

KEEP ON, KEEPING ON

NEW YEAR MESSAGE



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Jude 1-25
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Jude 1-25

Keep on, keeping on! My friend and mentor, Barry Asmus, wrote those words in the card he gave to me when I graduated from high school. That was 1979. I don't know why, but those words have stayed with me all these years. The phrase itself dates back several decades, but it was the first time I had heard it. Keep on, keeping on. I liked the sound of that. My graduation from high school ended a period in my life that began with great loss and finished with an enormous sense of hope. God was indeed faithful and would continue to be; but what about me? Would I keep on, keeping on?

Those words again come to mind as I read the book of Jude, which we'll look at this morning before returning to Acts next week. As far as I can tell, June 1968 was the first and only time the book of Jude has been preached at PBC. Ray Stedman was preaching single messages for every book in the Bible on Sunday evenings.

Jude doesn't get preached very often. The author is obscure. The book is tucked in the back of the New Testament between more prominent letters and Revelation. Its brevity makes it seem less significant. Furthermore, once you dive into it, you discover that Jude appears to treat sources outside the Bible as authoritative. Most of us have our hands full studying the Bible, let alone sorting out where 1 Enoch or the Assumption of Moses fit in the theological landscape.

Lastly, Jude doesn't mince words. The short letter speaks of God's judgment in rather unambiguous terms. That's a subject many of us would just as soon avoid in this day and age.

But Jude is part of God's Word. Like all Scripture, it is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. Let's see how God might speak to us this morning through this short letter.

Jude 1-2:

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ: 2 May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you.

Jude (or Judas) was a common name in first century Palestine. Predictably, there are several opinions about who is actually writing. But I don't think there is any good reason to reject the traditional view. He is one of the brothers of Jesus mentioned in Mark 6:3. Further, Michael Green says that "the unadorned reference to James" can refer to one man and one man only: the more prominent brother of Jesus and the leader of the early church in Jerusalem.¹ Green also says that we can learn a lot about someone by what they say about themselves. Here, Jude is unwilling to claim any special status as the Lord's brother. And he has no problem being in the shadow of James. He begins humbly, and on equal footing, as a fellow servant of Jesus Christ. Humility is always a good place to start.

Likewise, there are multiple opinions about who the recipients of this letter were. We don't have time to explore all the options this morning. Consider that homework. They are only identified by the first of Jude's triads: called, beloved, kept.

And so are we. In the original text, "called" is actually last. The literal reading is, "to those who, having been loved by God the Father, having been kept for Jesus Christ, are called." We often read too quickly through the greeting in a New Testament letter. But it is just as important as the body and conclusion.

Consider what it means to be loved by God. Think of the baptism of Jesus, when the Spirit descended and proclaimed, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Unbelievably, he says the same about us. He is pleased with us! The late Henri Nouwen was asked by his close friend (an unbeliever) to write a book about the spiritual life for him and his friends. Nouwen searched for one special word that they could remember if they remembered nothing else. It was this: "Beloved."² The PBC High School Ministry is called "Jedidiah" for the same reason. Jedidiah means "loved by God." That's what we want all our young people to know beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Jude also says, "kept for Jesus Christ." This is what Jesus prays for in John 17. He prays that all who have been given to him would be kept in the Father's name. He prays that, by the Spirit, they would be united with the Father and the Son (John 17:11).

Having been loved, having been kept, we are called. As William Barclay says, we are summoned to a great responsibility, the service of our Lord. We are summoned as if to a feast, one day the marriage supper of the Lamb. We are summoned to give an account of ourselves, at the judgment seat of Christ.³ This great calling is what is in danger as Jude writes. This is why the greeting concludes with a prayer for mercy, peace, and love. As we shall see, we need these daily to fulfill our calling.

Jude 3-4:

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. 4 For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Jude wants to write a longer theological treatise, but there is a more urgent matter at hand: the infiltration of false teachers. It is imperative that the teachings handed down from the apostles be defended at all costs.

