

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

SERMON: **Sorry Shepherds Who Feed Only Themselves**

SCRIPTURE: Jude 12-16

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I have been chided by a few for planning a sermon about sorry shepherds on Mother's Day. I guess my only excuse is that Mother's Day is not a biblical holiday, though respect for mothers is certainly biblical—and not just the 2nd Sunday in May but every day!. Mother's Day originated in 1908 when a spinster named Anna Jarvis started a letter-writing campaign to set aside a special day to honor mothers, her own mother having died two years before. She hoped Mother's Day would increase respect for parents and strengthen family bonds. On May 9, 1914, a Presidential proclamation declared the 2nd Sunday of May to be observed as Mother's Day, and nearly a century later we still gladly join in the celebration of mothers. But if I'm going to get through the book of Jude on schedule, we'll have to stay by the stuff this morning. Mothers and grandmothers, be assured that we honor you and value you highly. I trust that the other aspects of this delightful service have revealed that sufficiently.

One of the most sobering passages in all the Bible is found in the 34th chapter of Ezekiel. It is addressed to the professional clergy of Israel—to the priests, Levites, and prophets. And it reveals why the whole nation was regularly in terrible spiritual condition. When the spiritual shepherds of God's people were more interested in feeding themselves than in feeding the flock, the people of God were destined for disaster. Listen as I read: Ezekiel 34:1-10:

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: `This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

As sad as was the state of the clergy of ancient Israel, it is probably even worse in our day. In regard to both belief and behavior, a huge number of men and women of the cloth have violated their oaths of office and the spiritual trust of their parishioners. For three weeks now we have been studying a short little book of the New Testament that focuses upon apostasy in the Church. An apostate, as I have

reiterated every week, is someone who is knowledgeable of the Christian faith, perhaps even once practiced it at some level, but who has since abandoned its fundamentals and is actively undermining the truth from within.

I received a powerful letter this week from a member of our church family whose cousin was a pastor in a mainline church. Though taught the truth as a young man, he lost his faith in seminary but went on to pastor several churches. When faced with some depression he was counseled by some denominational colleagues that perhaps he was repressing latent homosexuality. He was actually encouraged to claim that lifestyle and come out of the closet. He took his own life at age 47! I'll read one short paragraph from this letter:

"I'm firmly convinced that the _____ Church (she mentions the denomination) contributed to my cousin's death. Had he received adequate counseling directed toward grace and forgiveness instead of being poisoned with ideas that run contrary to the Word of God, I believe he would be an active, thriving minister doing the work God set out for him to do today. But the church was so bent on twisting God's Word, pushing its own agenda, and accommodating everyone, that he was engulfed with lies."

In the first half of his treatise Jude has been fingering apostates wherever they are found—in the prehistoric angelic world, in ancient Israel, in his own day, and by extension even in ours—whether clergy or laity. But in verses 12-16, our text today, he clearly hones in on those of the professional clergy who have become traitors to Christ. I want to do two things this morning. First, I want us to examine these five verses for what God says about apostate clergy. But then I want us to take time to look at the alternative. What kind of leaders should we choose for the church and what characteristics must they exhibit?

Apostate clergy are described by tragic metaphors. (12-13)

Look at verses 12 and 13:

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.

The first metaphor he uses is “blemishes at your love feasts”, or as some of your versions read, “hidden reefs.”

1. They are blemishes or hidden reefs. In the first century church the Lord's Table was often preceded by a meal, a potluck of sorts that was called a Love Feast. Rich and poor would both attend, giving the rich the opportunity of sharing their abundance with the rest. The concept was wonderful, but it quickly dissolved into an opportunity for gluttony, drunkenness and divisiveness. Listen to Paul's rebuke of the Corinthian church for their abuse of the Love Feast:

And then I find that you bring your divisions to worship—you come together, and instead of eating the Lord's Supper, you bring in a lot of food from the outside and make pigs of yourselves. Some are left out, and go home hungry. Others have to be carried out, too drunk to

walk. I can't believe it! (1 Cor. 11:20, 21, The Message).

Jude seems to be addressing a similar problem in his day. Some of the church leaders were feeding their faces (literally or figuratively), with little concern for others, so Jude refers to them as spots or blemishes in this meal that was designed to be a beautiful expression of Christian love.

