

“Now to Him Who Is Able”

The Third in a Series of Sermons on Jude

Texts: Jude 17-25; Zechariah 3:1-10

The epistle of Jude may be short, but it is packed. In the span of just 25 verses, Jude manages to remind those reading/hearing this letter of a received body of doctrine (“the faith once for all delivered”) which came to them directly from the apostles themselves. Jude warns churches to be on guard for false teachers, and reminds us of the inevitability of God’s judgment upon those who seek to exploit God’s people, or lead them astray. Jude then gives the church specific instructions as how to remain in the love of God, until Jesus returns, as promised, at the end of the age. Christians are to build themselves up in the faith, pray in the Holy Spirit, and eagerly await the Lord’s return. Not bad for a twenty-five verse epistle!

The epistle of Jude has three parts—the opening greeting and declaration of Jude’s purpose in writing (verses 1-5), which is followed by a mini-sermon in verses 5-16, in which Jude alludes to a number of key Old Testament events and people (the Passover and Exodus, God’s destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and infamous figures such as Cain, Balaam, Korah). Jude also utilizes themes addressed in two Jewish apocryphal books, which were well-known, apparently, to many in Jude’s original audience. These two works include the *Assumption (Testament) of Moses*, and the *Book of Enoch*. The authors of both of these books include well-known legends which attempt to explain certain events in the Old Testament which are not explained within the biblical text itself—such as the fate of Moses’ body, or the crimes of the Nephilim (Genesis 6:1-4), which, according to the *Book of Enoch*, resulted in fallen angels being bound in chains until the day of judgment.

In addition to a number of Old Testament events and people, Jude cites from these two apocryphal texts so as to make the point that God’s judgment upon those false teachers then troubling the churches was a certainty. Jude quotes from the *Book of Enoch* in verses 14-15 to make the point that the countless number of holy ones about whom Enoch prophesies, will actually accompany Jesus Christ on the day of his return. In verse 14, Jude writes, “*it was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, ‘Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, to 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.’*” Jude appeals to specific Old Testament events, and even some of the legendary interpretations of them, to show that all of these open-ended Old Testament events are fulfilled in and through the person and work of Jesus. Even these two apocryphal books make predictions and offer interpretations of certain events which can only properly be understood in the light of the coming of Jesus. Jude’s point is that as God judged false teachers and false prophets throughout the course of redemptive history, so too, Jesus Christ will return at the end of the age to bring certain judgment upon all those who seek to lead the people of God astray with the intention of exploiting them for personal gain motivated by pure self-indulgence.

In the third and final portion of Jude (vv. 17-25), our text, Jude makes three points of application.¹ The first is an exhortation to all those reading and hearing this letter to remember the predictions made by the

¹ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, Logos on Jude 17-25.

apostles—the situation in which the Christians of Jude’s day now find themselves (dealing with false teachers) is something of which the Apostles had specifically warned. The second point Jude makes is that until the day of judgment, God’s people should devote themselves to dwelling in God’s love, so that the acrimony and doctrinal debate which is taking place in the churches (as necessary as it is) does not cause God’s people to become cold or hard-hearted toward one another. Allowing the church to become a place of bitterness and contention would be as bad as allowing the false teachers to go unchecked. To ensure that this is not the case, Christians are to build themselves up in the faith, they are to pray in the Spirit, and they are to wait eagerly for the Lord’s return. Third, Jude explains how Christians are to treat those who have been deceived by false prophets and false preachers. Christians are to exercise great mercy toward them, while at the same time exercising great caution that they themselves do not fall into the same kind of errors as those who have been deceived.

Turning to our text, in verse 17 we find a good indication that Jude is personally familiar with those receiving this letter. *“But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Jude speaks of the letter’s recipients as “loved of God,” an indication of personal affection as well as a reminder that all Christians are the objects of God’s love. That Jude’s readers should remember what the apostles told them certainly indicates a familiarity with the apostles’ teaching, which Jude has described to us in verse 3, as a *“common salvation”* and as a faith *“once for all delivered.”* It is significant in this regard that the “predictions” of the Apostles were repeated, perhaps many times, and which includes the word (the *rhēmatōn* or “sayings”) of the apostles.² Those receiving this letter from Jude, were well catechized in apostolic teaching. Jude exhorts these people to remember things they already know well. The problem is not ignorance of proper doctrine, but whether or not his readers will actually put into practice the things they already know to be true. This is every bit as much a dilemma for Christians living today, as it was for Christians living in the first century. We must strive to live out in daily life the same doctrines which we confess with our mouths. Practice should match profession.