This is something I also appreciate about Jude. He has some idea about what he should be doing to further the Gospel. Maybe he's read Romans or Hebrews already and thinks he should write something similar. But instead, the Lord presses upon him a more urgent need, one that perhaps destined Jude for obscurity in the clean pages of our Bibles. Faithfully and willingly, he responds to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Verse 3 can teach us the same lesson. We pursue God's call for our lives but are willing to be re-directed by the Spirit at any time.

Who are these false teachers? As Paul Taylor mentioned a few weeks ago, it was common in the days of the early church for teachers to travel from house-church to house-church preaching and prophesying. As we can imagine, not all of these teachers were authentic representatives of the Gospel. Here they are basically saying that it doesn't matter how followers of Jesus live.

There is always a danger with the Gospel of grace. At the one extreme, we can't believe that we have nothing to add to our salvation. And so we respond with legalism. At the other, the one Jude is confronting, we twist its message and rationalize our old, sinful lifestyles. That is what Jude means when he says the false teachers deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. There's no indication of explicit false

doctrine here such as a denial of the Second Coming in 2 Peter. Instead, they are denying the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. They are denying their calling to be set apart as God's holy people.

And so Jude gives the first of two exhortations to his readers: contend for the faith. Or as we might say this morning, keep on, keeping on. The faith Jude is talking about is the truth about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as taught by his apostles. These teachings would later be canonized as the New Testament. Combined with the Old Testament (or Hebrew Scriptures), these constitute God's written revelation to mankind. They are comprehensive and complete.

What exactly are the false teachers advocating? Jude says they "pervert the grace of our God into sensuality". The word here translated "sensuality" refers to sensual indulgence, especially sexual immorality. Jesus uses the same word in Mark 7:22 where he explains that it is all the evil things that come out of our hearts that defile us, not the foods we put into our stomachs.

At its core, what the false teachers advocate is really no different from what the serpent says in Genesis 3: "Did God actually say...?" Their message is, "Hey, you're saved, live it up! There aren't any more constraints. Judge not lest ye be judged. Grace means never having to say you're sorry."

Before going further, let me re-emphasize that indeed we add nothing to our salvation. We are declared righteous before the Father based solely on the work of his Son on our behalf. We cannot earn his favor; it is granted to us by faith alone. This is God's grace.

But God doesn't save us to wallow in our sins. As we are reminded by the words inscribed at the front of our church, we are not our own, we are bought with a price. By faith we put off the old self and put on the new. By faith we recognize that we are a royal priesthood, set apart for God's own possession. By faith we present our bodies as living and holy sacrifices. By faith we are not to be conformed to this world but instead transformed by the Spirit.

I hope that's what you will always hear from this platform and the ministries surrounding this church. But we would be naïve if we think we are immune from this false doctrine of "license", which goes by the theological term "antinomianism". Perhaps today it's not as blatant as what Jude is addressing. But our libertine culture presses in on us from every side. And a myriad of traveling preachers can be downloaded at 100Mbps. If you don't like to hear "deny (yourself) and take up your cross" (Matthew 16:24) or "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality"

(1 Thessalonians 4:3), you don't have too far to go to hear something else. Sadly, the American church too often syncs with our culture's "self" absorption. And that voice alternately shouts and whispers: "Did God really say...?"

There's more to say about our current situation but let's go a little further in our text. Jude drives home his point with three well-known stories from the Old Testament. These episodes stand as emphatic and unmistakable warnings about the consequences of abusing God's grace.

Jude 5-7:

Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved[a] a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. 6 And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day— 7 just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

Verse 5 reveals a helpful tip from Jude. Sometimes, when you need to correct someone, it's better to "remind" than "teach". Jude's readers already know these stories. But they need to be reminded of their serious implications; and so do we. We don't have time to explore each one in depth. But here is a brief summary.

