

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

SERMON: *How to Survive in the Last Days*

SCRIPTURE: Jude 17-25

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We come today to the end of a month-long study of one of the briefest books in the Bible. But however brief it is, I don't think any of us would now consider it inconsequential or light-weight. Jude has forced us to examine our own hearts as individuals and to ask hard questions about leadership in the Church.

I was particularly touched when one of our lay teachers told me he was deeply convicted by the responsibility he bears to teach God's Word accurately. He asked, in effect, "How do I know if I'm toying with heresy or apostasy? I certainly wouldn't do it on purpose, but what if I just wander off course?" I appreciate that attitude of humility. He's probably the last teacher I would be concerned about, largely because he's asking just such questions.

I suspect Jude was not what you would call a fun guy. Not the kind of apostle likely to be invited to speak at a fund-raising celebration or a church growth conference. He could be a real downer. But I will certainly stand up for him when it comes to both honesty and relevance. Jude tells it like it is. He speaks truth to power. And while he warns us that things are bad spiritually *even* in normal times, he informs us in our passage today that they will get even worse as we approach the End Times.

You see, the Bible makes it very clear that Jesus rose from the dead, is alive, and is coming again. That's going to be a great Day, but it's also going to be a terrible Day. He will come to redeem His children but He will also come in judgment against unbelievers, and particularly against apostates, those who have abandoned the historic faith and are actively undermining it.

I don't know when that Day will be, and no one else does either. Yet we're not totally unaware of its approach, because the Scriptures give us signs to look for—like war and rumors of war, famine, pestilence (could this refer to biological warfare?), earthquakes, persecution of believers, *and* a great apostasy. Paul specifically mentions apostasy in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, when he says that the Day of the Lord "will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction." Well, we know who the man of lawlessness is—the Anti-Christ. But what is this rebellion? The Greek word translated rebellion is *apostasia*, a falling away from the faith once entrusted to the saints!

I am not an alarmist. I will never call upon you to sell everything you own and join me on a remote hill somewhere to await the Second Coming. But the signs of the Second Coming are evident all around us, particularly the coming apostasy. I don't see anything Jude has described that isn't blatantly obvious in the church today. In this week's *World Magazine* there were articles about the upcoming summer conventions in three major denominations—all hell-bent on denying the truth of God's Word. For example, in the Evangelical Lutheran church in America,

which is no longer either evangelical or Lutheran in any historical sense, “a statement endorsed by 129 theologians insists that biblical texts on homosexuality ‘are not directly pertinent to the 21st-century discussion . . .’”ⁱ

Now this kind of apostasy within formerly sound bodies of faith does not necessarily mean that Jesus is coming soon, but I think it should certainly cause us to ponder the possibility. And since the Day may be close, it behooves us to give careful attention to the spiritual survival tactics Jude urges upon us.

Our text today is just verses 17-25, but inasmuch as I have a few extra minutes this morning to speak, I am going to read the entire book of Jude so as to make sure we see the message of today in its full context:

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:

Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.

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. 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.

Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe. And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.

In the very same way, these dreamers pollute their own bodies, reject authority and slander celestial beings. But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!" Yet these men speak abusively against whatever they do not understand; and what things they do understand by instinct, like unreasoning animals—these are the very things that destroy them.

Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion.

These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead. They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever.

Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men: "See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones 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." These men are grumblers and

faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage.

(Today's text) But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires." These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.

But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.

Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

To him who is able to keep you from falling 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.

I've divided Jude's advice here into two categories—defensive tactics for survival and offensive tactics. We need to do some things to make sure we are not overrun by the Enemy; but then we also need to be ready to storm the gates of hell, so to speak. The evangelical church is probably better at the defensive than the offensive, but we need to be prepared to use both.

Defensive tactics for survival

Remember what the Apostles predicted about apostates in the church. (17-19) Our first line of defense is our memories, and this is not the first time we've heard this. In verse 5 he told us, "Though you already know all this, I want to remind you . . ." and then he proceeded to bring back to the minds of his readers a whole series of familiar stories from the OT that they had either forgotten or neglected. Now he reminds us additionally of what the NT Apostles said about apostates. Since there are no quotation marks in the original Greek, we can't be sure if the quotation stops with verse 18 or continues through verse 19. In fact, he may just be summarizing the Apostles' teaching since this exact quote is not found in the Gospels. So we will just combine the two verses and note four key facts about the apostates which were apparently passed on from the Apostles to the early believers.

