

Mercy and Fear
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
April 18, 2021-AM Service
Reverend Peter Jonker
Jude

As you may know, we are in the middle of a sermon mini-series. During Easter, on Sundays not already taken up with other celebrations and events, we will study three of the short letters from the New Testament. Last week Ruth preached on 2 John. This week I am preaching on Jude, a book that tradition tells us was written by one of Jesus' half-brothers. Most scholars think it is a general letter – not written to one church, but written to many churches in a region. What shall we say about Jude? Jude is like the Nahum of the New Testament. It's a book that everyone knows is there, but few people read, and almost no one understands. It's also a sharp book. Jude is very direct. He'll make you wince. I am not aware of any inspirational quotes from Jude appearing on mugs and posters. Here's what the great Bible scholar Raymond Brown writes about the book: "We owe Jude a reverence as a book of Sacred Scripture, but its applicability to ordinary life remains a formidable difficulty." Frankly, there are parts of Jude where you wonder, "what is Jude even talking about?"

So why am I preaching on Jude? Because it's in the Bible. The Holy Spirit saw fit to put this hard, strange book in the Bible for our edification. I am a minister of the Word. I am charged with preaching, as they sometimes say, the whole counsel of God. That means preaching on the positive and uplifting parts of scripture and preaching on the parts that make you wince. Here's how we will approach things this morning. There will be two halves to this sermon. Part one: What is Jude saying? In this section, we will get the background for some of Jude's strange references. We will just try to make sense of his words. This section will happen during the Bible reading. The first half of this sermon will be us reading scripture and then me stopping to explain some of the difficult parts. Part two: What is Jude's word for us? What is he trying to teach the church, what is Holy Spirit saying to us through this difficult book?

Read Jude 1-2. So far that's a pretty standard introduction. Notice that Jude starts positively. We're called and kept. He blesses them with mercy, peace and love.

Read Jude 3-4. There's the reason for Jude's letter. False teachers from the outside who are corrupting the true faith. Jude doesn't want these false teachers to push believers off the track and into destructive paths. Now, to show the danger is real, he gives three examples from history of times when believers were led astray.

Read Jude 5-7. Here's a place where we need to stop. We know about example one, the disobedience of the Israelites, we know about example three, the lust and violence of Sodom. But what is Jude talking about in example two? Who are these angels who did not keep their proper place, whom God is now keeping in darkness? If you were up on your apocalyptic Jewish literature you would know the backstory. It's not a Biblical reference; it comes from an extra-biblical Jewish text called Enoch. Enoch tells the story of a group of angels who gaze down from heaven and behold the daughters of earth and find them beautiful. "And when the angels, the sons of heaven beheld them, they become enamored of them and saying to each other, 'Come let us select for ourselves wives from the progeny of men and let us beget their children.'" So it's angels who fall, who are led off track because they follow their inner desire instead of God's way.

Read Jude 8. I'm afraid we need to stop again. What is Jude talking about when he says that these false teachers heap abuse on heavenly beings? A lot of debate here. I think it's possible that these angels slander heavenly beings by rejecting the law of God. In Jewish thinking the law was given by God but mediated – delivered to humans – by angels. This is a belief that shows up in the New Testament. In Acts 7 when Stephen makes his speech before the Sanhedrin, he says to the Jewish Leaders, “you are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.” In Galatians 3:19 Paul says, the law was ordained through angels by a mediator. And in Hebrews 2 the law is referred to as ‘the message declared through angels.’ It's pretty clear that these false teachers reject the law. They follow their own impulses, their own dreams. They use the grace of God as a license for immorality. They don't seem to think the law has any hold on him. So, most likely, they heap abuse on celestial beings in their role as lawgivers. “Those law-giving angels are worthless! We are not bound by their law; we are people of grace! Sin has no hold on us!”

Read Jude 9-10. Okay raise your hand if you understand everything in those verses. We need to stop again. The Archangel Michael disputing with the devil over the body of Moses?! I don't remember that one from Sunday school. Did I miss something? No, you didn't miss anything. The story isn't in the Bible. Once again, Jude refers to a story from Jewish extra-biblical literature. This time from a work called the Assumption of Moses. We don't even have a modern copy of this writing – only fragments. But it seems that there was a story in Judaism that when Moses died, the devil came to claim Moses' body, saying that Moses didn't deserve eternal life because he was a murderer. Remember, he killed that Egyptian overseer before he fled to Midian. But the Archangel Michael came and contended with the devil and won Moses' body back. Jude is saying that even when Michael contended with the devil he did not heap abuse on him. He was more respectful than the false teachers. The most he would say is ‘the Lord rebuke you!’ because you should always be respectful of celestial beings, even fallen ones. By contrast, these false teachers have no impulse control. They slander freely.

Read Jude 11-25. Now that we've got a better sense of what Jude actually means we are ready for our second point, our second question. What's is Jude's message for the church? It all centers around an important spiritual question: what do we do with our persistent sin? I've been saved and baptized. I belong to Jesus. But I still sin. What do I do with that? That's not just a church question; it's a question all humans face at some level. All of us know what it's like to be frustrated with ourselves. Why do I do the things I do?! Why am I struggling with the same failures and temptations? What's the matter with me!?! Unless they are sociopathic, all human beings struggle with their sins and failures and the guilt and shame that results from those sins and failures. The question ‘what do I do with my sin and guilt, and what do we as a community do with sin and guilt’ is a basic Christian question, and Jude challenges the false teachers about their answer to that question.