First, not every Israelite saved out of Egypt entered into the Promised Land. Jude simply says those who did not believe were destroyed. Again, he's brief because they already know the story. Paul gives us a more detailed explanation addressing the church in Corinth about a similar heresy. In 1 Corinthians 10 he warns them not to repeat Israel's sins. The Israelites had all crossed the Red Sea and eaten heavenly manna, Old Testament types of baptism and The Lord's Supper. These events were to mark them as God's people. Yet for most of them, idolatry, sexual immorality, and rejection of God's authority culminated in unbelief. Ten of the twelve spies gave a bad report and that was enough for the Israelites. Instead of trusting the Lord, they wanted to return to Egypt, the Old Testament type for a Christian's life before Christ. And so their bodies were strewn over the wilderness. Hebrews 3:19 says finally "they were not able to enter because of unbelief."

Second, Jude reminds us that not even angels can escape judgment. Like the children of Israel, they enjoyed a privileged position of knowledge. Yet this knowledge was of no use to those who succumbed to pride and lust. The reference here

is probably to Genesis 6, as interpreted in 1 Enoch. Not content as angels, these rebellious beings sought to procreate with the daughters of men. No longer keeping their proper place, they are now kept by chains in darkness awaiting the final judgment.

Third is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the most graphic example of judgment in the Old Testament and one used throughout the Scriptures. The people of these cities, like the fallen angels, abandoned the natural order and indulged in gross immorality. Their lust drove them to demand sex with Lot's angelic visitors who they thought were men (see Genesis 19). The next day, God's judgment rained down from heaven and consumed them in fire. Those cities were never rebuilt.

In the next verses Jude links the false teachers to these infamous examples.

Jude 8-10:

Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones. 9 But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you." 10 But these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively.

Judgment falls in the wilderness, on angels, on Sodom and Gomorrah. So too will it fall on these false teachers. Jude says they have bad input: their own dreams; garbage in, garbage out. Now the Lord does sometimes speak to his people through dreams. We see that for example in Matthew (1:13, 19) and in Acts (2:17, 16:9, 18:9). But Deuteronomy 13 speaks of those whose dreams are not from God (Deuteronomy 13:1-5). Their signs or wonders may even come true. But ultimately they lead people to serve false gods (Deuteronomy 13:2). This is why Peter Davids says "all prophetic revelation needs testing on the basis of the whole teaching of Scripture so that the true may be separated from the false." ⁴

Those who make up their own truth head down a dangerous road. They pollute their own bodies, reject authority, and "blaspheme the glorious ones". The "glorious ones" probably refers to good angels, who were recognized in the first century as the mediators of the law. The church fathers tell us that Jude verse 9 is a reference to a section in the Assumption of Moses that is now lost to us. Because Moses was a murderer, the devil laid claim his body, as if to say, this body will never be resurrected.

But notice that not even an archangel speaks on his own authority. Instead, he quotes Zechariah 3:2, simply saying, “The Lord rebuke you.” Michael knows that it is the Lord God who passes judgment. He need make no other argument. Even Jesus in the wilderness does not respond to Satan’s temptation by his own authority. He corrects the devil’s twisted use of Scripture with its proper exposition (Matthew 4:1-11). Later, Peter writes that when Jesus was reviled and beaten, “He uttered no threats but kept entrusting himself to him who judges righteously...” (1 Peter 2:23). Not so these false teachers. They are immoral, rebellious and arrogant.

This is pretty serious stuff for the first day of the year. I can imagine many a preacher looking over these verses and saying, “maybe next week.”

Are these warnings meant for us? How should we respond? It’s clear to me we would be foolish not to take them seriously. We’re just as capable of abusing God’s grace as those in the first century or any since then.

