

Three Groups

Jude 22-23

So what do we do? “Certain people have crept in unnoticed.” That’s the problem Jude has identified. They are troublemakers, “who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.” “Woe to them,” Jude declares, “for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.”

Last week, finally, in a sense, finally we came to the focal point of the book, its climax, with an emphasis upon the faithful believer’s own responsibility. What should you do? I hope the words were very encouraging to you.

v.20 “But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, 21 keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.”

This afternoon we continue that emphasis, that encouragement, to the faithful. Today, in relation to those troublemakers who have crept in unnoticed, you need to protect and preserve your own faith. You need to keep yourself in the love of God. You need to look forward to and anticipate the revelation of God’s mercy in terms of your eternal life.

But how do you respond to the trouble that is now in the church? How do you respond to the troublemakers, and to those influenced by them? That’s the question we will try to answer today, with three different answers. Three answers that correspond to three different types of people, three different categories of people. Therefore, three difference responses.

Before I go any further, let me note for you who study and

read different English versions of the Bible, that these verses may appear slightly differently in those different verses. The Greek text of these verses is extremely difficult, because there are many variant texts that exist. Discerning the actual, authentic original text is a complicated task. Some translations, therefore, give the impression that there are only two groups of people, and some of the words are variously translated. With an appropriate sense of humility in studying God’s word, I’ll try to cut through all the textual differences in the Greek with a clear explanation of those three groups of being identified.

The overall sense of our response to those who cause trouble is mercy, which is the response of God to us as well, isn’t it? According to verse 22, we are to “have compassion, making a distinction,” as the NKJV translates. “Have mercy,” we read in the ESV, meaning the same thing as compassion.

As an encouragement and motivation to you, let me remind you that our very salvation is put in those same terms of God’s mercy. For example, we read,

1 Peter 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

And, Titus 3:4 “But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, 5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.”

Eph. 2:4 “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you

have been saved.”

So the mercy of God is that compassion by which God determines to save us. And that same mercy is to be our response, even in the context of the dangerous situation which Jude has been describing in this letter. And first of all, that is what is described by verse 22, “mercy on those who doubt.”

I. MERCY TOWARD SOME.

And in the ESV, we read to have that mercy “on those who doubt.” In the NKJV we read of “making a distinction,” a word referring to indecision or uncertainty, which relates to the translation of those who doubt. The Greek word for “doubt” can be translated “to make a distinction.” Or “to make a difference.” The idea is of discrimination. Making a distinction between two groups of people. Choosing a preference.

The word also refers to having a conflict within yourself, a difference of opinion within your own mind, and thus the translation to doubt. There are those who doubt, those who are troubled in their own mind. There are those who have this conflict; perhaps they see some of the dangers of these troublemakers who have crept in unnoticed, but remain friends. Perhaps they don’t see the fullness of the danger. Perhaps they want to make the situation right, they want to correct what is wrong, but don’t know how to do so. Jude describes here,

A. An awareness of struggle.

He’s not trying to be overly divisive, nor overly critical. He is not forcing everyone to line up according to the camp they belong to, identifying themselves along political lines, political parties. Sadly, such things to happen in churches all the time, and it is devastating to the peace and unity of the church. All too often, whenever there are conflicts or struggles in the church people

align themselves with one side or another. Paul addressed that directly with the church at Corinth.

1 Cor. 3:12 “What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” 13 Is Christ divided?”

Thankfully, there are people who are unwilling to do that, according to Jude. They are unwilling to register themselves as a Democrat or Republican, in terms of church politics. They are unwilling to take sides, unwilling to add to the divisiveness that these certain people have caused. But because of that, they seem unwilling to identify or recognize the dangers, either.

Thus, Jude’s words are wise. He recognizes the struggle that these people have, and he calls for mercy upon them. He understands that this distinction is appropriate. These people, themselves, are not the troublemakers.

Too often today, leadership in churches becomes overbearing, and demands this sort of political identification. Too often, leaders require and demand of people such loyalty that they will never question their authority, they will never speak critically of the leadership. Thus if people aren’t so-called “team-players”, they are immediately labeled “divisive.”

I had seen that dynamic play out in a number of churches, where faithful, gentle, conservative believers who were exercising leadership and effective service in a church came to situations where they had differences of opinion from the leadership, especially a domineering pastor. And as soon as they disagreed with the party line, they were accused of being divisive. They were marginalized, and ultimately they are driven away, they themselves being the ones accused of being contentious.

