



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

We Need to Be Contenders

Jude 1–25

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Introduction

In college, I took an introduction to counseling course in which our teacher gave us some rules for how married couples should fight. By “fight,” he did not mean physical altercations; he was giving us pointers to successfully manage the inevitable conflicts that occur when two unique people from different backgrounds with different outlooks set out to build a life together.

Of course, one problem with such lists—or even with mentioning them—is that they introduce a subject many would rather not consider. Even though we know some level of conflict is inevitable any time different people try to live and work together—in the home, at work or school, and, yes, even at church—we often try to act like the fact that we *should* get along means we automatically *will* get along.

Our reluctance to talk about conflict may be one of the reasons many have the letter of Jude at the end, or very near the end, of their list of favorite New Testament books. To study it, we think, is to focus on the negative, to dwell on contentiousness that results from doctrinal error and those who teach it. We think it better to devote our attention to other books we perceive to be more positive in outlook.

But no matter how long we postpone it, we can’t always avoid the inevitable. And the reality is that we benefit more from taking the time to address the problems than we do from always focusing on the positive. Douglas Moo, who in his younger years played basketball, illustrated the point this way: “I loved to hear fans cheering my occasional dunks. I didn’t much like hearing my coaches scolding me for failing to box out my man. Yet the scolding was just as important as the cheering in helping me become a better basketball player” (Moo 1996, 15).

Similarly, he continues, when asked to identify the books or topics we want to explore,

Not many of us would probably choose “Denunciations of False Teachers.” But it might be the message we most need to hear. We are inundated by allegedly “Christian” teaching of all kinds;

and the pluralistic mindset of our age encourages us to be tolerant of this wide range of teaching. Too easily lost in this atmosphere of easy-going tolerance is a concern for *truth* (Moo 1996, 15).

In other words, at times, we also face circumstances like those Jude encountered and confronted. False teachers are still around and actively spread their message, both directly and more subtly. And the response that's best for our spiritual well-being begins with the acceptance of Jesus's declaration that "the truth will set you free" (John 8.32). But that is not all the response entails. If we're going to stand for anything, we must be willing to contend for what we believe, to encourage others to accept the truth and reject falsehood.

It's a good idea, then, to learn how to do that most effectively. In what follows, we'll note some things Jude shows us about how to fight. But before we do, let's get a better sense of what Jude's letter is about.

Overview of Jude and His Themes

Because Jude is "a most neglected book" (Rowston 1975; in Webb 1997, 611), we should pause to acquaint ourselves with the letter's big picture.

First, Jude, or Judas (Ιούδας, *Ioudas*; v. 1), who is most likely one of Jesus's younger brothers (cf. Matt 13.55), is clear about why he wrote his letter.

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. 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 3–4).

What makes Jude's purpose statement different from similar purpose statements is that he says the letter he wrote is not the one he intended to write (v. 3). He changed course because of the infiltration of false teachers into the body, an incursion that created circumstances that required a different message and approach (v. 4).

From various comments he makes throughout the letter, we can infer some things about these teachers and what they were saying.

- They were antinomian, rejecting Christ's authority (v. 4) and the law (vv. 8–10).
- Their beliefs were leading to immorality, especially sexual immorality (vv. 6–8, 16, 18, 23).
- They attempted to justify their libertine behavior by appealing to personal visionary experiences (v. 8).
- They had apparently come into the community from outside (v. 4), had been accepted by the group (v. 12), and were perhaps supported by them, too (v. 16).
- Their influence (vv. 11–13) and Jude's use of the shepherding figure indicate that they were functioning as teachers. "Shepherds feeding themselves" in verse 12 translates the participial form of ποιμαίνω (*poimainō*), used elsewhere of the shepherding role of elders (cf. Acts 20.28).

Clearly, Jude was concerned to confront the threats posed by the false teaching and resulting illicit behaviors. But a closer look at the structure of the letter reveals that he intended to do more than simply denounce the false teachers and their ways.

First, Jude's salutation (vv. 1–2) and concluding doxology comprise an *inclusio* that brackets the letter with reminders of the blessing of being a Christ-follower and the importance of continuing in that blessed state.

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:
May mercy, peace, and love be
multiplied to you (vv. 1–2).