The content of the “word” predicted by the apostles is spelled out in verse 18. *“They said to you, ‘In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.’”* That the apostles *“said to you,”* indicates that these were the men in Jesus’ close circle of associates (including the twelve apostles, and others such as Mark, Jude, James, etc.) whom we identify as the “apostolic circle.” These men are apostles of the same Lord Jesus Christ, who was being denied by the false teachers then troubling the church. Peter says of them, in 2 Peter 2:1, *“false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.”* Jude has said of them (in v. 4), *“for 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.”* From this declaration, it is clear that these false teachers and prophets hypocritically proclaim their allegiance to Jesus, but in practice deny the very “lord” whom they claim has bought them. These men are revealed to be charlatans in their doctrine, and by their conduct. They do not teach the things which Jesus taught his church. They do not do the things which Jesus commanded his people to do. They follow ungodly passions—not the commandments of God.

This is yet another instance in which someone from within the apostolic circle speaks of the apostolic church as already living in the last days. The author of Hebrews tells us (Heb.1:2) that *“in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he*

² Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos, Jude 17.

created the world.” In his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:17), Peter proclaimed that the “last days” had come with the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit. “*And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.*” Peter does the same in the opening chapter of his first epistle (Peter 1:20), “*He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you.*”

The Apostle Paul makes several references to Christians already living in the last days during his own lifetime, and offers the presence of false teachers as proof of this very fact. In 1 Timothy 4:1, Paul warns, “*Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.*” Similarly in 2 Timothy 3:1 he adds, “*But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.*” Jude’s readers had possibly heard this warning in person from both Peter and Paul, and they are now to remember the gravity and urgency of these repeated warnings.

The church has been living in the last days since the day of Pentecost. The fact that the church will be plagued by false teachers until the Lord returns certainly undermines the idea of a golden-age postmillennialism as held by a number of our Reformed brethren. But Jude’s point here is that because Jesus promised to return at any moment—but had not yet done so—a group of scoffers had arisen, who were familiar with Jesus’ teaching that he might return at any moment, and because Jesus hadn’t returned yet, began to use delay in the Lord’s return as an excuse to indulge their sinful flesh.

Their basic argument runs as follows. “Jesus promised to come back for a final judgment.” “He hasn’t.” “Maybe there will not be a final judgment.” “If there will be no final judgment, why bother to restrain our urges and passions?” What is so sad about this line of thinking is that so many professing Christians, who should have been able to see through this nonsense, were still taken in by these false teachers, and even joined them in the pursuit of ungodly pleasure. It was not just that these men were cynics—Jesus promised to come back, and hadn’t, so maybe his word will not come true. It was that these scoffers used the delay in the *parousia* as an excuse to live as they please, and as an opportunity to exploit others. These men are slaves to their ungodly passions—this is what they live to do. Ironically, they may deny the certainty of the Lord’s return, but the same apostles who taught us about Jesus’ return also told to expect the coming of the false teachers and scoffers. Their presence in the church to which Jude is writing should not have come as a huge surprise. Remember what the apostles have told us. It is not a question of “if.” It is a matter of “when.” Whenever people offer us reasons as to why we can supposedly sin with impunity, we are probably dealing with one of the very people about whom Jude is warning.

In verse 19, Jude impresses upon his readers the great amount of damage these men can do if unopposed. “*It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.*” These men reveal themselves by placing their own self-interest ahead above the needs of the church in a manner that exceeds typical human selfishness, with which we all struggle. These men are not Christians—so they do not struggle with sin as genuine believers do. They think nothing of tearing apart the body of Christ if that is necessary to gain the ungodly pleasures they seek. They are users and exploiters, even if they appear pious and orthodox. Some, apparently, were even claiming that God speaks to them. These men will seek to draw followers unto themselves—and draw people away from Christ and those pastors and elders whom Christ has called to tend these congregations. Their agenda is profoundly personal, and entirely self-centered. Such false teachers seek money and sensual pleasure, and they even dare use their claim to dreams and revelation as a basis for doing so. Theirs is an agenda we see played out nightly on TBN.