Jude is not suggesting any such authoritarian leadership, though it is common today. One very well known pastor made these comments about his ministry and leadership, “There is a pile of dead bodies behind the [church] bus, and by God’s grace, it’ll be a mountain by the time we’re done. You either get on the bus or you get run over by the bus. Those are the options. But the bus ain’t going to stop!”

“You either get on the bus or you get run over by the bus.” No, says Jude, “Have mercy on those who doubt.” Have mercy, compassion, on those who are unsure of some things, who are trying to make distinctions. Not everything is black and white. Not everything is clearly, explicitly right and wrong. So show mercy, show compassion, show a personal interest and awareness of the honest and genuine struggles that people endure. Even, for Jude, when such grave matters as he has identified in this book are at stake!

Some people struggle. According to Jude, their evaluation is wrong. Their awareness of the danger is lacking. But Jude recognizes that they, themselves, are not part of the problem. As Calvin expresses it, these are “the meek and teachable.” So how are they to be corrected? How are they to be restored? How are they to be led away from the terrible dangers of these certain people who have crept in unnoticed? Again, Calvin writes, Jude “reminds them that such ought to be treated in different ways, every one according to his disposition: for to the meek and teachable we ought to use kindness; but others, who are hard and perverse, must be subdued by terror.”

So those who struggle, those who doubt, those who show themselves tender and teachable, they ought to receive the tenderness of mercy. That’s how you correct them and restore them to a place of safety, away from the dangers of these ungodly

and wicked impostors whom we spent several weeks describing from Jude’s words. Those who struggle, within the sincerity of their own heart, should be shown mercy.

B. A tender mercy.

This really is a very tender word, emphasizing the hardship and struggle of the one needing mercy. The idea of mercy is love and compassion toward those in need, love and compassion toward those in misery. Mercy is God’s attitude toward those who are in distress.

Mercy is the desire to bring help, to ease or give comfort in an affliction, a deep desire. A sincere desire. Rather than criticize those who doubt, rather than confront those who struggle, rather than incite those who don’t understand the fullness of the dangers Jude has identified, he urges a tender mercy. Help them, in their need—rather than condemning.

Then, a second group that Jude identifies. A second response, and this one, a bit more urgent. Look at the language, v.23 “....but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire.”

“Save others by snatching them out of the fire.” The image is easy to understand, isn’t it?

II. SNATCHING FROM THE FIRE.

This situation is not a time for reasoned and careful explanations. This is not a time for diplomacy, or even, for that matter, gentleness. This is a time when life is in danger, when the threat is imminent, the potential casualty obvious. The fire is burning and the little baby is still in her crib, so you rush in to snatch her out. The young child is heading out into the busy street, wandering aimlessly with no sense of the danger of speeding cars, and you rush out and bring him back to safety. It’s

not the time for conversation or dialogue. There is no discussion needed. It's time to rescue. You can debrief later. That's the image the Jude gives to us here.

A. The need for a dramatic rescue.

These are the ones merely meek and teachable. These are the ones who have been led astray, who have been drawn into the danger. These are the ones who are playing with fire, whether they fully understand that or not. The danger of the troublemakers who crept into the church has become evident and obvious, and drastic, immediate action is called for.

One commentator gives this helpful description, "This group differs from the first in that they no longer hesitate; they have given way to the false teachers."

Calvin explains it this way, "Moreover, he employs a striking metaphor. When there is a danger of fire, we hesitate not to snatch away violently whom we desire to save; for it would not be enough to beckon with the finger, or kindly to stretch forth the hand. So also the salvation of some ought to be cared for, because they will not come to God, except when rudely drawn."

James gives us similar instructions,

James 5:19 "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

The Lord, as it were, "gives to his servants the privilege of co-operating with him in his saving work."

The Lord himself uses this same analogy, in the Old Covenant prophetic language of Zechariah,

Zech. 3:1 "Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. 2 And the Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire."

So actually, we are all "brands plucked from the fire." Therefore it isn't hard to identify with this group. It isn't hard to understand the motivation or the intention. The goal is protection, and these people are on the wrong path, headed for destruction. So the whole of this instruction from Jude is because of,

B. An awareness of danger.

Fire! How can the danger be expressed any more graphically! Fire is, for all of us in terms of our earthly existence, a great and terrible danger. With reference to God, it is as well a representation of the final judgment, both the condemnation of the wicked and the judgment according to works for believers, about which we read in,

1 Cor. 3:13 "...each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. 14 If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."

