



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Jude's Circumstances **Sometimes You Have to Change Course - 1** Jude 3–4

David Anguish

Until I was 11 years old, we lived in a rural area where there were a number of smaller churches who were not large enough to support a full-time preacher. They invited different men to preach from week to week, one of whom was my dad. By the time I was 9 or 10, he had a regular schedule with one church twice a month and with another on the alternating Sundays.

In one of those churches one Sunday, a visitor surprised everyone present by getting into the pulpit after the song before the sermon—before Dad could get there. He was the brother of one of the members but normally attended a congregation in a different fellowship. That morning, he proceeded to share some thoughts and sing a short song. When he sat down—something I've always suspected happened as quickly as it did because Dad was standing right behind him the entire time he was speaking—Dad faced a group of believers who not only had been surprised by the interruption but had also been taught something that required a response. So, as he told me later, Dad shelved his planned sermon and responded to the man's remarks.

Jude's situation was not as spontaneous, but he tells us up front that he had planned to write a different kind of letter until circumstances dictated that he write something else. His change of plans reminds us of an important component of Christian teaching and life: sometimes course-changes are necessary and should be undertaken with dispatch. We'll begin our look at this idea with the circumstances that led Jude to change his plans.

The False Teachers in Jude

Jude decided to change course because he needed to warn his readers about some influential false teachers. They had insinuated themselves into the community through stealth. The ESV translates the revealing phrase, “crept in unnoticed” (v. 4).¹ The problem was that, though they were stealthy in their approach, they had gained some influence (vv. 11–13).

A threat to the community

Jude described the teachers in four ways. First, he saw them as a serious threat to the community (see Moo 1996, 229–231). He said they were the type of teachers “who long ago were designated for this condemnation” (v. 4). The phrase, “long ago designated” translates a participle form of one Greek verb, προγράφω (*prographō*). It means “to write in advance or before” (Bauer 2000, 867). The Greek perfect tense used here underscores the point that their condemnation was something that had been determined in the past and was still in effect at the time of Jude’s writing.

What that meant in practice, however, is not completely clear. Two interpretations are possible. First, since the language echoes that of 2 Peter 1.2–4, some think Jude intended to point back to Peter’s writing. This may not align with the “long ago” idea in Jude’s description, but if, as some think, “long ago” (πάλαι, *palai*) should be translated “already” (see Bauer 2000, 751 for this possibility), this problem would be resolved. But the bigger problem with this interpretation is that we do not know whether 2 Peter or Jude were written first (a matter of debate among students of the writings).

Second, some think Jude was anticipating the citation from 1 Enoch he will include in verses 14–16. If so, his intent was to point out that since Enoch, the condemnation he referenced in verse 4 had long been in place and should have been understood.

The Enoch alternative gets closer to Jude’s intent but falls short by limiting the scope of the reference to Enoch. What Jude probably intends is a reference to all of the ancient sources he will use in his argument: the Old Testament (vv. 5–8, 11), Jewish traditions (vv. 9, 14–16), and the teaching of the apostles (vv. 17–18).

“Ungodly people”

Jude said that those who were designated for condemnation were “ungodly” (ἀσεβής; *asebēs*) (v. 4; he used other forms of this word in vv. 15, 18). Douglas Moo summarizes the word’s meaning and significance.

The word connotes a person who is “without religion,” who “fails to worship” (see also Rom. 4:5; 5:6; 1 Tim. 1:19; 1 Peter 4:18; 2 Peter 2:5–6; 3:7). It is broad enough to cover all kinds of sins and errors, but Hellenistic Jews used it especially of irreverence in an ethical sense: “not theoretical atheism, but practical godlessness” (Moo 1996, 230; citing Bauckham 1983, 35–36).

Jude’s use of *asebēs* points to an important feature of his letter which we will merely introduce here: he says little about heresy in doctrinal beliefs but says a great deal about the teachers’ immoral lifestyles.