1. They will be prominent in the last days. (17) "In the last days there will be scoffers . . ." When you combine this with other NT teaching you realize that they will not only be present in the last days; they will be more numerous, they will become bolder, and they will do more damage. Let me share just one example this morning that comes from a news article several years ago about my own alma mater, Southern Methodist University:

Methodist seminary officials in Dallas found themselves in a caldron after a witch was invited to lecture and led a liturgy to an ancient deity. Linda Finnell, a self-avowed occultist and lesbian, gave her presentation during a "Women's Week" series sponsored by Perkins School of Theology, an affiliate of Southern Methodist University and the leading United Methodist Seminary. The special class was held at posh Highland Park

United Methodist Church in Dallas.

One observer said that Finnell “projected a positive affirmation of witchcraft, while she lectured behind a candlelit altar featuring an image of the goddess Diana. Charges against Perkins Seminary were filed by leaders of First United Methodist Church in Ketchum, OK. They asked the denomination’s University Senate to decertify the seminary and place reprimands in the files of professors who approved of Finnell’s ritual.”ⁱⁱ

Those protests, sadly, came to nothing because they were dismissed by the bishop. Now my purpose in sharing this is not to attack Methodists. There are many local Methodist congregations and pastors who were as scandalized as I by this incident, like this church in Ketchum, Oklahoma. What I want you to grasp is that this kind of stuff is happening all over the ecclesiastical landscape. You used to find this only in bizarre cults; now it’s gone mainstream. The Apostles were absolutely right when they predicted that apostasy would proliferate in the End Times.

2. They will scoff at God’s laws while making up their own. (18) Jude speaks of apostates in verse 18 as “scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires.” They will use every means in the book to challenge *The Book*. They will question whether the Bible was written by the authors whose names it bears or at the time it purports to have been written, they will challenge its interpretation, they will doubt its relevance, and they will contend that science has superseded it. And as they succeed in casting doubt on God’s Word, that will open up the playing field for them to write their own rules. Tolerance has become their watchword because they want tolerance for their own sin.

3. They will create division in the Church. “These are the men who divide you.” (19) God hates divisiveness in His Church; in fact, He speaks very harshly about it on a number of occasions. He even hates it when conservative, Bible-believing Christians are the ones creating division and splitting churches, which happens much too frequently and often with very little justification.

But to me the really insidious thing about apostate divisiveness is that the apostate usually succeeds in blaming the true disciple for the divisiveness he himself causes. I can’t help but think of St. Paul’s Evangelical Church in St. Louis. My colleague there, Pastor Mark Friz, is a fifth generation United Church of Christ pastor. He led his church out of the UCC by a 93% vote because of apostasy – intolerable doctrinal deviation on the part of denominational leaders. Mark then led his congregation into the Evangelical Free Church with a 97% vote. Yet he himself was excoriated by those same denominational leaders for being divisive, even though he and his people were the ones who were holding fast to the historic creeds of the Faith rather than the denomination.ⁱⁱⁱ This, of course, is happening in the gay marriage debate. Those who hold to the traditional view of marriage that has prevailed in every world religion for over 5000 years are called divisive and discriminatory.

4. Far from being the spiritually elite they claim to be, they are devoid of the Holy Spirit.

(19) Jude speaks of them as those “who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.” History tells us that the gnostics and other first-century apostates considered themselves to be the initiated, the spiritually elite. The rest of the people were “the herd,” the “Great Unwashed,” the fanatics, the ignorant, the Bible-thumpers.

Jude turns the tables on them, alleging that those apostates who hold themselves up as being spiritual giants are really just the opposite. The *only thing* that can make a person truly spiritual is being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and apostates do not have the Spirit. They are not even Christians, because Romans 8:9 makes it clear that if a person doesn’t have the Holy Spirit, he can’t belong to Jesus.