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, 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 (vv. 24–25).

Second, when we look at the letter's big picture, we discern an A-B-B-A chiastic structure in which the two parts of the initial theme statement in verses 3–4 correspond, in reverse order, to the two major parts of the letter (Bauckham 1992, 1098). This structure serves to accentuate Jude's concern to equip and encourage his readers to defend their faith.

- Verse 3 (A) declares the first theme: the appeal to contend for the faith.
 - Verse 4 (B) states the second theme: the appeal to contend is needed because the readers are in danger of being misled by false teachers.
 - Verses 5–19 (B¹) elaborate the second theme by pointing to examples from the Old Testament and Jewish literary tradition to emphasize that false teachers and those who practice ungodly behavior can expect to be judged for their actions.
- Verses 20–23 (A¹) bring closure to the letter by showing how to contend for the faith and reminding the readers of the positive things they must live for as faithful disciples.

Lessons for Contending

Lesson 1: sometimes it is necessary to contend.

A problem for many of us is that we sometimes confuse things we should never fight about with things we should. There is biblical merit for this concern. Galatians 5.19–21, for example, include enmity, strife, rivalries, dissensions, and divisions among the works of the flesh which, if practiced, will result in forfeiture of our kingdom inheritance. And in his farewell letter, Paul told Timothy to “have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels” (2 Tim 2.23). We also live in a world that stresses the idea that “everyone should learn to get along.”

But Jude reminds us that we should contend for the faith that has been delivered to us. “Contend” translates ἐπαγωνίζομαι (*epagōnizomai*), “to exert intense effort on behalf of someth[ing], contend” (Bauer 2000, 356). We intuitively understand the importance of Jude's stance because we recognize that a failure to contend for the truth leads some to think that error has made its case and won the day.

But that leads to the real reason many have a problem with the idea of contending. We are supposed to contend for the faith, for the truth, not for our personal preferences (the two terms are used interchangeably in texts such as 2 Tim 2.18; 3.8; Tit 1.1). Furthermore, we are supposed to base our lives on the truth. We contend for it because we understand that failing to follow it is not just a bad idea, it is tragic, not least because it is what makes the difference between whether we will experience condemnation or be kept for our salvation (Jude 5–23).

Lesson 2: When a fight is necessary, it must be based on truth.

It is significant that Jude draws on, and in some cases through inspiration endorses, what Jewish teaching knew: God is always true (cf. Rom 3.4). He pulls no punches about the sins and potential wrong influence of the false teachers, but he does not get embroiled in a personality squabble. Nor does he confuse optional matters of choice with obligatory matters of truth. He is solely concerned to encourage his readers to pursue and defend the truth that resided in and came from God.

Lesson 3: Learn the primary importance of attitude and behavior.

Jude writes in harmony with a consistent New Testament pattern that emphasizes attitude and behavior more than whether everyone thinks the same thing. Yes, there are some teachings that must never be compromised (cf. 2 Thess 2.15). The challenge arises when we do not correctly distinguish between what can and cannot be compromised. As both Jesus and Paul show, we can major in minors and treat matters of personal preference as if they are doctrinal absolutes (cf. Matt 15.1–9; Rom 14.1–6).

What always matters in New Testament teaching, however, is behavior, the way we show what we really believe (Jas 2.14–26). And in biblical thought, right behavior includes right attitudes (Matt 5.21–26). In other words, Jude’s teaching implicitly challenges the tendency we have sometimes seen, illustrated in the excommunication of someone for holding a private belief (even a wrong one) or for not performing a ritual requirement (which is important) but failing to act when someone is guilty of a moral offense. Furthermore, he shows that what is most important is keeping ourselves and those we influence in the love of God and out of the fire of hell (Jude 21–23).

Conclusion

Some of the problems with which Jude was concerned show why we need to study this writing today. Some still pervert grace and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ, in deed if not in word (v. 4). Some still try to straddle the fence, committing moral offenses while being active in community life (v. 12). And although most will not claim to have received a special vision (v. 8), they do use conclusions not found in Scripture to justify their attempts to lead God’s people in a different direction.

Jude reminds us that we need to stand ready to contend, be well grounded in the Word that equips us to contend, and contend for the right reasons to see the right result come about.

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