

Jude 4-7

<sup>4</sup> For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.

<sup>5</sup> Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord at one time delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe. <sup>6</sup> And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling – these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. <sup>7</sup> In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire. [NIV]

We've been looking at this often neglected and even more often misunderstood little letter from Jude – the brother of James and the slave of Christ, as he calls himself. We said last week that he wrote this to a group of believers that he obviously cares about very much, but that also it was not his first choice of topic. After intending to write something different, he was instead compelled to warn them about an infestation in their midst.

A person or a group of them, Jude says, had slipped into the fellowship – wormed their way into this church body – and were working toward influencing that body with untrue, unorthodox teachings that, if they took hold, were dangerous enough to ruin their salvation.

This was a life or death issue – an *eternal* life or eternal death issue – that Jude is taking on here. That's how he saw it.

Last Sunday we focused on the danger of *the way* that the falsehoods were being delivered into the church. It was not through an overt, public proclamation. Those are too easy to see and evaluate.

What was going on, instead, was a slow and very sly process where the poison was being delivered a little at a time. That's the danger of infestations: they're clandestine by their nature. They're covert operations that aren't even noticed until the damage is already nearly complete.

For example: if I were to show you this [hold up blue vase] and make the statement, "This vase is red," everyone watching this who can see, who is not blind, would say, "Well, no it isn't. It's blue!" And no matter how much I insisted – no matter how loud or indignant I got, you'd still say, "You're nuts if you think that's red."

But, if I came to you one day and said, "You know, I've been studying some things about color. Did you know that new studies are showing that the colors red and blue are really not self-differentiated primary colors – that microscopic elements of colorant are being found in each that suggest there is a similarity between them – in fact,

even a unity between them – that we've never realized before? Yes, it's quite fascinating!"

So, I leave you to think about that.

And then a couple weeks later I come back around – approach you very winsomely – and talk, this time, about how the finish glaze has been proven to distort true color – which does have a bit of truth in it.

And then, a week later I could make a biological case for how different human eyes see color differently, and how, of course, that would have to play a part in this debate about true color.

A week or so later, I could make some sociological statement about how the color red has been unfairly demonized through the years – it's suffered all sorts of uncalled-for marginalization and hatred, really. I feel bad for what people have done to red. It's terrible, really, what people have done to red.

And then a week or two later, I could make a philosophical case for what, then, really is true color? Is it perception? Is it science? Is it biology? Is it pigment? Is it on the macro or micro level? Is it opinion? Is it sociological? Is it all these things together? And if they're all different for different people, then – given all this – is it really wrong for me to say this vase is actually red?

You see how that works?

That's what an infestation – like Jude is speaking of here – does. It reveals itself, a little at a time, and it makes you question even the validity of what can easily and obviously be seen. And it does that because it suggests that you're privileged to know things that others don't – know whether they're true or not. It plays on our pride. It plays on our arrogance, because we *like* to think we know things that others don't. We like to think we're smarter – that we have *special* knowledge that others don't have.

That was the sin of *gnosticism*. Gnosticism – the word is impressive, but really, it's just plain old pride – is an intellectual pride that says, "I'm better than others because I have special knowledge."

That's what was happening in this church, and it was leading them into immoral behavior, immoral choices, immoral lifestyles. Someone or some people had wormed their way in and, through the infestation of their errant, intellectual arguments, they were managing to disconnect relationship with Jesus – faith in Christ – from a true Christian lifestyle.

And they were doing it by re-defining – or rather, mis-defining – grace.

We said last week the disconnection involved two tenets – you can find them in verse 4 there.

The first, Jude says, is that these infiltrators were changing the grace of God into a *license for immorality*; that is the key phrase; license for immorality. They were teaching and living that the grace of God allows for – is a license for – immoral behavior.

This is the heresy of *antinomianism*, which tries to say that the grace of God actually frees believers from the need to keep any sort of moral code or standard of behavior. “No matter what I do – whatever sin I may commit, God’s grace is big enough to cover it. So, I may as well do whatever I like – whatever feels good, whatever pleases me. I may as well give my body over to its basest lusts. I may as well indulge in whatever behavior is most fun at the moment, regardless of earthly consequence, because God’s grace is so overwhelming. He will forgive me in the end, and all will turn out OK.”

That is the position of antinomianism, and although the name for that particular heresy only came to be as recently as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the tenets of it appear right here, in the earliest of churches.

And not only here. The Apostle Paul speaks against this same thing in Romans and in Ephesians – and Peter does as well – because it’s an utter affront to the holy character of God, you see? To believe and to teach that sinning is fine because of the greatness of God’s power to forgive is so immensely presumptuous, it’s hard to even describe. The very thought of it stands against the overwhelming message of the Bible that God calls people to be holy, and God punishes wicked and sinful behavior.

I mean, think about that. Any parent would bristle at the idea that their kid would think it fine to behave in exactly the opposite way their parent thought good and right – to just give in to their lusts without even a thought – because they knew their parent’s love for them would see past it in the end. It’s the height of arrogance and presumption.

But even more dangerous than that, it’s blatant and intentional sin.