Before moving on, let me ask each of us once again to examine ourselves in light of these characteristics which the Apostles attribute to apostates. It’s always easier to see these things in other denominations or other people than in ourselves. But are we, through our lifestyles, scoffing at God’s laws while making up our own? Are we being divisive in the family of God? Do we consider ourselves to have it made spiritually when in fact we are just faking it?

Well, Jude has been faithful to remind us, again and again, of the enemy we are up against. But what else do we need to do besides remember in order to defend ourselves against apostasy as we approach the last days? Here is his second major defensive strategy:

Put your armor on. (20-21) Several weeks ago I mentioned a verse from 2 Cor. 10:4, “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.” We are not effective when we fight with politics and manipulation and anger and revenge. Well, if those are not legitimate weapons, what weapons *are* at our disposal? Paul, of course, writes powerfully about our spiritual armor in Ephesians 6, but this morning let’s look at the three weapons Jude mentions.

1. Build yourselves up in your most holy faith. (20) This architectural metaphor is very instructive. A building is always built from the bottom up. If you neglect the foundation, you’ll never succeed in erecting a lasting building. On the other hand, if you have only a foundation, you’re not going to be very successful either. Building ourselves up is a process that begins with foundational truths but isn’t finished until the superstructure of a Christian world view is established.

Unfortunately the church at large is doing a dismal job of this today. Even many evangelical churches have been satisfied to win converts and get them involved in service but never establish them in the fundamental truths of God’s Word or train them to the point they can reproduce themselves. Once again I mention the Truth Project for those who haven’t yet had a chance to take it. It is a powerful tool to build a Christian world-view that integrates all areas of our lives—spiritual, moral, political, social, economic.

I have been told on good authority that Mormonism actually targets members of a certain evangelical denomination, because they are known to be strong on evangelism but weak on

discipleship. They have a kind of emotional attachment to God, but since they know very little Scripture, they're extremely gullible and Mormons have found that it's easier to get them to transfer allegiance to their apostate views than it is to go after unchurched converts.

Friends, we will never be able to stand against the deceit of the Evil One if we don't get ourselves grounded in the most holy faith. I'm astounded sometimes at the monumental ignorance of some professing Christians about the simple truths of the Bible, even though they may have professed faith in Christ 20, 30, or 40 years ago. I don't expect everyone to be a Bible scholar. I'm not even talking about scholarship. I'm talking about being able to distinguish the Gospels from the Epistles, knowing the difference between justification and sanctification, being able to defend the resurrection, knowing how to lead someone to Christ.

In talking about biblical illiteracy a few weeks ago I told you that we're here to help you grow. We have the Lay Bible Institute, Women's Ministries, BSF, CBS, Precepts, etc. I don't want to sound like a broken record, but you need to do something about this. Jude doesn't say, "go to a good church and let the pastor build you up in the most holy faith." Rather he says, "build *yourselves* up." You will never grow to maturity as long as you are being spoon-fed by someone else. You need to get off the bottle and start chewing (i.e. off the milk bottle and start chewing on some steak). Phooey on vegetarianism. Peter says real Christians need meat. Now no emails please! I think it's fine to be a vegetarian if you want, but don't be a spiritual vegetarian.

2. Pray in the Holy Spirit. (20) Prayer is as essential to growth as is food. If spiritual food is the source of our energy, prayer is the nerve center that allows our nourished bodies to move in the right direction. And that's why our prayers must be in the Holy Spirit. Some want to interpret this as a certain kind of praying, like praying in tongues, but that is not in view in this passage. Praying in the Spirit means praying in the power of the Holy Spirit, under His direction, and with complete dependence upon Him. It means praying out of hearts that are indwelt, illuminated, and filled by the Spirit.

There's a wonderful passage in the 8th chapter of Romans that talks about praying in the Spirit:

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express (His prayers are not audible). And he who searches our hearts (God the Father) knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will (Romans 8:26,27).

