their sins. We are all aware of the horror stories of well-intentioned preachers, elders or Bible School teachers who simply got in over their heads in some counseling situation, who pridefully overrated their own moral strength.

Another risk in dealing with such a person that requires a fearful caution on the part of the "rescuer" is the danger of seeming to endorse that person's sin through a lack of clarity. There is a way to exercise compassion and mercy while remaining crystal clear that the person is, in fact, sinning. Jesus is our supreme Example of this. No one ever extended more mercy and compassion to a sinner, but there was no ambiguity in regard to His stand on the sinfulness of the sin.

Another risk of mercy devoid of fear is that of coarsening our witness and damaging our credibility. In a quest to be hip, cool, relevant or authentic, I might adopt figures of speech that make me less distinguishable from the world rather than more distinguishable. I might find myself in questionable places. I might pierce my nose and get a few tattoos. I am not going to say that such measures are never right and always wrong. I won't beyond what Jude says. Mix godly fear with your mercy, for "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 1:7). Think. Pray. Bathe your strategies for rescuing those stuck in the mire of their sins in much prayer and reflection.

How do you keep yourself from falling when it is inevitable that falsehoods will be proclaimed in Jesus' Name? How do you protect others? How do you rescue others who wander too close to the fire? How do you contend for the faith? Jude has written a fiery letter, but ultimately, his intent is to help us to be strong in faith, rooted in truth and useful in bringing others to that point.