What does preaching “license” look like today? Again, to my mind, there are just more variations on “Did God really say...?” Some preach as if God hasn’t said much of anything, as if there are no moral demands whatsoever on the followers of Jesus. These are the teachers who make their arguments without any reference at all to God’s Word. Others (and we all must be careful about this) like to pick and choose their way through the Bible, which lets them make it say anything they want it to. When God’s Word in its totality is lost as an anchor, you eventually hear something like this: “I can’t imagine a God who would allow this, or require that, or prohibit this...” Consumerism triumphs even from the pulpit because, after all, “the customer is always right.” C.S. Lewis famously wrote in *The Problem of Pain*.

“... We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven- a senile benevolence who, as they say, liked to see young people enjoying themselves’, and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, ‘a good time was had by all.’”⁵

I’m not saying that we will never disagree about what the Bible says or how it should be interpreted or applied. We often do, especially with respect to many secondary issues. But the foundation of our arguments must always be God’s Word, illumined by his Spirit and studied faithfully, prayerfully, and in community with the body of Christ.

In contrast to those in the warning stories, we are not to abandon our place as God’s redeemed image-bearers. When we do, we become unable to appraise spiritual things (verse 10 and also 1 Corinthians 2:14). When we do, we exchange the truth for a lie and are given over to idolatry. When we do, we cease to be truly human. Our focus becomes limited to material lust and it overpowers us. Like the boys on Pleasure Island in *Pinocchio*, we are transformed into unthinking beasts. As Paul says in Romans 6:2, “By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?”

To this point, I’ve got a mental image of Jude backing up the truck. One of those back-up beepers is beeping. Now he empties his load.

Jude 11-16:

Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam’s error and perished in Korah’s rebellion. 12 These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; 13 wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.

14 It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, 15 to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him.” 16 These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires; they are loud-mouthed boasters, showing favoritism to gain advantage.

Verse 11 includes another Old Testament triad that reverberates in the minds of Jude’s readers. He links the false teachers to each one of these notorious men. Again, there’s not time this morning to explore each story in depth. I can only attempt the briefest of summaries. Hopefully, your interest will be peaked to pursue them further.

Most of us know the story of Cain, who murdered his brother Abel because the Lord favored Abel's offering but not his. But what does it mean to "walk in the way of Cain?" By the first century, he was known not just for murder but for a lifestyle of complete selfishness. Barclay says, "To the Hebrew thinkers, Cain was the cynical, materialistic unbeliever who believed neither in God nor in the moral order of the world and who, therefore, did exactly as he liked." ⁶ According to Josephus, Cain corrupted the race of men becoming "their instructor in wicked practices." ⁷

What about Balaam? He's most famous for his ride on a rather articulate donkey. He is an enigma; his story is fascinating and requires careful reading. We meet him in Numbers 22 where he is a prophet for hire. Later, unable to curse Israel directly, he subverts indirectly. Through his influence (Numbers 31:16), Israel was led into immorality and idolatry with the daughters of Moab (Numbers 25:1-3).

We also meet Korah in Numbers (Numbers 16). His sin was leading a rebellion against God's divinely appointed leadership of Moses and Aaron. ⁸ He went so far as to invent his own way of worshipping God. His fate is public and graphic: the ground opened up and swallowed him and his family. Fire then consumed the 250 men who practiced his novel form of worship (Numbers 16:31-35).

The common thread here is teaching others to sin. This is what the false teachers are doing. In verses 12 and 13 we are given a tsunami of similes to describe them. They shipwreck the unwary and feed only themselves. They are unable to impart life; themselves dead and fruitless. They are unstable; like wandering stars, they are worthless guides for navigating life. Their ultimate fate is certain. Jude quotes from 1 Enoch in verses 14 and 15 to indicate the judgment that awaits them. Verse 16 continues to describe their character in no uncertain terms: grumblers, malcontents, slaves to their own desires, boasters who seek the favor of men rather than of God.

Wow! You can see why James says, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1).

As I said earlier, there are many voices today on the evangelical landscape. To whom do you listen? How well do you know them? What is the content of their character? Are they more concerned with building their own brand than feeding their flocks? Are they arrogant? Who confronts them when they are wrong? Do they listen? Do they modify the message to increase their audience? Have they abandoned the message altogether? Are they teaching others to sin?