I am so glad for that truth, because it describes me—I often don't know what to pray for. But when I pray in the Spirit, I can count on Him intercepting my prayer on the way to the Father and re-praying it according to God's will. Prayers in the Spirit are always answered—sometimes the way I pray them and sometimes the way the Spirit re-prays them. And of course that's why the very next verse is able to affirm, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." How could it be otherwise with the Spirit of God coming alongside us in our prayers?

3. Keep yourselves in God's love. (21) Now this is an interesting imperative that isn't what we would expect Jude to say. After all, we were told back in verse 1 that God's children are called by the Holy Spirit, loved by God, and kept by Jesus Christ. We noted that those who have received Christ as Savior are secure because Jesus Christ is keeping us secure. So why, then, does he here in verse 21 urge us to keep ourselves in God's love?

Clearly he's not telling us we have to keep ourselves saved. We couldn't save ourselves in the first place, and we can't keep ourselves saved. Rather I think he's urging us to keep ourselves in the sphere of God's love. Stay within the parameters where God can pour out His blessings on our lives. If we go wandering off into sinful life styles, God still loves us, but He cannot bless us as He desires to do. Keep yourselves in the sphere of God's love.

Friends, do you have your armor on? Are you building yourself up, praying in the Holy Spirit, and keeping yourself within the sphere where God can pour out His love without restriction? If you're doing that and remembering what the Apostles said, then you have learned the defensive tactics of survival. But you may not yet be quite ready for the last days. In the NFL they say a great defense will generally win over a great offense. But no team is going to win without some offense. We need both.

Offensive tactics for survival (22-25)

Reach out to those deceived by apostasy, but don't treat all unbelievers alike. (22-23) In spiritual warfare offense is critical because God is seeking worshipers, and as long as there are millions of non-worshipers headed for a Christless eternity, God will not rest. We are His hands and feet to a needy world. Let's read verses 22 and 23 again: "Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear-hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh."

The King James Version reads a little differently than the NIV; it speaks of two categories of unbelievers instead of three, but I believe the NIV has captured the essence of Jude's message here. He is telling us that there is a world of unbelievers out there who have been influenced by the apostates. What should we do? Write them off?

No, they are victims, victims of the Evil one and his apostate henchmen. They're not exactly innocent victims, because they have all had opportunities to hear the truth and turn to God, but they are still victims. And as such they deserve compassion and help. But interestingly, while we are commanded to reach out to the unbelievers around us, we are expressly instructed not to treat them all alike. There is no one-size-fits-all method of evangelism. Look at Jude's three categories:

1. Be merciful to some. To whom? To sincere doubters. Several Easers ago I preached a sermon entitled, "In Celebration of Doubt." The hero of that sermon was a disciple known as Doubting Thomas. While the nickname given to Thomas was meant pejoratively, I view it more as a badge of honor. Doubt can be a positive thing; it can keep us from being gullible, from

falling for half-truths and outright falsehoods.

Doubters are prime candidates for the Gospel, so we should exercise mercy towards them. We should share our faith with them. We should give them reasons for the hope that is within us, for doubters are often looking for reasons to believe. Tim Keller has written a terrific book entitled, *The Reason for God, Belief in the Age of Skepticism*. If you know a sincere doubter in your family or in your circle of friends, invest in that book and give it to that person.

2. Snatch others from the fire. There is a second category of unbeliever mentioned in verse 23 who are so far gone they're in grave danger of being singed by hell-fire. You don't send them books or try to dialogue with them. They need someone to grab them, shake them, and practice spiritual intervention. I'm talking about a person who is living dangerously—perhaps doing drugs or drinking heavily or sleeping around. His or her life is out of control. To that person we must say, “I love you too much to let you go on destroying yourself. You're going into treatment to save your life, and you need God to save your soul.”

Or perhaps this is a person on his or her deathbed. They've lived their whole lives independently of God. They've done it their way and now they've come to the end of the road, and the blackness of eternity lies before them. What do we do? Do we say, “You've made your bed; now lie in it?” No, not if we love them! We try to snatch them out of the fire. This is not the time for pious platitudes. This is not the time to worry that you might offend them. This is the time to tell them one last time that God loves them, that Jesus died for them, and that the consequences of a Christ-less eternity are awful.