However, some of your Bibles may read “hidden reefs in your love feasts,” and that is because the Greek word for “spot” and the term for “rock” or “reef” are almost identical, and some ancient scribes apparently copied one word while others copied the other. It’s very difficult to know for sure which Jude meant because both make sense in the context. If “rocks” is the correct reading, Jude is picturing the church as a sailing ship that runs aground on rocks just below the surface. The point would be that the church must be wary of secret apostates who are trying to make spiritual shipwreck of their fellowship.

Whether he is talking about blemishes or hidden reefs, the point is clear—apostates don’t mind participating in the church’s most sacred rites, like communion, if that’s what it takes to gain influence. Sadly, it is indisputable that on any given Sunday there are thousands of pastors and priests who regularly lead their people in communion and baptism and prayer and worship even though they don’t even believe the fundamental truths upon which all of it is all based—that Jesus died for our sins, that it’s His blood that provides our forgiveness, and He is the only way to God.

2. They are clouds without rain. The Jewish farmer was always in need of rain, and he would be encouraged when dark clouds appeared on the horizon, because clouds typically promise rain to thirsty fields. But sometimes the wind would carry these clouds past his field before they could drop any moisture. The false teachers in the church are compared to these water-less clouds. They promise to provide spiritual refreshment, but they don’t because they do not possess the water of God’s Word. Hollow messages on humanistic goodness, love, unity, positive mental attitudes, and financial prosperity may tickle people’s ears, but only the sound teaching of God’s Word can thoroughly quench man’s spiritual thirst.

3. They are autumn trees. Trees are beautiful for a short time in autumn, but Jude has in mind what happens when the leaves fall and the trees appear barren, dry and unproductive. Trees only *appear* dead, of course, because in the Spring they sprout new leaves. False teachers, on the other hand, are not just dead in appearance; they are also dead in reality. Their lack of fruit is permanent. Although seasons change, they never produce anything of value. In fact, they will be plucked up and burned, thus they are twice dead.

4. They are wild waves of the sea. Have you ever seen polluted water and the foamy scum it leaves on the shore? The foam has no substance; it rides on the crest of the waves until it hits a barrier and then it vanishes. False teachers in the church are like that—they produce only spiritual scum.

5. They are wandering stars. He’s probably speaking of shooting stars, which aren’t really stars at all but meteors which streak across the sky with great brilliance and vanish quickly into the darkness of space. They provide no light and no guidance to the traveler. Apostates are similar. They make a big flash and then burn out. They appear on the scene professing to bring new light to spiritual

pilgrims, but in reality they guide their followers into deeper darkness. The ones we see today are really no different from the ones we saw 20 or 40 years ago. They come and go.

I well remember when the cover of *Time Magazine* proclaimed the probable Death of God. It was April 8, 1966 and I was in my first year of seminary. The magazine touted the brilliance of theologians Thomas J. J. Altizer, Paul Van Buren, William Hamilton, and Rabbi Richard Rubenstein. For a few months, maybe a few years these men made a big splash. They were invited to seminars and got huge speaking fees. But their heresy was short-lived and none today is anything more than a footnote in history. We could cite dozens of similar wandering stars over the past generation.

Please note the end result for these whom Jude has referred to as blemishes or hidden reefs, rainless clouds, autumn trees, wild waves and wandering stars. He says in verse 13 that for them “blackest darkness has been reserved forever.” He’s talking about hell, in case you didn’t catch that. Hell is a reality, according to the New Testament, and the teacher who emphasized it most was none other than Jesus Christ. He took no joy in hell, nor should we. I resonate with John MacArthur’s thoughts:

“I have mixed emotions when I see apostasy: I am angry at the apostate, but I feel broken inside over the godless eternity that he will experience. Do you know what it means for a person to sit in a church year after year, and never come to know Jesus Christ? Do you know what it means for somebody to study the Bible, and maybe even go to Bible college or seminary, and yet turn into a false teacher? For someone that close to the truth to live in torment for eternity is a sobering thought!”

