

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *To Contend, No. 7*

Mercy Mixed with Fear

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Jude 20-23

But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.

²² Be merciful to those who doubt; ²³ save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear – hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh. [NIV]

We began this series – this study of the book of Jude – a few weeks ago using the word *infestation* to describe what was happening in the church to which Jude wrote.

That's an ugly word, isn't it? *Infestation*. I think I'm right in saying that it always carries a negative message – a negative connotation.

It's funny how some words do that.

Like the word *infection*. It works the same way. People are never said to have *infections of happiness or pleasantness or health*. No one ever says, "Look at her – she's just infected with good skin!"

You never hear things like that, but you *do* hear how people have infections of disease or germs or viruses or bitterness.

You never hear about houses that are *infested* with beauty or pleasant smells or nice furnishings. What you hear about are houses that are infested with mold or rats or some other *negative* thing.

You *never* hear, "That church on the hill is just *infested* with *joy*," – or *faith* or *harmony* or *generosity*! But you *do* hear of churches being infested with negativity or pride or dysfunction or, as in Jude's case, *heresy*.

The church to which Jude wrote was infested with false teaching (in this case, regarding sexual immorality) because of some people who had, as Jude says, "wormed their way" into places of influence and leadership.

Their teaching, a lie which claimed that you can do whatever you want sexually and be just fine with God, because He's so gracious He will forgive you in the end, was named "antinomianism" in the 16th century, but we clearly see in Jude that it threatened the Church long before then.

"Do what you like – have your own way, and don't worry. God will forgive you."

You know why that kind of thinking is especially dangerous? Because it's especially effective. It has been convincing to people through the ages because people want it to be true. People want to believe it, because it appeals to our baser drives and desires.

I mean, who doesn't at least listen to the argument when someone suggests, "Oh, we have *new information* that says you really *can* behave this way or that way – you can do whatever you like and not hurt anything or anyone?"

Who doesn't want to hear on the news someday, "New study shows that you can eat all the chocolate you want and you won't gain weight"?

People have made millions and millions on diet products that promise things like that.

Or, when you hear someone who says, "You can spend all the money you have, or go into all the debt you like, and it won't really matter."

"You can satisfy every urge or craving that rises up within you and no one will be hurt and no one will care – including God."

Those are all dangerous, dangerous lies, of course, but people listen to them because of that pride that remains within us – that vestige of the fall that says, "I want to do what I want to do – I'm the boss of me." Anything that promises to give us that power will capture our attention.

That deep desire for control – that is what the fall did to us. It's the heart of the human problem, and giving in to that – adopting that as our mode of operation in life – is nothing less than the rejection of God, the rejection of His authority and His Lordship of our world – and of us.

The false teachers here were saying, "Oh, it's fine to do that – we have *new information*, you see!"

But listening to that – believing that – can be absolutely deadly, both in *this* world and the *next*, which is why Jude wrote here one of the strongest letters in the New Testament. He wrote to reveal the lie of antinomianism – to hopefully exterminate it from this church – in order to save the body here from its effects.

Now, as we said last week, the largest part of the letter is spent exposing and denouncing the false teachers and their antinomian assertions.

But here at the end, Jude moves into three far more positive topics.

It's like he's made a legal argument here.

"Whereas the false teachers say this and do this and claim this;

Whereas that is all a lie; and

Whereas believing it can destroy you;

Therefore, this is what you must do in order to **contend for true faith in Jesus.**"

This is the prescription for contending for Christian faith.

Last Sunday we talked about the first of the three parts of Jude's prescription or instructions, and that is, how we are to develop and strengthen our faith *internally*.

Jude knew that if our faith isn't strong within us – if our faith muscles are weak, we will very likely fall to this sort of temptation especially.

So, Jude gives us five ways – five means of developing those faith muscles, and we talked about these last week:

First, remember the past: intentionally recall what God has done in days past.

Second, build your faith: exercise faith to build faith muscle.

Third, pray in the Spirit: listen carefully for the Spirit's voice.

Fourth, keep yourself in God's love: which Jesus said simply means to do what He says, to follow His instructions about life.

Fifth, know that, for those in Jesus, there is most definitely a reward: there is a tremendous tomorrow coming that is well, well worth waiting for.

These are the things we must do in us in order to contend successfully for our faith in Jesus.

In an airplane cabin that is depressurizing, there are the practices that give us the oxygen to breathe in order to survive, ourselves, and to actually be able to help others survive as well.

And that is what Jude gets to next, because, you see, contending for faith in Jesus involves helping others find and keep faith in Jesus too.

Contending is not just defense – it's not just balling up and hiding in a bunker somewhere.

There is an offensive part of contending for Christ too.

Once our own condition is secure, we are then called to help put the oxygen masks on others, you see – in order to save them.

And Jude mentions three ways we're to engage like this with others – other people. And they're important to differentiate, because how we engage depends on the persons involved.

Jude says there starting in verse 22, "*Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear – hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.*"

This seems to indicate three sorts of persons to whom we're to witness: first, people whom we're to engage for the sake of Jesus and their own salvation. Certainly, Jude is speaking of people in that particular church, but this applies directly to today as well.

