

Jude 1:17-23

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Bearing in mind that God will punish sin, Jude urges his readers to remember what the apostles teach. It is not unexpected that mocking, lustful men will come to cause divisions in the church. But believers can stand firm in the faith, pray under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and thus can maintain their fellowship with God. In doing so, believers can help other stumbling believers avoid losing their rewards and right themselves in their faith-walk with God.

In verse 17, the believers are referred to as *beloved*:

But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ (v 17).

This indicates the deep love Jude has for all these believers to whom he is writing. He has their best interest at heart. The reason for his biting words toward the ungodly people in their midst is that he desires to protect them. We protect those whom we love.

After pointing out the destructive path being taken by those who would lead them astray, Jude urges those whom he loves to *remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Jude has authority as a teacher. But he does not rely only upon his own authority in this matter. He appeals to two sources of authority 1) *the apostles* and 2) *our Lord Jesus Christ*.

It is remarkable to reflect that Jude grew up in a household with Jesus, and did not believe He was the Christ during the time of His earthly ministry (John 7:5). Now Jude refers to his half-brother as *our Lord Jesus Christ*. This is a testimony to the resurrection of Jesus.

The specific thing Jude brings to their mind from the teachings of Jesus and His apostles follows in verse 18:

that they were saying to you, “In the last time there will be mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts” (v 18).

It is notable that in using this quote Jude shows he considered himself and his readers to be in the *last time*. This is consistent with the biblical narrative regarding human eras. In Daniel 2, the last age of men prior to the advent of the kingdom of God is the Roman era (Daniel 2:40-43). The end of this era is referred to by Paul as “the fullness of the Gentiles” (Romans 11:25). Both are consistent reflections of the influence of Roman civilization upon the earth from that point until now.

It might have surprised the first century Christians that the *last time* is approaching two thousand years. But to God a thousand years is as a day (2 Peter 3:8).

Jude describes the fleshly culture that will be consistently present during this era. There will be *mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts*. This is almost identical wording to the warning of Peter in his second letter (2 Peter 3:3). This confirms Jude's assertion that this statement regarding *mockers* in the *last time* was spoken of by the apostles, given that Peter was a leading apostle.

The spirit of this *last time* will be self-seeking and exploitative. This is the opposite of how God calls humanity to live. In order to gain the greatest blessing and fulfillment, God calls humans to mutual love, harmony, and collaboration in mutual service. This is the practical outworking of the two greatest commandments, to love God and love others as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39). That is why Jude insists that the believers eradicate the spirit of ungodliness from their midst, to cleanse it from the influence of exploitation and self-seeking.

This spirit of exploitation and self-seeking is in the world. They are to keep this influence from their midst in part so they will be equipped to affect the world for good (1 Corinthians 5:10). Since the purpose of the church is to stir one another up to love and good works, polluting influences need to be removed (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Given that the apostles apparently considered themselves to live in the *last time*, the message is all the more relevant to us, who are also living in the *last time*. The Apostle Paul gives the same basic warning, that in the "last days difficult times will come":

"For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God..."

(2 Timothy 3:2-4)

In the face of this deteriorating moral environment, Paul urges Timothy to "continue in the things you have learned" (2 Timothy 3:14) exhorting him to soldier on in living a life that is set apart unto the Lord. The admonitions of Jude, Peter, and Paul emphasize a biblical theme that exhorts believers to resist a deteriorating moral and cultural environment by living the truth.

Their detrimental influence within the community of believers can be observed by their negative effect on unity:

These are the ones who cause divisions, worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit (v 19).

This statement that causing divisions is *devoid of the Spirit* is consistent with the Apostle Paul's listing of the deeds of the flesh in his letter to the Galatians, where "disputes, dissensions, factions" are all listed as products of our fleshly nature (Galatians 5:20).

Since Jude is advocating in this letter that the believing community "contend earnestly for the faith" (Jude 1:3), there must be an important distinction between the fight Jude urges and the *divisions* by these ungodly persons who are behaving in a manner *devoid of the Spirit*. The key is the purpose for the fight.