That doesn't mean you never take “no” for an answer. If a person says, “I don't want to hear it, leave me alone,” then you must honor their wishes. Ultimately no one can truly be snatched out of the flames by us anyway. If the Holy Spirit isn't convicting their hearts, all our efforts will go for nothing.

3. Be very cautious with others. But there is still a third category that requires a much more cautious approach. “To others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.” There are some people who are so wicked, so reprobate that even to witness to them is dangerous. Don't do it casually; don't do it carelessly.

Back in the 60's there was a well-known flamboyant Baptist evangelist named Bob Harrington, who called himself the Chaplain of Bourbon Street. He had a ministry to the prostitutes and drug addicts in New Orleans, and he had some amazing stories about people he supposedly led to Christ. I say “supposedly” because Harrington himself fell into sin with some of his parishioners, and his ministry went down the tubes. Witnessing to prostitutes is not the place for a flamboyant evangelist. It may be something that can be done by a humble, cautious, fearful couple, but it's no place for a showman. Harrington lacked the fear he should have exercised. (I understand that Bob Harrington himself repented years later and returned to ministry, albeit in a much less flamboyant manner).

I do not recommend engaging cult missionaries that come to your home. Witness to them if they're your neighbor, but you have no more chance of winning a cult missionary to Christ when he comes to your door than you have of selling your own vacuum cleaner to a salesman who comes to your home to sell you a vacuum cleaner. Show mercy mixed with fear.

The second major offensive weapon we have is worship.

Worship our glorious, awesome God and His Son, Jesus Christ. (24-25) Why do I call worship an offensive weapon? Because Satan is afraid of authentic worship. Satan works overtime to disrupt true worship. I am convinced that Satan is doing everything he can to stir up "worship wars" in the church today so that great worship is derailed. How sad, because worship is, by definition, ascribing worth and value to our awesome God.

Jude addresses this, first by telling us what God can do.

1. Know what He can do. Jude 24: "To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy . . ." God is able to keep you from falling. This is the third time Jude has used the word "keep." First he said we are kept by Jesus Christ, then that we should keep ourselves in God's love, and now he sandwiches our responsibility between the responsibility of His Son and Himself. He is able to keep you from falling. You don't have to be paranoid about the apostates—watchful, yes, but not paranoid, because God is able.

And He isn't just able to keep you from falling; He is also able to present you before His presence without fault! Without fault? How is that possible? My faults are so obvious—both past and present. If I can see them, and if my friends can see them, imagine what God sees! And yet He is able to present me faultless? Yes, because a trade was made when I accepted Jesus as my Savior. It was a fabulous trade—for me, that is. I gave Him my sin and He gave me Christ's righteousness. Even Steven! No refunds, no exchanges. It's a done deal. He took my sin on Himself at the Cross and said, "It is finished."

And, God does this with great joy. God doesn't grudgingly accept me. He doesn't stand at the Judgment Seat of Christ and say, "You're a sorry excuse for a disciple. Look what I did for you and look how you've responded. You don't deserve to be here, but I promised, so come on in, but you'd better not let out a peep for the first million years."

No, we know exactly how God will respond, for Jesus showed us in the parable of the Forgiving Father. When the Prodigal Son came home after his sinful sojourn, it says,

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. . . . Then the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate (Luke 16:20-24).

Is that amazing, or what? God is able to keep you and to present you, without fault and with

great joy. But worship is not just about what God can do. It is even more about who God is.

2. Know who He is. “To the *only* God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.” But why should we talk about worshiping this amazing God when we can just *do it*? Worship team, will you come back up and lead us in worship of this awesome God?

i. “Dividing the unity,” *World*, May 23, 2009, 44.

ii. This is quoted exactly from a newspaper article, but I lost the biographical information.

iii. Sheldon Culver and John Dorhauer, *Steeplejacking, How the Christian Right is Hijacking Mainstream Religion*. These two conference staff in the United Church of Christ write a very dishonest and inaccurate account of what happened at St. Paul’s Evangelical Church. When 93% of a congregation vote to leave a denomination they have been in for over 150 years, one can hardly speak of the congregation being “hijacked.”