

Jude 1:1a, 3-4, 6-8, 12a, 17-21, 24-25

WHAT'S THE MATTER?

The enemy without is seldom as dangerous as the enemy within. That is why our world spends nearly all of its time, and most of its resources, struggling with externals. That way at least we do not have to focus on the most serious problems. It is comforting to pretend that all our problems are outside of us and perpetrated by other people or events. That way when we get angry at all that is going wrong, at least our anger can be directed toward others – elsewhere and outward.

It is true on all levels, of course. The threats and pressures from the society around us are a real and serious factor in every family's life and well-being. But how serious would they be if there were not so many internal factors also at work? Do more families fall apart from external problems than from lack of love, loyalty, appreciation, cooperation on the inside? When companies fail or barely stagger along, is it because the world is such a tough place and the competition so fierce? Surely anybody who has ever been part of an organization or corporation knows that the external problems, however tough, would be almost fun if the team could get it together – if all those within the organization would work together in trust, and for the mutual benefit of the company and each other.

Naturally the church is not immune to any of these principles. None of you have ever been part of a church where there has been no “fringe” – where everybody truly loved God, and willingly carried their share of the load. None of you have ever been part of a church where every member cared about the church's true purpose, or where every member lived their own personal life in honor of the precepts and teachings of our Lord. And I do not mean in some ethereal or perfect sense; I mean only to the degree that they themselves have been able to understand them. Always the personal agenda creeps in, and the pride gets hooked, and on our best days the power is cut by willfulness, disobedience, carelessness, rebelliousness, and a lack of consistent loyalty and love for our Lord. Something about a “broken world” ...

By the way, I am not suddenly unhappy with you or with this church. Not at all. This situation did not arise yesterday, or last week. It started back with Adam and Eve, and the fruit of that tree. I am just

trying to get us in step with Jude's remarks so we can better understand him. Jude is not addressing his letter to some specific place or town or to some particular congregation. His letter is to the church of his time "in general." Paul writes to specific congregations that he knows, and in most cases he was the one who started those churches (Romans is an exception). At least once he wrote to a particular individual named Philemon. But Jude belongs to what we call the "catholic epistles" – "catholic" meaning "universal." Jude hopes every church everywhere will get a copy and read his letter. I presume, therefore, that the problems Jude addresses are widespread and a threat to all the Christian churches, not just to one isolated congregation, in one specific location, with a unique troublemaker or group of troublemakers that most other churches do not have to deal with.

At the time Jude writes, then, there are widespread aberrations of the faith growing pretty much across the board in the Christian world. Even if we choose the latest probable date (150 A.D.), we have seven generations to go before Christianity becomes the acceptable religion of the Roman Empire. In short, there are plenty of pressures and problems on the outside. But Jude says nothing about these. He is worried about the threat from within. At first blush you might also think the Book of Revelation is worried about the enemy without. But not so. From John's perspective, there are plenty of pressures from without, and more coming, but that is not his big concern. He knows that if the people inside the church stay faithful, everything will come out fine. His real concern, not merely in his letters to the seven churches but throughout, is for the faithfulness of those inside the church.

How many churches across the land today believe that their biggest problem, or even their only problem, is that they do not have more members? About ninety percent. Well, I understand the feeling, but it is only a secondary problem. And it is never solved by thinking about what's wrong with all those people who are not coming. But fortunately only a handful of leaders think or care about it anyway (which is what is *really* wrong).

What can we discover from Jude's brief letter regarding the threat from within? There are people trying to lead the churches away from their basic faith and convictions. They have "wormed their way in." They are turning the freedom, grace, and forgiveness of Jesus into an excuse for licentiousness. And Jude is a bit scathing here: They have claimed

the *grace* of Jesus, while using their new freedom to act any way they want to. Thus they have actually rejected the One who brought this grace. They took the gift and rejected the Giver. And now they want the whole church to misuse this grace for purposes opposite to the meaning of both the gift and the Giver. Jude is not pleased with this new trend, or the people who represent it. And by the way, Jude probably got into the New Testament because the majority of people of the church realized that this letter was a clear and helpful warning about a serious problem. If this letter could help to defeat this new trend, then it belonged in the canon. And indeed Jude has helped to defeat this continued trend down through the ages.

The situation Jude is addressing is much too complex for a Sunday morning. On the other hand, Christians need to know this stuff. If I cannot get it clear, maybe I can at least get it started.

The story of the struggle for the right way to live is as old as human history itself. I have seen no indication that this struggle – maybe “warfare” would be more accurate – is any less poignant today than it has ever been. And the stakes are high in terms of human suffering; blighted lives; energy and resources wasted; people off-course, often leading to the destruction of self-image, love, family life, church, character ... and of course true spiritual development.