Jude advocates that the disciples fight for “the faith.” The focus is the truth. Contending for the faith is a constructive conflict that moves each person toward doing and living what is true. The ungodly persons create divisions to an end that is *worldly-minded*. A common application of creating divisions is to pit people against one another in order to bring attention to ourselves, or to create the illusion of having power over others.

A common theme in Paul’s list of deeds of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21 is that they are behaviors that focus on self. Some listed behaviors are pleasure-seeking (immorality, sensuality, drunkenness). Some seek the illusion of control of circumstances (idolatry, sorcery). Others seek to control others (outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions). As Paul states in Romans 2:8, “those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth” will get a negative reward in the judgement of God (Romans 2:2).

Jude desires those to whom he ministers to be spared from such a negative judgment, and urges that they contend against this self-seeking behavior, that they might seek a good and lasting reward from life:

But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit (v 20).

A necessary task for contending for the faith is *building yourselves up*. Just as an athlete trains to build up physical strength and stamina, we need to build up spiritual capability. This is done through *building yourselves up on your most holy faith*. In order to adequately contend for the faith, one must be built up in the faith.

The Greek word translated *holy* is “agios” and means “set apart for special service.” “Agios” appears four times in the book of Jude:

- Jude 1:3, where each believer is set apart for special service; there “agios” is translated “saints.”
- Jude 1:14 where the Jude quoted from Enoch, that the Lord would return with many of His set apart ones; there translated “holy ones.”
- Jude 1:20 where “agios” is translated “holy” two times, once to apply to faith (*holy faith*) and once to the Spirit (*Holy Spirit*).

In each instance, context determines who or what is being set apart for special service. In verse 20, Jude asserts that the faith for which each believer should contend is not just any faith, but *holy faith*. This is *faith* in God’s word, and His ways. It is *faith* that seeing as God sees is what is true and best for us. An integral part of *building yourselves up on your most holy faith* is to be *continually praying in the Holy Spirit*.

The verb translated *praying* is plural in Greek grammar. It indicates that the prayer should be ongoing, continual and shared. Although a participle (manifested with the ending “ing” in English) it is present tense, meaning it is something that is ongoing and present. The contending for the faith is to be a spiritual exercise done with the guidance and perspective given by the

Holy Spirit. This is the opposite of the description of the ungodly persons whose behavior is *devoid of the Spirit* (v 19).

Walking in the Spirit, building up faith, this is how to *keep yourselves in the love of God*.

The goal of contending for the faith is to build up others in love. That implies that although ungodly persons must be identified and confronted, the goal is their restoration. The goal is to build up the unity of faith within the body, and protect it from false influence.

The full admonition in verse 21 is to *keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life* (v 21).

The phrase *eternal life* is used in the Bible to describe two different but related things.

- First, it is used to describe a gift that is given upon a person's spiritual rebirth. Being born again spiritually gives us a permanent position as a child of God (Romans 6:23).
- Second, it is used to describe the quality or result of life lived by a person who has been spiritually reborn.

The degree to which believers gain the experience of eternal life determines our condition as a child of God. In this verse, Jude refers to *eternal life* in the sense of the rewards that believers will receive at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Paul states that "eternal life" is a reward that God will give to "those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality" (from God rather than man) (Romans 2:7).

The gift of eternal life is given by God freely to all who have enough faith to look on Jesus, hoping to be delivered from the adverse consequences of sin (John 3:14-15). Eternal life as a gift has no connection with works or deeds, but is given apart from any actions on our part (Ephesians 2:8-9). However, the reason God births us as a new creation is so that we might participate in "good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10b).

