

SERIES: A New Testament Postcard: The Acts of the Apostates

SERMON: **Defending the Faith**

SCRIPTURE: Jude 1-4

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This morning we start a new four week study of one of the shortest, more obscure books of the New Testament, written by one of the more obscure disciples—Jude. It's so short that it has sometimes been called a postcard instead of a letter. But some very significant things come in small packages, and this is one of them.

You're all familiar with the NT book called *The Acts of the Apostles*. Well, Jude has been called *The Acts of the Apostates*. An apostate is someone who was knowledgeable about Christianity but has abandoned the faith. The book talks about such people and the tragedy that occurs when unbelief and heresy get a foothold in the church. Jude reveals to us that the patterns of apostasy were evident in the earliest days of the church and predicts they will continue right up to the time of the return of Jesus Christ.

Frankly, I don't know anything that is more relevant for us to study at this time in our nation's history. The Christian faith is under assault as we have never seen it before. The institution of marriage is under assault, as is the sanctity of human life, as is any mention of God in the public sector.

But before jumping into the theme of this book, I want us to take just a few minutes to discuss the background of Jude.

Background of the Book of Jude

There is a very strong tradition in church history that the book of Jude was written by a half-brother of Jesus. According to Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3, Mary and Joseph had at least four sons and an unknown number of daughters *after* Mary gave birth to Jesus and married Joseph. The four boys were named James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, none of whom believed in Jesus as the Messiah and Savior during His earthly ministry. But His death and resurrection had a profound impact on them, and they quickly became ardent followers of His teaching. In fact, they were praying with the Eleven disciples in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost, just weeks after the resurrection, according to Acts 1:14.

James became the best-known of the four brothers, authoring the Book of James and becoming the leader of the church at Jerusalem. Judas is known only by his authorship of this brief letter. He apparently adopted a nickname, Jude, because his contemporary, Judas Iscariot, had sullied the name Judas for all time.

Now if I were a half-brother of Jesus writing a letter to the church, I think I would be tempted to note that fact in introducing the letter; it would make a great PR blurb on the book jacket. But

Jude doesn't mention his blood relationship with Jesus, only his spiritual relationship. He chooses instead to call himself "a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James." I think this is evidence of his humility. It may also indicate that he has learned a lesson from Jesus, who made it clear that His real relatives were those who followed His teaching, not those who claimed a blood relationship.

The date of the book of Jude is unknown but it was probably written about a generation after the Resurrection of Christ and the founding of the Church. Its purpose was to warn the church (even at this early date), about the presence of false teachers and apostates in their midst. But before Jude discusses this problem, he identifies his audience. Who are they? Or let's ask the question in the first person, since we are also his listeners:

Who are we?

I need a volunteer. _____, will you come up and help me. Here's a mic. You seem to be kind of a quiet guy, so a number of our people may not know you. I want you to tell our people who you are.

I'm _____.

No, that's just your name. Who are you?

Well, I'm _____.

No, that's your job title. Who are you?

Well, I'm a graduate of _____.

No, that's where you went to school! Who are you?

I'm a husband and a father.

That's better, _____. That tells us something really significant about you, but it still only describes your family status. I want to know who you are *really*.

You mean, like "I'm a sinner saved by grace?"

Yes, but I think you can do even better than that. Is your basic identity "sinner," even "*saved sinner*"? I don't think so.

How about, "I'm _____ and I'm a child of God"?

There, you nailed it!

Now friends, _____ and I were role playing. He's known for a long time who he is. But do you know who *you* are? People who attend Alcoholics Anonymous are taught to introduce themselves this way, "Hello, I'm Jim and I'm an alcoholic." I know why they do that—to teach brutal honesty—but I have never agreed with it. I think it would be far better for an alcoholic, at least one who is a believer, to say, "Hello, I'm Jim, I'm a child of God, but I have a problem with alcohol that I cannot conquer on my own."

There's a fundamental difference between those two introductions. The first sees one's basic identity is "alcoholic." The second sees it as "child of God." Here's the point: No one can consistently behave in a manner that is inconsistent with the way he perceives himself. If your basic self-identity is "sinner," even "*saved* sinner," then guess what you're going to do? After all, sinners sin. You're half-way defeated already. But if your basic identity is child of God, saint, holy one, what do *they* do?

Let me ask you a simple question. Which book of the New Testament is addressed to the "sinners at Corinth?" Or the "losers at Philippi?" Or the "apathetic believers of Ephesus?" Not one. They are consistently addressed to the saints and the chosen ones in those locations.