When you read the New Testament there are two ways to go wrong in answering that question, two ways for the community to go wrong in the way it treats persistent sin. Sometimes Christians choose the way of license. Or, to use the old fashioned King James word, licentiousness. Sometimes people deal with their sin by minimizing it. In this view, sin is not the problem. Guilt and shame are the problems. It's not that the things you do are actually wrong, it's that you beat yourself and act as if they are wrong. Say you get drunk, so drunk that you pass out on your own front lawn. All your neighbors see you sprawled drunk on the grass. You wake up and you feel guilty for getting drunk and you feel ashamed that all your neighbors saw you. In this view where grace gives you license to sin, the problem isn't that you got drunk, the problem

is really that you feel bad about it. Jesus has forgiven your sins! So what if you had a good time with your friends and got a little crazy! It doesn't change who you are deep down. If people out there look down on you for your choices, that's their problem! You are free in Christ! Don't waste your energy on guilt and shame those are negative emotions. Stick to the positive. Live by grace. If people are judgmental, get them out of your life and find people who affirm you.

Read Jude closely, and it's pretty clear that the false teachers are spreading some version of this idea. Verse 4, 'they pervert the grace of God into a license for immorality.' Verse 16, 'they simply follow their own evil desires.' If it feels good they do it. Jude isn't the only place where the New Testament speaks against the danger of license. In 1 Corinthians 6, you can see that the Corinthian church clearly had a problem with this. In Romans, Paul rebukes people who say, "Let us go on sinning that grace may increase." He says people with this attitude are justly condemned.

There is no question we sometimes overdo guilt and shame. There are times when we are too hard on ourselves and others and give out guilt people don't deserve. There is no question that Jesus died to set us free from this sort of toxic guilt and shame. But there are times where guilt and shame are appropriate. After what Larry Nassar did, he should feel both guilt and shame. That's obvious right? When I look back on my youth and think of the racist and sexist jokes that I tolerated, and sometimes told, I feel both guilt and shame. And that feeling is not the problem. Those jokes were the problem. My sin was the problem. I can't sweep this aside by saying "well everyone did it and it's not a big deal." Those feelings of sin and shame are pointing towards a real issue. A heart not fully surrendered to my Lord. Jude is sharp in this letter and that's because he doesn't want the church to be a community that lets sin slide. Sin brings hurt. Sin brings injustice and oppression. Sin destroys relationships and families. Sin brings both physical and spiritual death. He can't stand by while people use the cross of Jesus and the grace of Jesus as a justification to sin.

Sometimes the church falls into the extreme of license. But sometimes it deals with sin by falling into the opposite error: Legalism. One extreme is license. The other extreme is legalism. Some communities dealt with sin by becoming hyper vigilant. When a church community strays into legalism, the way you deal with the problem of sin is making sure everyone in the community follows all the rules. When a community strays into legalism, there's a rule for every situation and everyone walks around making sure that everyone is keeping those rules. When a church strays into legalism there's no grace, no forbearance, no patience. Instead, something like a moral 'cancel culture' is in place. Everyone's watching each other to make sure they toe the line. There's a lot of nitpicking and accusation. Lots of outrage.

The New Testament warns against this way of dealing with sin too. Paul is constantly fighting legalism. That's his main concern in the book of Galatians. The Galatians are going overboard on the rules, insisting that Christians keep every one of the Old Testament laws. Paul rebukes them. 'Guys,' he says with frustration, 'if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing. Grace people! We need grace! It's about faith in Jesus.'

Some of us may have experienced some legalism growing up. I remember talking to some older ministers who told me stories about how elders from the church came to visit a pastor because his wife had been seen wearing shorts around town. Had she no shame?

So if license and legalism are both bad options, how do we as a community deal with our sin? What does a healthy community address sin? Maybe a little like the community Jude suggests. "But you dear friends, keep yourself in God's love by building yourself up in the most

holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit. As you wait for the mercy of the Lord to bring you eternal life.”

“As you wait for the mercy of the Lord.” Despite its harsh tone, the mercy of Jesus is at the center of this letter. When he begins the letter, what does Jude wish for the community? “Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.” Let mercy peace and love overflow in your community. And when Jesus returns what does Jude say Jesus will bring? Mercy. (v 21) And what do you show to people who doubt? Mercy. (v.22) And what do you show to your fellow church members struggling with sin? Mercy mixed with fear. (v 23)

In this community, we don’t deal with sin by trying to nag each other into righteousness. Nor do we deal with sin by ignoring it. We hate sin! It ruins everything. In the church we deal with sin by bringing it to the cross and saying, “Lord, I can’t ignore these sins. I hate them. But I can’t get rid of them. No matter how hard I try, I cannot clean up this mess. So Lord Jesus I ask for your mercy. Please, please, please forgive me, and please wash me and make me the person you mean me to be.” And Jesus forgives us and he washes us. Day after day, morning by morning, he shows us mercy.

So yes, Jude is a book that makes you wince. Yes, Jude is a book that is really strong against sin, but condemnation and judgement is not at its center. The mercy of Jesus is at its center. His mercy that is new every morning. So let me finish where Jude finishes, with his great doxology which shows us where our hope lies. “To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.”

© Rev. Peter Jonker