There was a time when this church had a higher profile in certain circles than it does today. But given the landscape of our time, I'm thankful for a lower profile. The temptations of celebrity and fame can be difficult to resist. The Lord may from time to time extend our sphere of influence, but let him do that with humble and meek servants led by his Spirit and grounded in his Word. And of course, many of today's "traveling preachers" are helpful and faithful to God's Word. But we must always listen with discerning ears.

Jude has delivered his load about the false teachers. He now returns to his readers. Look at verses 17 to 23 for his second exhortation to keep on, keeping on.

Jude 17-23:

But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. 18 They said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions." 19 It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. 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. 22 And have mercy on those who doubt; 23 save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.

The second exhortation is in verse 21: "keep yourselves in the love of God". That is the surprising way to correct the heresy of license. Jude doesn't give a lot of instruction about how to deal with the false teachers. He merely reminds us that their presence is inevitable. It's important that they can be identified and their impact understood. But we are to choose to live our lives in the power of the Holy Spirit. We make this choice each and every day. I think Scott Grant put it well a couple weeks ago when he taught about Mary, the Lord's mother. Her response to an angel from the Lord was one of awe, respect, and humility. How did Mary respond? "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

That is how we keep ourselves in the love of God. We start each day with an understanding that we are his servants. He directs our steps. We pray in the Holy Spirit, setting aside our own agendas. We recognize that his presence in our lives enables us to walk by faith. We build ourselves up in our faith with regular study of God's Word and fellowship with his people. And we wait for Christ's mercy, daily and ultimately. Let's face it. The old self lingers. We do sin and will continue

to until the very end. But we never adopt the error of the false teachers. Sin remains sin and we call it what it is. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Because mercy has been extended to us, we continue to show mercy to others. Jude describes three kinds of people in need of mercy. These verses are worthy of a separate sermon altogether.

The first are those who doubt. Doubting is common to all of us. Life is hard and there is so much we don’t understand. The message to live “unconstrained”, to doubt what God has said, can sound like a siren’s call. “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. . .” But it is important that our doubts be shared while, as Michael Green says, we are still open to being persuaded back to the truth.⁹ We need to help one another with our doubts and not avoid them.

Second are those who must be snatched from the fire. Doubt has become error and they’ve turned the wrong way on a busy one-way street. There’s no time for subtlety. “Wrong Way!” is the most loving thing we can say. Yet we do so with humility, knowing that each one of us has been plucked from the fire by God’s grace (see Zechariah 3:2).

Third are those in need of rescue but who have wandered so far into the fire that they stand a very good chance of dragging us in with them. We must not underestimate the deceitfulness of sin. We show mercy with fear. “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.” (1 Corinthians 10:12). The end of verse 23 is the basis for our saying “love the sinner but hate the sin.” Many today find this phrase hopelessly trite, but it remains true nonetheless. Barclay says “Even to the worst heretics, even to those most far gone in error and to those whose beliefs are most dangerous, Christians have a binding duty not to destroy but to save.”¹⁰ Judgment, as we have seen, belongs to God. We are to keep ourselves in his love.

It’s been almost 38 years since Barry gave me that graduation card. Nearing the age of 56, I’m well past half-way. I’m on the downside. Like many of you, I move slower during the day and get up more often at night. Yet that phrase intrigues me now as much as it did then. Where do my priorities lie? Will I contend for the faith? Will I keep myself in the love of God? Will I keep on keeping on? What about you?

As if knowing how difficult life can be, Jude concludes his short letter with perhaps the greatest doxology in all of Scripture. It is certainly my favorite. His exhortations remind us of our responsibilities, our calling. But his conclusion reassures us concerning the One who ultimately keeps us. He who began a good work in us will indeed complete it.

Jude 24-25:

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, 25 to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

Endnotes

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 - ⁶ Barclay, 216.
 - ⁷ Green, 186.
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