Now what does all this have to do with the book of Jude? Well, look at verse 1: "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James, To those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ." Isn't that interesting? He doesn't mention their names, their social status, or their jobs, nor does he call them "sinners saved by grace" (though they certainly are that). Rather he uses three wonderful verbs to communicate their basic identity: called, loved, kept.

Called. The word "call" has several meanings in Scripture. It sometimes refers to the general invitation that God extends to every person to receive forgiveness and to begin a personal relationship with Him. For example, consider Jesus' invitation in Matthew 11:28: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

Or how about John 7:37, 38: "On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.'" Or Revelation 22:17: "Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life."

This general invitation is sometimes rejected. Some say to God, "No thanks." But those who respond positively to the Gospel discover that God has a second call, what we might refer to as a specific invitation that results in salvation. Theologians sometimes refer to these two calls as the universal call and the effectual call. Jesus distinguished these two calls in Matthew 22:14 when He said, "Many are invited (or called), but few are chosen."

Jude is writing to those of us who have heard the general call *and* have experienced the specific call to salvation. How about you? If you have been here at First Free for anytime at all, you have

heard the truth of the Gospel. You have been challenged to put your faith in Jesus Christ. Have you responded? Have you confessed your sins and submitted to the Lordship of Jesus?

Loved by God the Father. No other term describes God's relationship with His people better than the term "love." Do you know how much God loves you? He loves you every bit as much as He loves His one and only Son Jesus. Listen to these words Jesus Himself spoke describing all believers in his high priestly prayer in John 17:23: "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them *even as* you have loved me." Do you have any doubt that God loves His one and only Son? Then you should have no doubt that God loves you, too.

Kept by Jesus Christ. The term "kept" means "to watch or stand guard over." Jesus takes His responsibility to keep and protect us very seriously. He said in John 10:28, 29: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand." I'd say that makes us pretty safe.

How does Jesus keep us? Primarily by His constant intercession. Hebrews 7:25: "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them." The book of Revelation tells us that Satan is constantly accusing us before the Father; but Jesus is constantly interceding, saying, "I died for that sin. I have forgiven that offense."

In verse 2 Jude goes on to tell us what we have:

What do we have?

"Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance." All three of these gifts are desperately needed by Christians living in an atmosphere of spiritual confusion and false teaching.

Mercy is God's favor to those who have forfeited it and who therefore stand under a sentence of condemnation. It's a little different from grace. You don't hear condemned men pleading for grace—they plead for mercy. They know their only hope is to cast themselves on the mercy of the Judge. And our only hope as condemned sinners is the mercy of almighty God.

Peace is a much talked about but little realized commodity. Furthermore, internal peace is even less often experienced than national peace or peace between neighbors. It is a gift God gives us when we seek Him.

Love is that without which no one can live in a healthy manner. It is absolutely essential to be loved, and if people don't get it in healthy places they will inevitably go looking in unhealthy places. We are showered with love by God, most notably through the sacrifice of His Son for our sins.

Now so far we have tried to answer two questions: Who are we? And what do we have? A third question Jude now answers is this:

What are we supposed to do?

Jude has a very specific purpose in writing to us, but it's not the purpose he started with. Notice in verse 3: "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." Jude wanted to write a book on soteriology. That's a big fancy theological term for the Bible's teaching on the subject of salvation. Why do we need to be saved, who is saved, how is a person saved, what are they saved for, etc.? I would love to be able to read Jude's unfinished book on salvation—I'll bet it would have been longer than one chapter! I wonder what kind of insight and discernment he may have offered in addition to Paul's *magnum opus* on the same subject known as the Book of Romans.

But as he was getting excited about this writing project, Jude's spirit was troubled by an even greater need in the church. If I can pursue a brief rabbit trail, I find it enlightening that he doesn't say, "The Lord told me to change my topics." That's the way a lot of Christians talk today. I call it "God talk." They think they have to trump all their decisions by claiming God told them.

Jude is too humble, or honest to say that. He simply says, "I *felt* I had to write." Where did those feelings come from? I am fairly certain they came from the Holy Spirit, but Jude is content to take personal responsibility for his decision. That's a wise course of action. I would like to hear a lot more Christians say, "I had a strong impression that I should do such-and-such," instead of, "The Lord told me this is what I should be doing."

Well, what *is* Jude's new direction? To urge his fellow-believers to . . .