Which moves toward the second declaration of Jude describing these infiltrators, which is that they were denying Jesus Christ as their only Lord.

You see, in this very way, they’d determined that it was fine to simply ignore everything Jesus said – *commanded* – regarding living a moral life, personal holiness, and love and concern for the good of others.

Of course, I can’t even begin to go through all the examples of that. If you’re curious, the Sermon on the Mount is a good place to review just some of Jesus’ words on those subjects.

I will mention, though, Jesus’ reminder in Matthew 5, starting in verse 17, where He introduces a whole section of teaching on moral behavior by saying, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them... until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter... will by any means disappear from the Law.... So anyone who sets aside one*

*of the least of these commands and teaches others to do that too will be called least in the kingdom of heaven...”* [NIV]

That’s what Jude saw was going on there in that church, you see?

And then, catch this last part of what Jesus says there in verse 20, *“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (which, you see, was all talk and no practice), you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

This is why Jude wrote what he did. This is why it was, to him, a life or death situation.

You can’t ignore God’s call to holiness; you can’t deny it; you can’t neglect it; you can’t dismiss it and just presume that grace will cover you. It’s an issue of intent, you see?

Of course, you can make mistakes in ignorance. We all do, and God is happy to forgive those. He’s happy to forgive us when we’re honestly pursuing Him and His word and the life He calls us all to lead – when obedience is our intention.

But when our pursuit turns into presumption – when we intend to please ourselves and not God, and then presume upon His grace – that’s when we get in trouble.

That’s what caused Paul to ask the church at Rome, *“What are you saying – that we should go on sinning so that grace might increase?”*

And then he answers himself, *“No way!”*

You can’t do that. Eventually, that attitude will end a relationship with God.

Why?

Not because it harms God’s grace toward us. Not because it diminishes God’s love for us. Not because it changes God’s desire for us to walk with Him.

It will, sooner or later, end a relationship with God simply because there’s no honesty left about it – about the relationship. The relationship becomes all about us: our way, our happiness, our satisfaction, our success, our taking advantage of God just so we get what we want from Him.

Think about it in human terms.

Have you ever tried to have a relationship with someone who is totally self-absorbed and self-focused? You can’t do it – not in honesty – because the interaction is entirely one-sided. You can try for a time, but a self-absorbed person doesn’t care about anyone but self. And, by definition, it’s impossible for a person like that to be in a real, mutually-giving relationship.

That’s Jude’s concern here. The error in thinking is leading to not only wrong conclusions about God’s character, but also to wrong practice – wrong lifestyle based in self-satisfaction. And all of that, if left as it is, will lead to death.

It’s not just academic. Not just of the mind. Nothing spiritual is. It’s completely practical – how what we believe and what we do must come together. That’s *praxis* – the

consistency between what we believe and what we do – and our praxis always carries eternal consequences.

“God takes sin very seriously. He does not ignore sinful behavior. God punishes sin. He always has – and you know that.” That’s what Jude is reminding His readers of – he says that plainly there in verse 5 – and right here is where this book typically loses us, because, let’s face it, from now on, there’s some pretty weird stuff in here, from our perspective, anyway.

We’re not first century Jews, so we don’t naturally follow all three of the arguments Jude makes here. But his original readers would have. In fact, the arguments Jude makes would have been easily some of the most powerful arguments he could have made to the original readers of this letter in conveying the point that, “God’s character has not changed with the coming of Jesus and the grace He offers. God still takes sin seriously, and so we need to take sin seriously.”

Now, the first illustration is probably the easiest for us: verse 5, the example of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. Jude’s point in bringing this up is to remind us that those who have been saved by grace can still be condemned if they are not faithful.

God delivered His people out of Egypt. What greater act of deliverance and grace could Jude have pointed to?

Yet even those who’d been among that group – who’d experienced firsthand the grace and power of God: most of them were banished from the promised land to wander in the desert for 40 years and to die there – never seeing the promise fulfilled.

Why?

They disobeyed God’s command to take the land. Even after all this grace they’d experienced, you see, they failed to trust Him. And not just once. They failed to trust him in that initial entry, then again in the golden calf incident, in their constant murmuring, in their worship of Baal at Peor, in committing immorality with the Moabites, and on it goes.

Numbers 26 says not one of them survived, besides Caleb and Joshua.

Why? Because they did not believe God and so rebelled against Him and His way, over and over again – even after experiencing His delivering grace.

And so, Jude’s message to His readers is this: remember the Israelites of old: if you fall into the same sort of sin and rebellion as they did, the same sort of judgment will come to you.

Remember that “Even from the very gates of Heaven,” as John Bunyan wrote, “there is still indeed a way to hell.”

Jude’s second illustration is the harder one for us: where he speaks in verse 6 about the, “*angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling...*”

We need to understand that the Jews had a very developed *angelology* – the study of angels, which included the fall of the angels. This is talked about a lot in the *Book of Enoch*, an ancient Hebrew apocalyptic work, but certainly this is also in the Bible. Both Isaiah and Ezekiel mention this fall being the result of pride and rebellion.<sup>1</sup>

This is the way we’re introduced to Lucifer, in Isaiah 14.