Nevertheless we must be clear that everyone who does not receive Jesus as Savior will inherit the condemnation of hell. Listen to John 3:16-18:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, BUT whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.

I would not say that every apathetic unbeliever will suffer as much as these apostates who actively oppose God and knowingly undermine the truth, but Hell is awful no matter what the degree of punishment. Jesus said to those who knew Him well and yet opposed Him, “it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.” (Matt. 11:24). Knowledge *increases* judgment. That is why apostasy is the most serious of all sins and the most severe punishment is reserved for it. The second section of our text expands upon this judgment that has been reserved for apostate clergy and explains the basis for it.

Apostate clergy will experience a special judgment from God. (14)

Look at verse 14:

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 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.”

Now you may have been unaware that Enoch was a prophet. In fact, you may not know anything at all about Enoch. From Genesis 5 we learn that he was the father of the oldest man who ever lived, Methuselah. Enoch lived 365 years, and his biography fills only one brief sentence (Gen. 5:24): “Enoch walked with God, then he was no more, because God took him away.”

In the great Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11, this explanation is added; “By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.” (Perhaps you are familiar with the riddle: “The oldest man who ever lived died before his father did.” Now you know why.)

Jude adds the additional information that Enoch was a prophet and that he prophesied judgment on apostates in the family of God. Jude found this prophecy in an extra-biblical book called *The Book of Enoch*, written in the first or second century before Christ. Because this quotation does not come from the OT, some Bible students, including the great Martin Luther, have questioned whether Jude itself belongs in the Bible. But the biblical authors often did research in extra-biblical sources. In Kings and Chronicles we often come across many references to “the annals of the kings of Israel and Judah.” We must realize that while everything in the Bible is true, *not* all truth is in the Bible. Here Jude points us to some truth that he found in the extra-biblical Book of Enoch.

1. The Lord is coming to judge everyone. In keeping with prophecies in Matthew and in the book of Revelation, Enoch notes that Jesus will come “with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones (angels).” But then Jude focuses on the specific judgment on apostates.

2. The Lord will specifically convict the ungodly of their deeds, motives, and words. Listen again to verse 15: “The Lord is coming . . . 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.” You get the distinct impression that Enoch was concerned about ungodliness, but not just overt acts of ungodliness. This is a good reminder that God is never concerned only with outward deeds; He is always concerned with speech, attitudes, and motives as well.

While Jude is applying this prophecy of judgment specifically to those who have abandoned the faith, namely apostates, I think it is very important to note that Enoch himself doesn’t restrict the prophecy to them. In fact, he says that the Lord is coming to judge *everyone*, and to judge *all* the ungodly of *all* the ungodly acts they have done, and of *all* the harsh words spoken against him. Even believers are going to face a judgment (at the Judgment Seat of Christ), though they will never face condemnation.

Apostate clergy share certain common characteristics. (16)

Verse 16: “These men are grumblers and fault-finders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage.”

1. They grumble and find fault constantly. This same word translated “grumblers” is used in John 6:41 just after Jesus gave his discourse on the bread of life. It says, “The Jews began to grumble about him because He said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’” They didn’t like the hard

truths He was teaching, and later in that same chapter we read, “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.” Grumbling led to apostasy, and I think it is often so. The reason is that grumbling is often ultimately against God; after all, if He has allowed the situation we’re grumbling about (and He has), our complaints are directed at Him, whether we like to admit it or not.

The second term, “fault-finders,” just refers to louder grumbling. Rather than just under-the-breath gossiping, this is full-blown opposition to the will and way of the Lord. These traits are evident often in the Scriptures, as we saw last week. The fallen angels were unhappy with their estate. Israel grumbled in the wilderness. Korah found fault with Moses and Aaron. I think we often fail to realize how seriously God takes murmuring and grumbling. As a pastor, the last thing I would want to do is to stifle legitimate difference of opinion. I would rather invite challenges to my own decisions and to the Elders’ decisions than to stifle dissent. But I am deeply disturbed when I see people constantly demonstrating negative attitudes, sharing rumors, gossiping, and questioning others’ motives. Fortunately we have seen very little of that in this church.