Contend for the Faith. Defend it. Join the battle. Recognize the dangerous times. Take responsibility. For what? To contend. My impression is that a fair number of believers are naturally inclined to contend. They readily join all kinds of causes—political, social, economic, and religious causes. They get quite exercised about prayer in the schools or the teaching of evolution or the election of conservative judges or excessive taxes. There's nothing wrong with contending for these things; I myself would have gone to the tea party on April 15 if I could have gotten away.

But what Jude primarily wants us to contend for is the Faith. Now please understand that he's not just talking about contending for *faith*, that is, i.e. for the right to religious freedom. As important as that is, religious freedom as often leads people into error as it does into truth. Rather he is talking about contending for a very specific faith, "*the* faith." And then he defines the faith as that which was "once for all entrusted to the saints."

That very concept is foreign to modern thinking, and absolutely ludicrous to *postmodern* thinking. The mere idea that a body of truth might be written in stone and remain absolute

throughout the centuries is so far from the minds of most people today that it is hardly discussible in polite company. A month ago Josh McDowell spoke at the Trinity Academy banquet, and he told us that his research indicates that 91% of the teens in our evangelical, Bible-believing churches (I'm not talking about pagan kids here!) don't believe in absolute truth. That is they don't believe there is anything that is true for everyone at all times.

But that's exactly what Jude claims. There is truth about God and man and the world and the future that was

not generated by human beings—it was delivered to them;
it was not delivered to the clergy but to the saints, i.e. ordinary believers;
it is not cultural but universal;
it is not temporary but final, once for all;
it is not just to be believed; it must be defended.

Josh Black and I just returned from the Gospel Coalition conference in Chicago. This is an organization formed to recapture the center of evangelicalism for the Gospel and for expository preaching. It was so encouraging to see over 3000 young pastors, seminarians and others focusing their entire attention for three days on the Faith once delivered to the saints. It gave me hope that the Church in the United States may be turning away from the apostasy that has captured so much of the religious scene.

On one of my recent trips I saw a large billboard with these words on it: "Make up your mind not to make up your mind." There was no sponsoring organization mentioned or any other identification—just those words. That, friends, is the epitome of 21st century postmodern thinking: "Make up your mind not to make up your mind." The Bible, on the other hand, tells us there are some things about which we should make up our minds, because they are settled for good. It's OK to make up your mind about who God is, who you are, how you can connect with God, and about what's coming after you die, because God spoke about those things once for all.

However, I think it extremely important to add at this point that this is not a call for dogmatism on every topic. I remember a businessman here in Wichita who was fond of acknowledging his own dogmatic personality by saying, "I may be wrong, but I'm never in doubt." That's not Christian; that's proud and obnoxious, though I suspect he said it in jest. Nor is this a call for intolerant and militant attitudes. There are times when we must contend but we are not to be contentious.

But avoid being contentious while we do it (2 Timothy 2:24). In 2 Timothy 2:23-25 Paul speaks to his young protégée and warns him,

"Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth."

Years ago I knew a seminary professor who had one of the most brilliant minds I've ever encountered. He was an ardent defender of the faith. He would debate any atheist at any time, and would invariably destroy him in the process. But that was the problem. Whenever he debated, the audience almost always sided with the unbeliever because they felt sorry for him. This professor was so contentious that while he won every battle he lost the war. Well, if defending the faith is a high priority and responsibility for those of us who are called, loved and kept, why?

Why are we supposed to do it?

He tells us in verse 4: "For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord."

Apostates have penetrated the church. Perhaps some of you saw an article in the Wichita Eagle on April 7, entitled *Apostles, not apostates: BYU paper's ungodly typo*. The article said,

Thousands of issues of Brigham Young University's student newspaper were pulled from newsstands because a front-page photo caption misidentified leaders of the Mormon church as apostates instead of apostles. . . The photo in The Daily Universe on Monday was of members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, a governing body of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, at the weekend general conference. The caption called the group the "Quorum of the Twelve Apostates." The mistake happened when a copy editor ran a computer spell check and apostate was suggested as the replacement for a misspelling of apostle.

Now that was an Freudian slip if I ever saw one! In my opinion the Mormon faith is indeed an abandonment of orthodox Christianity. But it is not the first or only group to do so.

By the way, the apostate differs from an ordinary pagan in that the apostate is knowledgeable about the faith and once practiced it at some level. He differs from a heretic in that the heretic is a true believer who is just screwed up in some specific aspect of his theology, while the apostate rejects the essential truths of the Faith.