The church as the body of Christ’s followers on earth does not escape this struggle. It does not *create* this struggle, but neither can it escape it. How shall we live? In fact, how shall we live in order to honor and obey our Savior and Lord? Does the Christian Life we live in any way connect to and match the high truths we claim: dying to the old, and being raised to New Life – and now spending our lives in the presence of our Living Lord, who continues to comfort, guide, and inspire us every step of this Way, and every day? Especially if, as Jude claims, we are the willing slaves of Jesus Christ?

We feel Paul already struggling with these issues in the church’s infancy, especially in the Corinthian letters. The knife of Jesus Himself is so swift and sharp, we sometimes miss the struggle and see only the filleted remains. “*Bid my brother divide the inheritance with me*” (Luke 12:13) “*If you make love with a woman, the two of you are become one ... and the relationship either goes forward in love, or you are adulterers.*” (Matthew 19:5-9; Mark 10:7-12) “*Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more.*” (John 8:11)

In the early history of the church, this struggle for the right way to live is not cured but is revealed by the wars between the orthodoxy and the heresies. It is a fascinating story, seldom well told, but gaining attention in some circles today as people realize that these wars are not over. These issues keep circling back around, not always with the same names, but always with the same constructs – with the same principles at work.

By the end of the second century (200 A.D.), the fight was in full swing. It was focused between the orthognomoi (*orthodoxoi*) and the Gnostics. (The Right Thinkers versus Those Who Know It All.) There were, of course, various groups and expressions within each camp. The popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown reveals how hot the issues can still be today. But Brown and his ignorance aside, there are many sincere and highly intelligent, if less famous, proponents for various forms of Gnosticism in our own time.

Marcion, the first of the more influential heretics (he died around 160 A.D.), was no Dan Brown. He was an incredibly sincere, disciplined, devoted follower of Jesus. Moreover, his followers tended to be the samurai of the early church. When persecutions came and it was time to die for their Lord, the Marcionites were among the most stalwart. It is easy to love and admire Marcion, but that does not make him right. He tried to throw out all Judaism and Old Testament writings, urging his followers to concentrate on Paul's letters and an edited version of the Gospel of Luke. Focus and simplicity are always appealing, even if they lead us into untenable error. Nevertheless, this began a powerful but heretical claim, taken up by many other groups after the Marcionites were discredited. (By the third century, most Marcionite groups had been absorbed into Manichaeism, a later heresy.) Marcion taught that the Christian Gospel was totally a Gospel of Love, to the absolute exclusion of Law. You can see why he was called a heretic and thrown out of the church at Rome. Marcion believed that the Old Testament God was cruel and contradictory and had no connection with Jesus. He believed that Jesus came to reveal a different and much higher God of love – a God beyond and much greater than the Creator of the physical realms of evil and sin. Marcion thought that Paul was the only one who understood Jesus' true Message, the rest of the disciples being too blinded by their Jewish roots. The Gospel of Luke (Luke was a disciple of Paul) was better than the other Gospels, but Marcion had to edit Luke to weed out the

Jewish errors. And of course, it was the Old Testament God who was behind the crucifixion of Jesus.

Marcion was not a typical Gnostic, but some of his beliefs were then “developed” by later groups into a dualism which claimed that Spirit was good, and that matter – everything in the physical realm – was evil. The battle was between light and darkness – spirit and matter. Perhaps some of you are now picking up on the sermon title. More importantly, perhaps you can now hear and feel Jude struggling against the growing heresies of his time. His readers, of course, would have been aware of these issues. If we are not, we cannot hear Jude except dimly and vaguely.

If all physical matter is evil, then the Creator – the Old Testament God – must be evil too, since he brought the physical world into existence. Our only hope is to escape all matter, because that is what’s the matter. Shades of Eastern religious beliefs, if you will pardon the pun. Indeed, many Gnostic groups (*Gnosis* = knowledge) saw the Old Testament and Jewish history and tradition as coming from the Demiurge – the evil Old Testament God. Therefore Jesus must be from a different, higher, more hidden God. And those endowed with true knowledge – and superior spiritual awareness – knew this and rose far above the common masses to true spiritual being ... until they saw themselves as being rather godlike. They were fulfilling the Christness within, though that is not the phrase they used back then.

In fact, they became so spirit-filled – so far beyond the body, the matter – that now they could have sex with anybody they wanted, any time they wanted, and it would not *matter*. Matter is only a fleeting aberration anyway. So what’s the matter with that? Well, Jude did not like that more and more of the women of the church were getting picked off by this baloney – and the men too, of course.

You may think I’m getting carried away. In fact, the translators have tamed it way down again. In English, verse 17 says: “*These people create divisions; they are worldly and unspiritual.*” Yes, well, it says that, if you are watching carefully enough. But Jude is far more passionate than this sounds. He is throwing the language and teachings of the Gnostics back in their faces. He says they claim to be *pneumatikoi* – spirit-filled. But in fact they are *psuchikoi* – flesh-dominated. The Gnostics were claiming that the *pneumatikoi* were a higher form of life, capable of high knowledge and true spiritual experience. The *psuchikoi* were locked in to the low and physical, not much better than animals.