Some Christians just seem to be deeply suspicious of church leaders. I had a man in my previous church who was constantly questioning every decision the pastors made, expecting there was some dark motive behind it. I suppose this may have been because of some bad experience he had in the past, but it was very destructive of church unity. I think we need to come to grips with the fact that grumbling and fault-finding are characteristics of apostates, not disciples.

How do you know if you’re guilty of grumbling and fault-finding as opposed to just being discerning? Well, I suggest a couple of questions to ask yourself:

1. When I hear about a decision I don’t like, do I immediately assume that someone has manipulated the system to get their own way, OR do I choose to assume that even if a wrong decision was made, the individuals involved probably did what they thought was best?
2. When I question a decision, do I tend to go immediately to the person or persons who made it, OR do I first call my friends and complain about it?
3. Do I automatically take the side of my friends when they are offended, OR do I investigate to see if the offense might have been a misunderstanding?

The leaders of this church, myself included, have undoubtedly made a number of mistakes over the years, but speaking as one who has been on the inside of many of those decisions, I would say that in the vast majority of those cases, they have been honest mistakes, and the leaders’ motives have been pure. In fact, I have never been part of an organization where I saw less politicking going on than in this body of believers.

Then Jude offers a second common characteristic of apostate clergy:

2. They do their own thing morally. The text says, “They follow their own evil desires.” While grumbling about church leaders, the grumbler is often secretly pursuing immoral behavior. In fact, there is a psychological reason why he may be grumbling—if he can point out fault in others, it takes the spotlight off his own secret sin. Believe me, friends, apostasy and immorality almost always go together. In fact, I think more often than not the immorality leads to the apostasy. After all, a person cannot indefinitely live with disequilibrium between his beliefs and his behavior. Either his behavior

has to change to fit his beliefs or his beliefs have to change to match his behavior.

3. They boast about themselves and flatter others. Literally Jude says they use “great swelling words” as they talk of themselves and their accomplishments. They also use similar speech about others, but not sincerely. Rather they flatter people to get an advantage. They say what people want to hear, acquiescing to popular opinion in order to gain favor.

Jude has stated and restated his case to make sure we realize the kind of danger we are facing from apostates in the Church, especially among its professional leaders. Now keeping his warnings in mind, I want to ask an important related question this morning?

In contrast, what are the characteristics of *godly* shepherds? 1 Timothy 3:1-15

Well, certainly the godly shepherd needs to feed the sheep, lead the sheep, and protect the sheep. That’s a given. But the Scriptures seem to be more concerned with who the shepherd *is* than with what he *does*. It’s fascinating to me how much attention is given in the NT to character issues as over against giftedness when it comes to choosing leaders. I have time this morning to look at only one of many passages, so I have chosen 1 Timothy 3. We’re not going to expound this chapter verse by verse, but I do want to read it. And I have chosen to read Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, *The Message*:

LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

If anyone wants to provide leadership in the church, good! But there are preconditions: A leader (elder, pastor, overseer) must be well-thought-of, committed to his wife, cool and collected, accessible, and hospitable. He must know what he’s talking about, not be overfond of wine, not pushy but gentle, not thin-skinned, not money-hungry. He must handle his own affairs well, attentive to his own children and having their respect. For if someone is unable to handle his own affairs, how can he take care of God’s church? He must not be a new believer, lest the position go to his head and the Devil trip him up. Outsiders must think well of him, or else the Devil will figure out a way to lure him into his trap.

The same goes for those who want to be servants (deacons) in the church: serious, not deceitful, not too free with the bottle, not in it for what they can get out of it. They must be reverent before the mystery of the faith, not using their position to try to run things. Let them prove themselves first. If they show they can do it, take them on. No exceptions are to be made for women—same qualifications: serious, dependable, not sharp-tongued, not overfond of wine. Servants in the church are to be committed to their spouses, attentive to their own children, and diligent in looking after their own affairs. Those who do this servant work will come to be highly respected, a real credit to this Jesus-faith.

Now think carefully with me about what Paul is saying here about church leadership—male or female. Paul describes the church leader in several different categories.

