

Contend for the Faith

The Characteristics of Past Heretics

Jude 11

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Scripture

The Letter of Jude deals with the subject of false teaching, which is the greatest danger to the Church of Jesus Christ today.

As we study Jude 11 today, I want you to notice the characteristics of past heretics. Let's read Jude 11:

¹¹ Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error and perished in Korah's rebellion. (Jude 11)

Introduction

We live in a culture that for the most part does not believe that truth can be known. For many, truth—if it exists at all—is relative. There is “your truth.” And there is “my truth.” The dictum of our age is: “True for you but not for me.”

But what is “truth”? One definition of truth is “that which corresponds to reality.” This is sometimes known as the *correspondence view* of truth. And I believe it is a valid definition.

But I like John MacArthur's definition of truth: “Truth is what God decrees.”¹ Thus, truth is not any individual's opinion or imagination. Truth is what God declares. And God has given us an infallible source of saving truth in his revealed Word, the Bible.

Pastors should preach and teach the infallible, inerrant, and authoritative Word of God.

And Christians should read the Word, study the Word, meditate on the Word, memorize the Word, and apply the Word.

Are there difficult parts in the Word of God? Absolutely! God himself said, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither

¹ John MacArthur, *The Truth War: Fighting for Certainty in an Age of Uncertainty* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2007), 183.

are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord." (Isaiah 55:8).

In 1 Corinthians 2:16, the apostle Paul paraphrased Isaiah 40:13-14, when he said, "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" To which Paul immediately added, "But we have the mind of Christ." In other words, Christ gives Christians the ability to know, understand, and apply the truth so as to know and serve God rightly.

Although we do not know the mind of God *exhaustively*, we can certainly know it *sufficiently* to respond correctly to his truth.

And so God calls us to fight for the truth. Or, as he put it in the words of Jude, "to contend for the faith" (v. 3).

Review

You recall that Jude began to write this marvelous letter to believers to encourage them with the wonderful truths "about our common salvation" (v. 3a). However, he "found it necessary to write appealing to [the believers] to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (v. 3b).

Why? Because word had reached Jude that false teachers had "crept in unnoticed." They perverted the grace of God into sensuality and denied the deity of Jesus by their character, their conduct, and their creed (v. 4).

Jude said that God's attitude toward false teachers was displayed in implacable judgment. He pointed to God's attitude in his judgment of unbelieving individuals, rebellious angels, and sinful communities (vv. 5-7).

Jude then gave a description of false teachers. He said that false teachers were immoral (they "defile the flesh"), insubordinate (they "reject authority"), and irreverent (they "blaspheme the glorious ones") (vv. 8-10).

Lesson

In our lesson today, Jude described the characteristics of past

heretics. By doing so he demonstrated that the false teachers of the present day were remarkably similar to the heretics of the past.

I. They Disobeyed God (11a)

First, past heretics disobeyed God.

Jude said in verse 11a, **“Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain. . . .”**

By exclaiming **“Woe to them!”** Jude was using a familiar Jewish expression. **“Woe”** is “a state of intense hardship or distress.”² Even today, Jewish people will sometimes say, “Oi vay!” This is the same as saying, “Oh woe!” It is an exclamation that something terrible is happening or is about to happen.

Jesus pronounced “woes,” for example, on the scribes and Pharisees (in Matthew 23:13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29). He was pronouncing ultimate spiritual judgment on them.

In the same way, Jude, by exclaiming **“Woe to them!”** was pronouncing that something terrible was going to happen to the false teachers and heretics. And that is the unmitigated wrath of God, which will end in their judgment and destruction in hell.

The first example of a past heretic is **Cain**. Jude said that false teachers are like past heretics in that **they walked in the way of Cain**.

Cain was the first child of Adam and Eve. He was born after the Fall of Adam. Genesis 4:1-16 gives the account of **Cain**:

¹ Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.” ² And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. ³ In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, ⁴ and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very an-

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996), 242.

gry, and his face fell. ⁶ The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? ⁷ If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.”

⁸ Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. ⁹ Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” ¹⁰ And the Lord said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground. ¹¹ And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” ¹³ Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is greater than I can bear. ¹⁴ Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.” ¹⁵ Then the Lord said to him, “Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him. ¹⁶ Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

The fact that Cain’s sacrifice was unacceptable to God means that God had previously told him what constituted a proper sacrifice. A proper sacrifice was a blood sacrifice. Cain knew that but brought a fruit sacrifice instead.