Just as in Jude's day, when people were at various stages of being under the influence of this antinomian idea, so are people today. And here, Jude "ranks" them, if you will, in order of seriousness and even danger.

The first, Jude says, are those who have fallen under the influence of the false teachers – those who are open to their assertions maybe, but who have not entirely deserted the faith – at least not yet. They have doubts about the exclusivity of Jesus, about the moral standards of God, about the seriousness of sin. They may not have completely embraced those things, but they are entertaining those ideas in their minds.

"Maybe it's not so bad to behave this way – maybe they're right – maybe God doesn't really care all that much, and even if He does, maybe He will just forgive me in the end."

Those were the thoughts they were playing with.

To people like that, Jude says there, "*Be merciful to those who doubt.*"

What does that mean? It means, "Don't over-react and reject people like that. Don't start calling them names. Don't post or tweet that they're idiots. Don't write them off. Don't get mad and leave that church to start another one over people like this."

As Paul told Timothy in 2 Tim 2:24-26, *Be kind, gently instruct, that they might come to their senses and escape the devil's trap.*

The reason is, you see, God loves them and wants them to come to repentance. And there is hope for this if we do our contending well – if we respond to them in such a way that pulls those sorts of persons toward Jesus instead of pushing them away.

That is one of the toughest things for people to take about Christians, you know? We, ourselves, are recipients of such immense mercy, but so often we show so little mercy to other people.

At one time or another in our lives, we were all utterly, spiritually lost. At one time or another we were spiritually ignorant. We were misguided. We claimed to know things we didn't, and so we all needed God's mercy and the mercy of others desperately, and we received it.

But we're often so quick to forget that and to show that same mercy to others.

Those who doubt don't require a punitive response from us. They need a redemptive response: not one that compromises truth, but one of mercy, patience, and understanding.

They're not the devil. They're searching, and they're lost, and they need to be found.

That's how we help those who are struggling with doubt to contend for faith, according to Jude. That's the first group.

The second group Jude speaks about are those people who have fully agreed and accepted the false teachers and their false teachings, and now need to be rescued from them and their consequences. Jude says about these, "*save them by snatching them from the fire.*"

This group's commitment to the false is greater than that of the first group, which means their circumstance is more serious – more dire, and so there is a greater call to action.

There are three interesting things about this phrase that Jude uses, actually.

The first is the call to save them.

Now, of course, Jude knew very well that we don't save people, in the theological sense. Salvation is due to God's mercy and gift alone; that is reality and we all know that.

But just as real is the fact that God, most often, works out His will through people – through those people who are listening for Him, who are guided by His Spirit, and who are willing to do as He asks them to do. This means that we have a part, not only in contending for our faith, and not only in saving ourselves, but in the salvation of other people.

The Christian's obedience to God makes a difference in other people's lives – even their eternal lives. It's just that serious, and sometimes quite dramatic, as Jude alludes to here with this turn of phrase, "snatch them!"

The word, "snatch" is one of those words that, just in itself, paints a picture. It's quick; it's decisive; it's intentional; it's even violent – snatching is.

When you're driving along on the freeway, maybe not paying a lot of attention, and you suddenly realize that

you've drifted into someone else's lane and you are even close to hitting another car, what do you do? You *snatch* the car, by the wheel, and bring it back to where it's supposed to be – out of danger.

When, by accident, you lay your hand on something hot, as soon as you feel that, you *snatch* your hand away – you *pull* it, *yank* it back to yourself – back to safety, so it doesn't get burned.

When I was a teenager, I was sitting around a campfire one cool night – I had my boots propped up on the rocks that surrounded the fire. What I didn't notice right away was that the fire had shifted and a burning log was burning the bottom of my boot. When I finally wound up feeling it, I jumped up, snatched my foot back away from the fire, and then I snatched my foot out of the boot. I pulled it back to safety so it wouldn't get burned!

That's the image of snatching – it's suddenly realizing a danger and yanking that which is valuable to safety.

Jude says that's how we're to see those who are caught up in this sort of sin. Because they are valuable to God, they are valuable to us, so as His agents on earth, we're to do all we can to snatch them back to safety from the danger they're in.

Now, let me say, snatching can be embarrassing, and I'm thinking of that move I made with my boot that was on fire. When you snatch, you jump and move quickly because you see the danger – you feel the heat – even if no one else does.

And you see, that means that, for a time, you may look like you're nuts to those who are around – those who are watching.

When I jumped up from the fire and tried to yank my foot out of the boot, of course everybody around me was startled and was surely wondering, "What on earth is he doing?"

They didn't know what was going on, because they did not feel the danger, you see?

And that's true in the spiritual realm too. Not everyone will understand what we're doing, what we're saying, why we're acting as we are.

But we know the danger – we know it's real – we know it hurts – and we know what will happen if we just let it go.

So, we don't let it go. We do all we can to snatch that which is valuable from the danger.

And ironically, the danger here in Jude is also fire; but it's not just a campfire that will just melt the soles of your shoes and maybe put a little burn on the bottom of your foot.