1. He or she must be a person of character. There’s almost nothing here about giftedness, skill level, success, or even experience. The very first trait mentioned in the NIV is “above reproach.” The problem is, “Who in the world is above reproach?” If we pushed some of these characteristics to

the wall, I suspect most of our Elders, deacons and pastors would have to resign. I know there would be a vacancy for Lead Pastor. Clearly, I think Paul is not talking in absolute terms but rather giving us a picture of the leader's lifestyle. Is the leader a person of integrity, reliable, can you count on him or her to be the same when no one is looking?

2. A strong family person. Mention is made of the importance of the leader's relationship with his spouse, as well as his children. The rationale is offered that if a person is unable to manage his own family well, if he's unable to gain the respect of his own children, how can he take care of God's church? Again, God is not expecting the leader's children to be perfect, but neither should they be delinquent rebels.

3. A person of faith. There are a number of qualities that relate to one's spiritual walk and level of maturity in the faith. This is true for the Deacon as well as the Elder.

4. A people person. By this I don't mean that a leader has to be an extrovert. Being a people-person has little to do with temperament, but a lot to do with how we treat others. Consider the following characteristics that relate to this: hospitable, gentle, not quarrelsome, worthy of respect, sincere, trustworthy.

5. A person of solid reputation. Several times the spotlight is placed directly on how outsiders view the leader. That is very important if outsiders are going to be reached with the Gospel.

Conclusion: I took as the theme of this passage this morning, "Sorry shepherds who feed only themselves." Spiritual shepherds are given to the church to feed, care for, nurture, lead, and protect the sheep. The apostate shepherd does the opposite—exploiting the sheep, gratifying his own appetites at their expense, and actually leading them to destruction.

I want to address both our leaders and the congregation as I conclude this morning. First, to the leaders I say that the one sure way to become a good shepherd is to follow the Good Shepherd. I came across the following quote from a popular evangelical clergyman whose name you would all know:

I have been asked to speak on national convention platforms, ministers' conferences, even executive motivational meetings.

At forty-nine years of age I have everything a person could want—an adequate salary, a beautiful home, a magnificent church, a loving wife and two very normal children.

The whole thing is Great Big.

But lately in the middle of the night I've begun to miss something.

When I was a very young minister I felt something I wish I could feel again.

I heard something I wish I could hear again.

It was the sound of sandaled feet walking beside me.

Now I have convention buttons; doctors degrees; plaques; photographs of me with movie stars, a president, and other dignitaries.

But I find myself wanting more than anything else . . .to hear again those Quiet Steps . . . of the Sandaled Feet.

I have motivated thousands of people to one degree or another. But how many have I touched with The Touch? When the smoke clears away, this is the only question that counts.ⁱ

To the congregation I would say that one of the saddest things I see today is when those who are charged with *feeding* the sheep end up *fleeing* the sheep. But I am compelled to say that the sheep are not without responsibility for this plight. It's absolutely amazing how gullible some sheep can be. They will continue to support religious leaders, even after immorality or financial greed or dictatorial attitudes have been clearly demonstrated.

God has given His sheep the unique privilege of choosing their own shepherds. At least that's the way we at First Free understand the NT. We do not believe in apostolic succession; rather the Scriptures provide for us a selection process for leaders. Not only do we choose our leaders; we also have the responsibility for encouraging them, praying for them, rebuking them under certain circumstances, and even disciplining them when necessary.

I want to call the members of this church this morning to take these responsibilities very seriously. I believe I speak for our Pastoral Leadership Team, for the Elders, for the Deacons, for the Trustees, as well as the rest of the leadership when I say, "We are your servants, not your masters. You have asked us to lead, so support us and pray for us faithfully. But do not tolerate ungodly leadership. Don't put up with sorry shepherds who feed themselves and fleece the sheep."

In closing I want to invite all of our elected leaders—pastoral staff, Elders, deacons, trustees, and our teaching leaders (ABF's, Sunday School, and Youth) to stand while I invite one of our laymen to come and lead us in prayer for the leadership of our church. Joe Stout (David May) will you come and pray for us as we close this morning?

i. I found this quotation in my own file. I had written it down from a book I read years ago, but I failed to document it. I apologize to my reader, but I no longer remember who wrote it. I trust you can still profit from its insight; perhaps it will actually be more useful as an anonymous quotation, because now it becomes the story of many of us.