He disobeyed God by inventing his own form of worship. He clearly disobeyed God and decided that he would decide how to worship God.

When God did not accept Cain’s form of self-styled worship, he responded with anger. He was so angry that he actually killed his brother Abel, who had worshipped God correctly with the proper blood sacrifice.

Like Cain who rejected God’s requirement of a blood sacrifice, theological liberals today reject the blood sacrifice of Christ as a substitutionary atonement for sin. They believe that Jesus was

merely a martyr who gave his life for a cause as an example to follow. In other words, they say that it is not necessary to believe in Christ alone for salvation.

But, dear friends, this is the way of **Cain**. False teachers and heretics disobey God and make up their own way of worship and salvation. And this will bring **woe** upon them.

So, past heretics disobeyed God.

II. They Influenced Others to Disobey God (11b)

Second, past heretics influenced others to disobey God.

Jude said in verse 11b “. . . **and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam’s error. . . .**”

The story of Balaam is given to us in Numbers 22-24. It is a fascinating story. The Israelites were marching through the wilderness to take over the land of Canaan. Balak, the king of Moab (on the east side of the Dead Sea), did not like that. So, he hired Balaam, a prophet, to curse Israel.

Balaam was not too sure that he wanted to do that because he had some fear of God in his soul. At one point Balaam’s donkey even challenged him to do the right thing. So, some have said that Balaam is the only person in history to be rebuked by a jackass!

Since he was unable to put a curse on Israel, but he desired Balak’s money, Balaam persuaded the women of Moab and Midian to seduce the Israelites to commit immorality and idolatry (Numbers 31:16; Revelation 2:14). He might have believed that God would have had to punish them, and that therefore Balak’s purpose would be realized.

Unfortunately, the plan worked. When the interaction of the Israelites with the women of Moab and Midian threatened to weaken the nation of Israel, God brought punishment upon his people. Balak got what he wanted: a curse upon the people of God.

But do you know how the story ended? Numbers 31:8, 16-17 tells us how God punished those who had seduced his people:

⁸ They [i.e., the Israelites] killed the kings of Midian with the rest of their slain, Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian. And they also killed Balaam the son of Beor with the sword. . . . ¹⁶ Behold, these, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the Lord. ¹⁷ Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man by lying with him.

Balaam influenced others to disobey God. The reason he did so was, as Jude said, **for the sake of gain**. Jude was a “prophet for hire.”

This is the error of the Health and Wealth Movement today. They are usually on TV but not always. Several years ago when I was visiting Ciudad Victoria I was struck by one of the nicest-looking homes in the city. I learned that it did not belong to a wealthy businessman, politician, or professional. No, it belonged to the American Prosperity Preacher who lived in luxury while the people around him, many of whom attended his church, were living in poverty.

Balaam's error is alive and well in the Church of Jesus Christ today. There are false teachers who, **for the sake of gain**, influence others to disobey God. That, too, will bring **woe** upon them.

So, past heretics disobeyed God. And they influenced others to disobey God.

III. They Led a Full Rebellion against God (11c)

And third, past heretics led a full rebellion against God.

Jude said in verse 11c, “. . . **and perished in Korah's rebellion.**”

Korah was a cousin of Moses. He was a Levite and a Kohathite, and had significant duties in the tabernacle (Number 1:50-51; 3:6-8; 18:3). However, when **Korah** was not chosen as a priest, he became irate. He envied Moses as God's mediator.

Numbers 16:1-3 describes **Korah's rebellion**:

¹ Now Korah the son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men. ² And they rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, 250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men. ³ They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?”

Korah said that the people did not need leader who would speak for God and teach them God’s truth (Exodus 4:10-17). He openly rebelled against the authority that God had given to Moses, and he actively recruited people to support his spiritual mutiny.

God responded by crushing **Korah’s rebellion**. Interestingly, the word translated as **rebellion** (*antilogia*) literally means “against the word.” **Korah** rebelled against the clear Word of God. The result was that **Korah** and all those with him **perished**. Numbers 16:32-35 gives us the account:

³² And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods. ³³ So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. ³⁴ And all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, “Lest the earth swallow us up!” ³⁵ And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men offering the incense.