But Jude says the truth is just the reverse. “Don’t just listen to their pretty talk, look at how they live,” he pleads.

In verse 12, Jude is warning the churches of the dangers of their communion meal – what was most often called “the love-feast” in the early church, referring to Jesus’ love for us in giving Himself for us. But watch yourselves, Jude is saying. These people come to the table fellowship for a different purpose. They act all religious and friendly and interested in Christian love, but they are really there to see who they can pick up – who they can go to bed with. Worship can be a dangerous and vulnerable time, because people feel safe and trusting; if the preaching and the singing are good and the spirit is high – watch out for the matter. So be careful. These people are wolves in sheep’s clothing. Do not get picked off. For some reason, I was reminded of a phrase from *My Fair Lady*: “Oozing charm from every pore, he oiled his way around the floor” Of course, around here our worship is really tame and sedate, so you’re not in nearly as much danger.

Nevertheless, if you think such aberrations of the faith are confined to the early days of the Christian church, you are truly asleep. There are always proponents around for some advanced and highly evolved mystical teachings which turn out to be sick and sad excuses for lust and sexual misconduct, or one of the other Deadly Seven.

Back to the heresies: Gnosticism in various forms was based on superior knowledge, not on faith. Docetism (to pretend) claimed that Jesus only *pretended* to have a body, and did not really suffer or die on the Cross; He was too spiritual for that. The Cross was just an object lesson, a charade. What’s the matter with *that*?

Michael Green, in the Tyndale Commentary on Jude, quietly frames the summary of Jude’s conclusions about the false teachers of his time:

Physically, they became immoral.
Intellectually, they became arrogant.
Spiritually, they became disobedient to our Lord.

I hope nobody is able to write that on any of *our* tombstones!

Because the battle for how to live was serious and heated, and because writings like Jude and Second Peter were strong ammunition for orthodoxy (literally, right thinking), they were included in the New

Testament canon by those grateful for their clarity and perspective. Since I am one who needs constant reminding of how we are supposed to live, I am grateful for them too. But of course, some who most seriously need such reminders are not here today. They have become so spirit-filled that they no longer need the Body – at least not the body of Christ.

But we are not Gnostic. We still love and believe in the Creator who made this place where body, mind, and spirit all reside together. Where the Christ comes in the flesh – the Incarnate One. Where behavior matters, and what we believe wants to be expressed by matter.

Sadly, from my perspective, some traces of the Gnostic heresies became *orthodoxoi* for most Christians. Sex, in much of Christendom down through the ages, was seen as evil, tainted with the darkness of matter. And so the church has often taught that sex is a lot of what's the matter with human life. It is good to be the body of Christ until it's time to make love. So except for Luther and a few other oddballs, the church has been somewhere between shy and downright negative about sexuality. Many Christians have a hard time with gratitude, devotion, prayerfulness, and obedience when it comes to claiming sexuality as one of God's gifts of Life.

So many times we have gone from Jude's warnings – or from other teachings about right living – to conclusions which state or imply that the best solution would be abstinence. I am not trying to introduce sex education this late in a sermon. I just know that Jude's type of warnings are often taken to false conclusions. Sex is supposed to be a beautiful celebration of love, in marriage – in fact, like a communion meal – leading to intimacy, and forgiveness, and new starts, and great appreciation. The entire history of the world is huge evidence of how effective it is to try to stop sexual misconduct by claiming that sex is ugly, wrong, ungodly, or selfish. It *can* be all of those things. There is no gift of God that we cannot ruin. But if you want your children to have any courage or patience or understanding for “right living,” then you have to tell them how beautiful sex can be, and what it is really for – and how easily it can be ruined, and why it is worth waiting for the right context and the true purpose. Humans can be pretty disciplined, if they are clear about the hope – the beauty, and the meaning, and the purpose. Most of us are pretty rebellious with “just don't do it,” if that comes without any attempt to reveal why, or what we are waiting for.

WHAT'S THE MATTER?

In any case, Jude is saying: “Get real! We live in a physical world, and our spirituality must be seen in how we live here. Behavior matters. Judaism is our roots, and the Old Testament scriptures as well as Jewish tradition and writings are still the ground out of which we came. Being loyal to Jesus, and to His church, in the real world is how we express our faith and commitment. So we know what happened to those who would not follow the ways of faith and devotion in the past. Do we imagine it will come out any better for us if we abandon those precepts in *our* time?”

We will spend a bit of time next week with the traditions Jude wants to remind us about. But essentially he calls us to get back to taking care of business: Keep strong in the faith. Help each other. Whenever possible, rescue people from the influence of those who have soared off into some wild blue yonder that turns out to be just another version of a barnyard. They call it a celestial wonder and glory that only the privileged elite can fully fathom, but in reality it stinks.

I still think Jude is too light on the mercy, forgiveness, and new starts – in short, the Gospel. But it's there if we are aware enough to pick up the hints and phrases: *“And now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing – to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen.”*