So fire is the ultimate test, the ultimate judgment. And ultimately, those who are given to the error of these certain people who have crept into the church unnoticed, ultimately it is a matter of the eternal destiny of their souls. So the danger can't be overstated! And the need for rescue can't be overemphasized.

So the first two groups refer to redemption. "Have mercy on those who doubt." Then, "save others by pulling them out of the

fire.” Thirdly,

v.23 “...but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled [stained] by the flesh.”

Here, I believe, are those in the most danger, and so we have...

III. APPROPRIATE FEAR.

And this, I also believe, is not the godly fear of reverence and honor which we owe to God. Rather, this is the fear of danger, the fear of terror, the fear of your own eternal destruction and judgment. So don't lose your mercy, don't lose your sense of earnest desire for the redemption of everyone you meet, but,

A. Fear the wicked.

Fear these dangerous impostors whom Jude identifies, these “ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.” “Woe to them,” Jude declares, “for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.”

That's the context for this fear. As one commentator puts it, “Your compassion is to be accompanied “with fear” of being at all defiled by them.” So the warning is given in,

v.23 “...hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.”

As one commentator explains, this means “avoiding the most remote contact with sin, and hating that which borders on it.” So fear the danger of contamination. Fear the danger in your own life of being drawn into the deception and danger of these “certain people...who long ago were designated for this condemnation.” Fear these “ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.”

Fear them. Fear the danger they pose to your soul. Fear the danger of their licentiousness, their sensuality. Fear their willingness to engage themselves in moral impurity, and fear that danger in your own life. So hate “even the garment stained by the flesh.” Hate everything to do with their own impurity and immorality. Hate it, with a godly hatred. Hate what is evil. Hate their own unrighteousness, because it threatens your purity. Thus, “...hating even the garment defiled by the flesh” would mean the same thing as the exhortation to,

B. Preserve your own purity.

We are told so clearly in,

1 Thes. 5:22 “Abstain from every form of evil.”

Surely the encouragement comes from the power and strength of God, as the next verse is this,

1 Thes. 5:23 “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”

So God will do it! God will keep you blameless. God will protect you and preserve you. But at the same time, beloved, “Abstain from every form of evil.” Hate every form of evil. Avoid even the appearance of evil, “even the garment stained by the flesh.”

So writes Calvin, “He would have the faithful not only to beware of contact with vices, but that no contagion might reach them, he reminds them that everything that borders on vices and is near to them ought to be avoided...The passage will also become clearer, when the whole sentence is filled up, that is, that we should hate not only the flesh, but also the garment, which, by a contact with it, is infected.”

People of God, in order to preserve your own purity, avoid every contact with sin. Avoid every contact with evil. Avoid every appearance of evil. Hate everything about evil, and rightly fear those who would lead you into the presence or practice of evil.

Don't lose your compassion for their soul. Don't lose your sense of mercy toward unbelievers who are in desperate need of the saving power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But don't lose your hatred of evil, either. And don't lose the ability or willingness to fear those situations that can harm and damage your own soul by defiling your own purity.

Let me put that positively.

2 Cor. 7:1 "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."

Thankfully, as we stand before God in Christ, he has already done that! He has already cleansed us, and given us clean clothes! No more glorious image could be found than what we read in,

Is. 61:10 "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, My soul shall be joyful in my God; For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

So we are "clothed with the garments of salvation." To be a bit more theological, we are clothed with the righteousness of Jesus himself. That gives such encouraging meaning to,

Rev. 7:13 Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?" 14 And I said to him, "Sir, you know." So he said to me,

"These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

Rev. 22:14 "Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city."

So, in Christ, we already have new clothes! We are adorned as a bride on her wedding day. And with that encouragement comes this earnest and practical warning of Jude, to preserve and protect your own purity when confronted with the dangers that this little book has gone to such lengths to identify.

As I have done in past weeks, let me end by moving on, by giving an introduction to the sermon next week, for with his severe warning, Jude ends with this great encouragement, that God himself will preserve your purity!

v.24 "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, 25 To God our Savior, Who alone is wise, Be glory and majesty, Dominion and power, Both now and forever. Amen."