But, if that was not bad enough, many of the Israelites—having grown sympathetic to Korah’s position—grumbled against Moses and Aaron. It led to God sending a plague that killed a further 14,700 Israelites. We read about this in Numbers 16:41-50:

⁴¹ But on the next day all the congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, saying, “You

have killed the people of the Lord.”⁴² And when the congregation had assembled against Moses and against Aaron, they turned toward the tent of meeting. And behold, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord appeared.⁴³ And Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting,⁴⁴ and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,⁴⁵ “Get away from the midst of this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.” And they fell on their faces.⁴⁶ And Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer, and put fire on it from off the altar and lay incense on it and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone out from the Lord; the plague has begun.”⁴⁷ So Aaron took it as Moses said and ran into the midst of the assembly. And behold, the plague had already begun among the people. And he put on the incense and made atonement for the people.⁴⁸ And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped.⁴⁹ Now those who died in the plague were 14,700, besides those who died in the affair of Korah.⁵⁰ And Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance of the tent of meeting, when the plague was stopped.

Korah is an example of someone who leads a full rebellion against God—with tragic consequences. **Korah** is an example of false teachers who say that sinful people do not need a Savior to serve as a mediator between themselves and God. They teach the “fatherhood of God.” They say that God is not only the *creator* of all people but that he is also the *father* of all people. All people have direct access to God apart from Christ. They say that Christ’s death did not open the way to God because all people have direct access to God. They say that God is too loving to send anyone to hell. They say that if there is such a thing as sin, they are sure that God is only too glad to overlook it.

Korah’s rebellion is also alive and well in the Church of Jesus Christ today. There are false teachers who are leading a **rebellion** against God and his truth. That, too, will bring **woe** upon them.

So, past heretics disobeyed God. They influenced others to disobey God. And they led a full rebellion against God.

Conclusion

Cain depicts false teachers who disobey God.

Balaam depicts false teachers who influence others to disobey God.

And Korah depicts false teachers who lead a full rebellion against God.

I think Jude intended his readers to understand that there is a remarkable regression of heresy in verse 11. It begins with false teachers who **walked** in the way of Cain. It continues with false teachers who **abandoned** themselves to Balaam's error for money. Finally, it ends with false teachers who **perished** in Korah's rebellion. Do you see that? **Walked. Abandoned. Perished.** That is always the way of heresy. It never corrects itself. It accelerates into greater error and heresy.

Further, by walking the way of Cain, false teachers have rejected the true way. By abandoning themselves to Balaam's error, false teachers have rejected the truth. And by rebelling against God and perishing because of God's judgment, false teachers have rejected life.

This is the antithesis of John 14:6, where Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." False teachers reject "the way, and the truth, and the life" for the way of self-styled worship, financial greed, and outright rebellion against the Word of God. That is why Jude said, **"Woe to them!"**

Let me close with two points of application. *First, commit yourself to the truth.* There is not such a thing as a truth for me and a truth for you. Truth is what God decrees. He is truth. And his Word is truth. Truth can be known and understood. Don't thoughtlessly believe any teacher who opens a Bible and says, "The Bible says. . . ." You must make sure that the teacher who opens the Bible is teaching the Bible accurately, the way God intended for it to be taught.

I have said it before, and I say it again: you must check what

I say as well. Acts 17:11 says, “Now these Jews [i.e., the Bereans] were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” If the Bereans needed to check Paul to make sure that he was teaching God’s Word accurately, you had better check me! And you can only do that if you are committed to knowing the truth yourself.

And second, do not support the ministries of false teachers. As I have said previously, there are far more false teachers around the world than there are true teachers. And even in our community we have false teachers. Don’t be fooled by their eloquence or their winsomeness. Pay attention to what they say and how accurately it corresponds to the teaching of God’s Word.

Well, may God give all of us discerning minds so that we can commit ourselves to the truth of God and spot false teaching. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, how grateful we are for your Word, which is the word of truth. I pray that we may always cherish your Word.

We understand why Jude was so concerned about false teaching. It is not something you take lightly. He gave terrifying illustrations of past heretics distorted your truth and promoted heresy.

Help each one of us here today to recognize false teachers so that we are not duped by their heretical teaching. And help us also to commit ourselves to the truth.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

To you who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ:

May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Amen.