People who pervert God’s grace

In the next phrase in verse 4, he says that the ungodly teachers were perverting God’s grace, changing (μετατίθημι; *metatithēmi*; see Bauer 2000, 642)² it into “sensuality” (ἀσέλγεια; *aselgeia*), which means a “lack of self-constraint which involves one in conduct that violates all bounds of what is socially acceptable” (Bauer 2000, 141). It is especially associated with sexual sins, drunkenness, gluttony, and related behaviors (Moo 1996, 230).

The problem in view is that grace was being used as a license, based on flawed reasoning that probably argued something like the following: since God resolved the sin problem on the cross, people are free to indulge their desires and live as they please. Those involved may not have vocalized it in those terms, but that was the practical result.

People who deny Jesus

It's not possible to tell from the text whether this was a doctrinal denial of Jesus's status or identity or a practical denial, i.e., whatever their profession about Jesus, they were living as if he was not Master (δεσπότης; *despotēs*) and Lord (κύριος; *kyrios*). Relative to denying Jesus, the verb (ἀρνέομαι; *arneomai*) is used a few times to refer to some who denied his identity (Acts 3.13; 1 John 2.22), but more often it is used to refer to those who would not acknowledge him when under pressure (Matt 10.33; Luke 12.9; Matt 26.70, 72 and parallels; 1 Tim 5.8; 2 Tim 2.12; Rev 2.13; 3.8). The context in Jude with its emphasis on lifestyle suggests that a practical denial is what he had in mind.

Application for Similar Circumstances

Although we like to think the best of people and give them the benefit of the doubt, the reality is that there are always people in the world whose intentions are not pure and whose agendas are unseemly. So, while the parallels may not be exact, Jude's circumstances can teach us some important lessons about dealing with those we face.

First, we should keep in mind that it remains true that not all who claim to follow Jesus are true to his teaching. We should heed John's recommendation to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4.1).

Second, Jude reminds us that false ways are often false in their demonstration as much as in their proclamation. In other words, we may not really see their falseness until we dig more deeply into them. We need to deepen our knowledge of genuine apostolic teaching so we are better able to recognize counterfeits that are often disguised by pleasantly presented rhetoric.

Third, that means we need to be alert and listen critically to what we hear, comparing it to the authentic teaching we are supposed to follow. The oft-used illustration about the training of treasury agents to detect counterfeit money is apt. They are trained to recognize genuine bills—how they are made, what they feel like, features that are built into them that cannot be duplicated by fake bills, and so on (see Challies 2006).³ Whether listening to a sermon or class presentation, reading a book, listening to the lyrics of a song (including spiritual songs), watching a movie, or any other way we are presented with truth claims, we are wise to follow the principle enunciated by Paul: "but test everything; hold fast to what is good" (1 Thess 5.21). Of course, before we can do that, we must know what is good.

Fourth, we must remain aware of the danger of lifestyle sins and their ability to influence thinking and behavior, not just the propositions included in the content of a sermon or class lesson.

Conclusion

Douglas Moo comments about the importance and intensity of Jude's message that is established in his opening remarks:

Jude writes with urgency; we need to sense that urgency and pick some of it up as we read the letter. For false teachers are all about us in our day, and "the faith once for all entrusted to the saints" is battered and attacked on every side. Do we care? Jude sure did! (Moo 1996, 230)

As we face similar challenges today, let us respond with similar urgency!

www.davidanguish.com

Works Cited

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Notes

¹ NIV translates, "secretly slipped in." NJB has "certain people have infiltrated among you."

² Bauer 2000, 642: μετατίθημι; *metatithēmi* – In Homer, etc., "change the position of." (1) "to convey from one place to another, *put in another place, transfer*. (2) "to effect a change in state or condition, *change, alter*. (3) to have a change of mind in allegiance, *change one's mind, turn away, desert*."

³ Tim Challies, who wrote the blog article, "Counterfeit Detection," demonstrates another important habit for detecting what is false: having often heard the illustrations about treasury agent training, he decided to check it for himself and visited a Canadian treasury office to find out firsthand.