The end result of walking in the works of faith that God prepared for us is that we can look forward to Christ's return, as we will expect a great reward of *eternal life* from Him (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Any reward believers receive from Christ at His judgment seat will be based on His *mercy*. The Apostle Paul underscores this reality in his second letter to his disciple Timothy:

"The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains."
(2 Timothy 1:16)

Here Paul prays that the Lord will reward Onesiphorus for his faithful ministry to him. But Paul calls such a reward "mercy." This is because God is the ultimate standard. No one can demand anything from God, for there is no standard to which He must answer. Therefore, any reward He

gives to any believer is a matter of His mercy.

Fortunately for us, God is merciful, and desires to reward His people for their faithfulness (Hebrews 11:6).

Eternal life as a gift secures our position in Christ, which is determined by Christ and His death on the cross. Eternal life as a reward depends on our condition, our fellowship with God and the extent to which we live in the faith. That of course depends on our choices, and determines our experience of eternal life.

Jude desires that these believers not only seek to live in such a manner as to anxiously await the return of Jesus, but also to seek to minister to others who need help in their walk of faith. There are some who doubt. While false teachers are to be confronted and pushed away, those who doubt are in need of mercy: *And have mercy on some, who are doubting* (v 22).

The word translated *mercy* can also be translated “compassion.” It is compassionate to help someone move from a position of doubtfulness to a position of steadfastness in their faith. This is because walking in faith, living a life in obedience to Christ, is the way to experience and gain the reward of eternal life.

Jude adds the admonition to *save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh* (v 23).

The Greek word translated *save* is “sozo.” Anytime we see the word “save” we need to recognize that the context determines what or who is being delivered from what. In this case, Jude exhorts believers in the body who have a strong faith to *save others*. So in this case this is one person acting to deliver another, like a lifeguard delivering someone from drowning. In this case, there are people that need to be saved from *fire*. The *fire* being addressed likely refers back to the image of Jude 1:7 that describes God’s judgment fire.

This could not apply to the judgment of being eternally separated from God, as Jesus Christ is the only one who can deliver anyone from that fate. To be born again into His family requires faith on Him, and His death on the cross (John 3:14-15). This saving is one human to another. The inference is that a part of contending for the faith (Jude 1:3) is to contend to help other believers walk in faith.

In particular, in this context there are false teachers leading people to believe that God’s grace makes it acceptable to live in licentiousness (Jude 1:4). To live in intentional sin leads to many adverse consequences. To lead someone away from this false belief is *snatching them out of the fire* of judgment.

The *fire* of judgment on sin takes place both in this life as well as in the next. In this life, living in sin leads us into slavery, loss and death (separation from God’s good design) (Romans 6:15-17). It also causes us to heap up deeds that will be like “wood, hay, straw” in the fire of Christ’s judgment of believers (1 Corinthians 3:12-13). That means we will waste our lives on earth and lose out on the “gold, silver, precious stones” when our works are “revealed with fire.”

Jude also says *on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh*. The *fear* here would seem to admonish each person engaging with a believer who has fallen into sin or false teaching to be very wary to avoid falling into sin themselves. The *flesh* refers to our old nature, which is not redeemed when we become a new creation in Christ (1 Corinthians 5:17). As Paul states regarding his own flesh:

“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not.”
(Romans 7:18)

The phrase *hating even the garment polluted by the flesh* would appear to be a form of hyperbole, saying “don’t even touch clothing that has touched flesh”—meaning “stay far away from fleshly behavior, not even touching that which has touched such a thing.”

This warning is consistent with Jude’s insistence that spiritual authorities should be respected. As Peter says:

“Be of sober *spirit*, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”
(1 Peter 5:8)

We need to constantly “be on the alert” and resist sin and the devil by walking in faith, following the Spirit. The way to overcome satanic forces is not to ignore them, but rather to resist in faith:

“But resist him [the devil], firm in *your* faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world.”
(1 Peter 5:9)

Thus, in this section Jude creates an expectation that contending for the faith against ungodliness will be an ongoing reality. Faithful believers need to come to expect resisting false teaching and helping those whose faith is wavering as a normal part of their faith walk.

Biblical Text

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