And this appears in the New Testament too – Jesus talks about Satan falling like lightning from heaven in the context of the disciples’ ministry success.

There is also, though, another reference to fallen angels: in Genesis 6, where we’re told that angels were attracted to the beauty of the daughters of the humans, and so they left heaven for the sake of their lust and wound up creating these people called the Nephilim – the super-human heroes of old. You see, in their doing this, the angels were out of God’s order; they left their own place and insisted upon taking what was not theirs to take – and on becoming what was not theirs to become.

What Jude does here, in effect then, is to combine these two events in order to communicate that the sins of lust and prideful rebellion have the capacity to take down even angels. Even those who enjoy the highest heights of spiritual attainment are not guaranteed ultimate victory. When rebellion and pride and lust are concerned, there is no height from which a person cannot fall.

So then how is salvation secured? Jude would say, only by keeping faith current and true. Contending for – fighting for, staying engaged and active and obedient in – the faith in a consistent and persistent way – that is what will result in salvation.

Apart from that, Jude says, remember the angels and know that if you fall into that same sort of sin and rebellion, the same sort of judgment will come to you.

And then, once again, the last example Jude gives in verse 7 is a familiar one to us: the account of Sodom and Gomorrah from Genesis 19.

Sodom and Gomorrah, above every other account in Scripture, would have been seen by Jude’s readers – and frankly by followers of God in nearly all times and places – as the foremost example of the sin of humanity and the judgment of God.

What happened in and to these cities is referenced in Deuteronomy, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Matthew, Luke, Romans, 2 Peter and Revelation! Their story is flung throughout the Bible. It’s spoken of by Jesus Himself. Although the sins of these cities do include immorality in general and certainly abuse of hospitality – in spite of what a growing number of people, both inside and outside the church, want to believe today, their sins also obviously include the acting out of homosexual lusts and desires, and the threat to do so

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 14:12, Ezekiel 26:20

against even angels, of all things – God’s very representatives – was particularly horrendous.

What it said about them was that they had no regard for God, for His way, for His order, or for His people. Those cities were in utter rebellion against God, and in return for their rebellion, they were consumed off the face of the earth.

“So,” Jude says, “remember Sodom and Gomorrah, and know that if you fall into that same sort of sin and rebellion, the same sort of judgment will come to you.”

By taking all of Jude’s arguments together, we come up with a pretty clear picture of what was being taught in this church: the sins the heretics were encouraging – the sins they insisted grace would cover – involved immorality, bodily and sexual immorality, of the most blatant kinds.

In Jude’s estimation, they were essentially creating a new religion – since none of these sorts of things could be in any way compatible with Christianity: a new religion that would bring together Christian ideas with a totally morally pagan lifestyle.

But this can never work, Jude says. It’s a false notion. It’s been tried before: rebelling against God’s ways and word, and presuming upon His grace. It’s been tried before, but it always results in a mess – in condemnation – and apart from true repentance and turning from sin, ultimately in judgment.

This is what was of life or death to Jude – his argument and his plea here: don’t give in to an idea that has proven all through history to result in both temporal and eternal destruction.

As is so often the case, people do stupid things because they’re either ignorant of history, or because, in their pride, they refuse to learn from history.

Jude is appealing to the very history of God with His people – with His creation – and to the history of God’s character and order to say to those who are, under the influence of these invaders, toying with heresy-based sexual immorality, “Don’t do it! Don’t give in to it! Don’t imagine God approves of it! Don’t believe grace, apart from repentance, will cover it. It’s never been that way, and it’s not that way now.”

There are always people today – and there always have been people – who lobby for new freedom and new

morality with regard to marriage and divorce, with regard to sexual sins, with regard to what you ingest into your mind and body.

But none of it is really new. It’s the old immorality seeking to justify itself by pretentious phrases or insidious infestations – by worming in to try to change something God has said, something about the way God has ordered our world.

Every time you turn around – throughout history and certainly today, someone is trying to make a *new* normal become *the* normal, morality-wise.

But Jude doesn’t buy it, and he says plainly, “neither should we.” Don’t give in to the infestations of mis-defined grace, of meaningless faith, of the self-satisfying immorality of our age.

Just as it always has, our very eternity depends on our praxis – how we think about grace, and how we live by it in our decisions day by day.

Don’t be deceived. God holds out the way. Ours is today, and has always been, to follow Him.

Prayer:

Lord, help us to do just that: to follow you and your way. It may mean we walk completely against culture, with regard to morality. It may mean we appear to be backward or prudish or unenlightened.

Help us to recognize infestations when we see them, and so to always be able to see things for what they really are – what you say they are. Help us to follow in that line of history that chooses to believe you and trust you, come what may.

Closing Song

Benediction

In a world that is increasingly confused about truth, about right and wrong, about moral and immoral behavior, may we always be people of light – not judgmental or argumentative, but warm and winsome and attractive examples of how God created people to live and relationships to work – so the world around might see God and His way in us and find, not just hope for a good today, but salvation for a good eternity. Amen.