Why are such people in the Church? The apostates Jude speaks of have secretly slipped in among the believers in the church. Satan, you know, doesn't place apostates on deserted islands. They are only effective when they have wormed their way into a Church, or a Seminary, or a denomination, or a parachurch group. Apostates never announce to a pulpit committee, "I'm an apostate and I'd like to lead this church into apostasy." Or, "I'm a false teacher and I'd like to propagate my false teaching in this seminary." They pretend to be believers until they get a following or obtain tenure, but they are actually Satanic counterfeits bent on destroying the work of God.

In wartime traitors are called the Fifth Column. Jude is in effect telling us there is a Fifth Column in the church, too, friends. It consists of those who make a pretense of belief; they go

through the motions; they use the traditional vocabulary and still practice the sacraments; but their hearts and minds are miles away from the truth.

A second fact Jude mentions about these dangerous apostates is that their condemnation was “written about long ago.”

They were predicted by the prophets. It’s not hard to find evidence of this. Just look a few verses ahead to Jude 14 and 15:

Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men: “See, the LORD is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones (angels) to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”

Nearly all of the OT prophets give some warning about false prophets and phony priests. I just mention Isaiah 8:19ff as one prediction of apostasy—the mediums and spiritists who draw some people away from God:

“When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.”

The written Word of God is the standard by which all teaching is to be judged.

They are dangerous in respect to their Character, their Conduct, and their Creed.

We are going to learn a lot more about these apostates in the next two weeks, but this morning we are simply introduced to three factors:

1. Character. “They are godless men.” Do you mean it, Pastor? Godless men in the church? You’d better believe it. Maybe they believe in God, but not the God of the Bible. They reject much of what He stands for and commands. Those of you who have come out of certain mainline denominations know what I mean. You have witnessed the ordination of practicing homosexuals. You have seen pastors divorce and remarry and continue in their ministries. You have heard church leaders say of another leader involved in an affair, “Judge not, lest you be judged.”

2. Conduct: Jude says they “change the grace of our God into a license for immorality.” Christian freedom was a beautiful thing to the early Christians, having come out of the rule-and-regulation mentality of Judaism. But there were those in the early church who used their freedom as an excuse for immoral behavior. The whole book of Galatians was written to counteract this tendency. Listen to Paul’s summary in 5:13: “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.” We see this happening in the church today as well.

3. Creed: They “deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.” A survey in *Redbook* magazine indicated that of the ministers in training represented in all the major seminaries,

56% rejected the virgin birth of Jesus Christ,
 71% denied there is life after death,
 54% denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus,
 and 98% denied the second Coming.ⁱ

And here is the really startling thing about this survey: It was taken in 1974! Thirty five years ago! Now if you think things have gotten better since then, you are sadly mistaken. They have actually radically declined.

Now allow me to summarize Jude's message this morning with some . . .

Principles to ponder:

1. The extent of apostasy in the church at large today, both in the pulpit and in the pew, is far greater than most Christians realize. If you grew up in a church committed to biblical authority, you may imagine that all Christian churches accept the same truths and worship the same Lord you do. Not quite! In mainline denomination after mainline denomination there has been a departure from the faith that would be startling to the average person in the pew if the full extent of it was known. There are some godly pastors and biblical churches in most of those denominations, but the amount of heresy and apostasy present, especially in the seminaries and denominational offices, would blow the minds of the faithful.

2. The current widespread denial of biblical truth is only a prelude to the final and terrible apostasy that will be evident when Jesus returns. In 1 Timothy 4:1, 2 we read that,

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith (and the Greek word there is apostasia) and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.

Paul also talks about the apostasy that will accompany the Anti-Christ.

Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come (i.e. the Day of the Lord) until the rebellion (Greek, apostasia) occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. (2 Thes. 2:3-4)

And in 2 Timothy 4:3 we read, "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around the a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear." We're there, friends. I don't know if these are the last times, but there's virtually nothing the Scriptures predict about those days that isn't present already.

3. Before we can become effective contenders for the faith, we must grasp our incredible position of favor and security in Christ. I believe we are essentially helpless as defenders of the faith unless and until we know we are called, loved and kept, until we recognize that we have been given mercy, peace and love in abundance! People who are insecure, marginally committed, and biblically illiterate are never going to be able to stand up to the onslaught of the evil one.

Friends, this is a call to the adults in our church, the wonderful group of teens, and even the children, to know who you are, know what you have, know what you are supposed to do, and know why you are supposed to do it. The time to defend the faith is now! If you have never committed yourself to the Faith, that time is now as well.

i. T. Wilson Litzenger, "Startling Trends in Our Generation", *Religion*, 1974, 172-3.