Jude may well be talking here, in part, about the earthly pain of wrong choices, because there is earthly pain that comes to us from ungodly choices. He may well be saying that we can help save some from the life-long pains and disappointments and frustrations that come to us here from going against God's wishes – against God's design.

We can snatch people from the fire of temporal pains.

But even more than that, Jude is speaking of the fire that is promised as the consequence of rejecting God as Lord and Christ as Savior.

Fire was the eternal consequence of Sodom and Gomorrah. Destruction – eternal, painful, agonizing death.

This is the fire of judgment – God's judgment of all who reject Him and His word and His ways.

And it's illustrated in Scripture as the fires of Gehenna, which is the constantly-burning trash heap outside Jerusalem in Kidron Valley. It's the fire that never goes out – sometimes smoldering, sometimes flaming, but always burning.

It's an uninhabitable place, but this is what eternal life is like, Scripture says, for those who choose to live apart from God. It's what eternity will be like without the soothing presence of God's grace.

In the church to which Jude wrote, these are the ones who had joined the movement, you see, and they were in grave danger of this judgment.

And yet there was still hope for them!

It's as James 5:19-20 says, "*If someone among you wanders and is brought back, whoever does so will save that person from death and will bring about forgiveness.*"

There were those in the church who were on the brink of the judgment of eternal fire, and God, through Jude, asked the faithful ones to snatch them back.

Snatching some from the fire: that's part of our work of contending for our faith.

And then finally, there is a third group of people. These are the ones who had completely bought in, and maybe even those who were leading the pack.

How do you approach those?

Jude says, "*Show mercy, mixed with fear – hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.*"

First of all, notice that there is still hope, even for these who are leading the sin. There is still hope for redemption – there is still the possibility for salvation for these, so we are to show them mercy.

At the same time, we are to use great caution when interacting with them. The word is, literally, *fear*. This is one of those times when fear is good – fear is healthy, because the temptation can be very strong and the consequence of giving in can be very devastating.

We cannot think we'll automatically be above falling to it ourselves. We cannot be arrogant or cavalier in this. Yes, God protects and preserves, but we also count the cost and use our heads.

Because in every effort of reclamation, there is a danger of being drawn into the flames ourselves.

There are people who do ministry in bars to save the drunks and the alcoholics who have then become addicted themselves.

There are people who try to save people from prostitution or pornography and then become ensnared in those evils themselves.

There are those who've counseled the vulnerable who wind up taking advantage.

As the Apostle Paul says to the Galatians, "If someone is caught in a sin, you should restore them gently – but be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself."

People make blanket statements like, "Christians should not fear and not hate." Yet here is Jude saying there is indeed a place for fear and for hate.

Fear those—use extreme caution with those who are so deeply entrenched in sin, for your own sake, and also hate even clothing stained with sin.

Sin repulses God, and it should repulse us.

Ironically, it may be our hatred of everything to do with sin that makes us love sinners more completely and effectively and redemptively. It may be our deep hatred for sin that lets us love those enmeshed in it enough to try to snatch them out of their trajectory of destruction.

You see, all of this is part of contending for faith in Christ.

Building up our own faith and engaging with others who need Christ. Both parts are necessary. We won't be effective and complete Christ-followers unless we are spiritually mature ourselves and also leading others along that path.

We are not saved to glory in our own faith. We are saved to serve others, to build Christ's Kingdom, and to rescue others who are in trouble, and this communal element is not often embraced by American Christians.

We tend to live by the American idea of minding our own business and of tolerance and live and let live.

But Jesus, through Jude, calls us to more. To engage others—even those caught in deep sin—redemptively, which is the most challenging and most hopeful thing about this passage.

There is always hope.

There is hope for those strong in faith to be even stronger.

There is hope for those who question and even doubt to find answers.

There is hope for those who've made mistakes to be redeemed.

There is even hope for those who've taunted and lived blatantly errant lives to find forgiveness and restoration.

Even for those against whom Jude speaks so strongly there is still hope—hope for redemption—hope for

salvation—hope for mercy—hope for eternal reward instead of eternal judgment.

God's last word here is redemptive, and He calls us—He calls all Christ-followers—to partner with Him in this. It's all part of contending for faith in a rebellious world.

Will you do that? Will you partner with God in building up your own faith—and showing redemptive mercy to those very, very far from Jesus?

That's what it means, and what it takes, at least to Jude, to contend for faith in a broken world.

Prayer:

Father, would You teach us how to do these things that Jude describes in our day? Would You pour Your love into our hearts so that we can love, with Your love, those around us who neglect You, who ignore You, who live in ways contrary to Your best, and who even teach and lead others away from You?

You want them all in Your Kingdom, and, while You call us to hate sin just as You do, You also call us to love lost people and to engage them with mercy, working—working with You—with Your Spirit toward their redemption.

Help us and strengthen our faith for the task—for the mission You've given us, Your church.

Closing Song

Benediction:

May the Lord our God, who is so, so worthy of all our praise, help us and empower us to contend for Christ in our broken world by being merciful to those who doubt; by snatching others from the fire; by showing mercy, mixed with fear—always hating the sin but also always loving the sinner toward redemption—loving the sinner toward Jesus.