They speak of God's grace as though it were nothing but an excuse for their sin. "Jesus fulfilled the law," they say. "So I'm not bound to obey it." These are not people who are struggling with lusts of the flesh, as all Christians do. These men who do not have the Holy Spirit (although they claim to know the mind of God). These men live life in the flesh, which as Paul tells us in Romans 8:9 is the defining characteristic of those who know not Jesus Christ. Paul tells the Christians in Rome, "*you, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.*" These men are not Christians. Their false doctrines and sinful ways ultimately give them away. They know nothing of the things of God, they only know the ways of this world. Their presence is proof that we are living in the last days.

In verses 20-21, Jude contrasts the imminent judgment to come upon the false teachers (which he discussed in vv. 5-16), with that blessing which God has reserved for his own children. Jude also sets forth those duties Christians assume until the Lord returns. "*But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.*" As the false teachers tear down and cause division, believers, on the other hand, are to strive to live in the love of God and "build up."

If it is vital for a church to resist these false prophets and false teachers, it is also vital for the church not to become a doctrinal battlefield with massive collateral damage, in which the combatants become embittered and callous, while the needs of the non-combatants go unnoticed and they are neglected. The church must defend itself, while striving to live in the love of God, or else the church will lose its character as a hospital for sinners, and a nursery of faith, and faith's fruit, good works.

Jude mentions three things in verses 20-21 which Christians are to do, so as to keep themselves in God's love—the commandment which opens verse 21, although two statements precede it, and one follows.³ First, Christians are to build themselves up in the "most holy faith." As Calvin points out, when Christians build upon the faith (i.e., the doctrines in which we have been instructed and which serves as the object of our faith—the things we believe about the Triune God and our redemption), it were as though we are building a building which rises a bit more everyday.⁴ As the structure is being built, we see steady progress. The metaphor of the church as a building is prominent in Paul (i.e., 1 Cor. 3:10-15; Eph. 2:20). Peter speaks of Christians as "living stones" who compose the spiritual house (the church) in which the Spirit of God dwells (1 Pet. 2:5).

Jude speaks a bit differently here, referring instead to those doctrines which have been taught his hearers by the apostles, and which constitute the official doctrinal teaching of the church. Jude's focus is upon that body of doctrine (the faith once for all delivered) which was taught them, and which people in this church first heard with their own ears from the lips of the apostles. If you are looking for a text in the Bible which exhorts us to know our Bibles and the doctrines of the Christian faith as summarized in the Reformed confessions and catechisms, this is it. The idea here is that the more we know about God and the doctrine about him revealed in his word, the greater our capacity to love and to trust him.

Second, while the false teachers act piously, and even proclaim outlandish things about divine mysteries

³ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on Jude 20-21.

⁴ John Calvin, Matthew, Mark, and Luke Vol. III, James and Jude, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, vol. 3, trans A. W. Morrison (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), 334.

and angelic beings—which they know nothing about—believers are to pray in the Holy Spirit—that is, in full accordance with the word already preached to them, and not in light of their own lusts. All true Christian prayer is grounded in the work of the Holy Spirit, who unites us to Jesus Christ, who is in heaven. In Romans 8:26-27, Paul tells us that “*the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*” In Ephesians 6:18, Paul encourages us, “*praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.*” It is the work of the Holy Spirit to keep us in God’s love.

The third thing we are to do to keep ourselves in the love of God (found in the clause which follows the command which opens verse 20) is to wait “*for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.*” The idea of waiting is eschatological (i.e., waiting patiently for the Lord’s return) and which stands in sharp contrast to the false teachers, who urge Christians not to wait patiently by telling them the lie that the Lord’s promise is not true (Jesus hasn’t come back yet, so he’s not coming back at all). Like the saints of old, such as Joseph of Arimathea, who waited for the coming of the kingdom (Mark 15:43), or Simeon and Anna, who waited for the Messiah to come (Luke 2:25-38), so too Christians are to wait for Jesus’ second advent, when, at long last, all those for whom Jesus died and who trust in him, will be given their eternal reward, even as the false teachers will face that terrible judgment threatened them throughout the course of redemptive history.

The contrast here is very striking. As false teachers delight in their dreams and visions and use them as an excuse to gratify their every sinful craving, believers are to depend upon the “most holy faith,” which is surely a reference to the doctrine already taught them by the apostles. Instead of demanding that their sinful passions be immediately gratified, believers will wait patiently for the mercy of God—a reference to Christ’s return at the end of the age, when, at long last, Jude’s beloved family in Christ will enter their eternal rest and receive all of God’s gracious promises. More importantly, they will strive to remain in the love of God until the Lord returns, even though they contest the false teachers with great gusto.

In light of the damage done by the false teachers, in verses 22-23, Jude exhorts the members of these churches to remain compassionate toward those deceived by false teachers and to “*have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.*” It was the sacred duty of the pastors, elders, and members of these churches to resist these false teachers, by driving them away from the congregation. At the same time, it is the duties of pastors and elders to be compassionate towards all those whom the false teachers have deceived. In fact, Jude’s instruction in this regard is similar to Paul’s exhortation to Timothy (2 Timothy 2:25) to correct “*his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.*” Since God’s judgment upon the false teachers is inevitable, Jude’s plea is that Christians snatch the wandering sheep back from the edge of the abyss before it was too late. Jude’s use of the metaphor of fire reminds us that since we instinctively seek to rescue people from a burning building, so too, we should seek to pull from the flames any who have been deceived, so that they repent. When people have doubts and struggle with sin, we are to show them mercy.

Our common salvation teaches us that we are saved by God’s grace—specifically by Jesus’ death for our sins and through his imputed righteousness received through faith. This is why Jude can exhort us to hate even the clothing stained by sinful flesh. Since Jude’s reference is to “eternal fire,” he is reminding us that since we trust in Jesus Christ to save us from the wrath to come, we cannot continue to seek to live so as to gratify the desires of the flesh. In fact, Christians must come to hate their sinful desires

(flesh), because these sinful desires are what make the false teachers so attractive to us in the first place. The false teachers are the ones who tell us that these desires are not sinful, and since God is gracious, he wants us to satisfy them. Says Jude, rhetorically, we are to hate even the clothing that touches sinful human flesh. This is Jude's way of reminding us that having trusted in Christ, we are buried with him and raised to newness of life. This is why we hate the sinful nature and anything associated with it.

Jude's reference to garments stained by the flesh is actually a loud echo from Zechariah 3:3-5, part of our Old Testament lesson. The prophet Zechariah had written, "*now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, 'Remove the filthy garments from him.' And to him he said, 'Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments.' And I said, 'Let them put a clean turban on his head.' So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the LORD was standing by.*" The removal of Joshua's (the high priest) filthy clothing, only to be replaced by new, clean clothes, symbolizes the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness. We too should come to hate our own sinfulness as much as we would be miserable in clothing which looked like that of the zombies in Walking Dead. Jude's point is that we should come to hate our sin.

In verses 24-25, Jude concludes not with a benediction (a good word to his readers), but with a doxology—an expression of praise to God. "*Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.*" Like other doxologies in the New Testament, Jude directs praise, glory, and honor of endless duration to God. In light of the great difficulties currently facing his readers/hearers, Jude reminds them that God alone is able to keep them from stumbling. Jude's readers will not stumble (fall away), because God will not let them fall away. He will bring judgment upon those who attempt to deceive his people, even as he saves his own from their clutches, and preserves them from the wrath of final judgment on the last day. Jude's readers, who, through faith in Jesus Christ, and in Godly repentance, have come to hate their sin (their flesh) will be presented before God as blameless—in fact, as blameless as Jesus himself is blameless because of his imputed righteousness.

Beloved, false teachers will come. It is inevitable. We must remember what Jude and the other apostles have taught us. The last days will be perilous days. We are in the last days—therefore we do face perils. We will face all kinds of worldly and ungodly people who will claim to tell us about the mysteries of God, but who are devoid of the Holy Spirit. This is why we must cling to our common salvation as well as contend for that faith once for all delivered to saints. This is why as a congregation we must strive to live in God's love by devoting ourselves to building each other up in the faith once for all delivered, praying in the Spirit, and waiting patiently for the Lord's return.

I can think of no better way to end our time in the Book of Jude than to conclude with this benediction from Jude, brother of James, and half-brother of our Lord. "*Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.*"