

October 28, 2018

“Holding Fast and Rejecting the False -
Lessons from the Life of J. Gresham Machen
Jude 1-4

FCF: The ongoing danger and question of false teaching

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Since Christ has accomplished our salvation, (magnet) we must hold fast to Him and reject false ways.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

In the context of a worship service, is it right to take time to examine the life of a mortal man? Well, praise can be found in any of God’s image bearers for we all reflect something of Him. That’s true of every person. Pushing this further, how much so in the lives of His people?

Consider this quote from John Piper ([READ The Legacy of Sovereign Joy](#)):

God ordains that we gaze on his glory, dimly mirrored in the ministry of his flawed servants. He intends for us to consider their lives and peer through the imperfections of their faith and behold the beauty of their God.

The point being there is so much to be gained here. If we will have but the humility to listen.

But that begs a question, “Why John Gresham Machen?” Two things - what he stood for and the post-truth times in which we live. Perception and feeling is what matters. Evidence and facts don’t. It’s an age of “truthiness”. Older and wiser heads would call that “living in denial”.

Which brings us to the book of Jude and lessons from the life of J. Gresham Machen.

SCRIPTURE READING: Jude 1-4

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Who was J. Gresham Machen and why should we care? Here’s a sketch ([READ quote](#)):

Living from 1881 to 1937, Machen was an American Presbyterian theologian in the early 20th century. He was professor of New Testament at Princeton Seminary between 1906 and 1929. When the northern presbyterian church rejected his arguments during the mid-1920’s and decided to move Princeton Seminary in a more liberal direction, Machen took the lead in founding Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS).

His opposition during the 1930’s to liberalism in his denomination’s foreign missions agencies led to the creation of a new missions group. The trial, conviction, and suspension from the ministry of this group’s members, including Machen, led to the formation of a new denomination, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). Machen’s influence can still be felt today through his writings and the institutions he founded - WTS and the OPC.

There’s much more that could be said. For instance, here’s a sampling of Westminster graduates - Alistair Begg, Wayne Grudem, Tim Keller, Philip Ryken, and Francis Schaeffer. Then consider the WTS graduates who have become professors at other schools and all those they have trained.

Which brings us to the letter of Jude. Jude was the brother of James, a pillar of the early church. He was also a half-brother of Jesus, born sometime later to Mary and Joseph. This is a short letter, written in the mid-60’s, warning its readers of the dangers of false teaching and the need to persevere. Clearly, it presupposes historical events - the finished work of Christ and His resurrection from the dead. All of that is so very clear and is the basis of Jude’s great concern. Since Christ has accomplished our salvation, we must hold fast to Him and reject false ways.

This comes out in three areas. First, the clarity of faith. Second, the reality of danger. And, third, the necessity to stand. Let’s look at this and some lessons from Machen as well.

I. THE CLARITY OF FAITH

First, the clarity of faith. By that, I mean the objective fact of a known and received body of truth about Jesus and the exclusive means of salvation we find in Him ([READ Jude 3](#)).

A) *Original Plan*

1. Content

The content of what Jude had intended to write was more general, exalting the fellowship he and his readers shared together with the living God. We can but imagine what that would have been.

2. Intent

What he actually wrote is quite combative, filled with strong statements and fighting words. He was not looking for a fight but found it necessary to enter into it. We'll get to that in a minute.

B) *Body of Belief*

Jude held forth a body of belief ([READ Jude 3b](#)). What is he referring to here?

1. Apostolic teaching

The apostolic teaching handed down by the mercy of God to the people of God. A message of good news. A message no longer open but closed. It did not come from man but from God.

2. Objective standard

And, as such, it served as an objective standard by which what is true or false can be gauged.

Even in our post-truth times, Jude is setting before us the clarity of the faith.

Illustration:

Thinking of Machen, it's worth knowing the context of his labors. Others had identified certain fundamentals of the faith - the Bible's inspiration and inerrancy, Christ's virgin birth, His substitutionary atonement, His bodily resurrection, His performance of miracles - as unnecessary to Christianity. Desiring to be relevant, they said Christianity becomes real and meaningful as it is borne out in experience. To which Machen said Christianity should be real and meaningful, bearing itself out in experience. But it could only be that if it's true and in accord with history.

Application:

We need Machen's sort of clear thinking today, like a good whiff of smelling salts. You may have heard of a recent survey, *The State of Theology*. A cross-section of Americans were asked a host of questions. The trends are confusing and concerning. On the one hand, many would say the Bible is absolutely true. And on the other, on moral issues, anything goes. And we need to ask ourselves, "How have we contributed to this? And how are we affected by this?"

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II. THE REALITY OF DANGER

That brings us to the reality of the danger. Obviously, something shifted Jude's agenda. There had been an incursion. There were wolves let loose among the sheep ([READ Jude 4](#)).

A) *What Had Happened*

1. An infection

What had happened? This was an infection - a twisting of the gospel, the forgiveness of sin without freedom from sin. Along with that, a denial of the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ.

2. The description

All through individuals described as predicted, creeping, godless, sensual, and heretical.

B) What Was Threatened

That was what had happened. What was threatened? What then was at stake?

1. The new identity

The new identity (**READ Jude 1a**). Jude describes himself as the brother of James but not Jesus. Why? Because of who his brother was - Jesus Christ, our only Master and Lord. So James now sees himself as a servant of Jesus. This is what the gospel brings - deep profound humility.

2. The rich assurance

And not just that but rich assurance as well (**READ Jude 1b-2**). Called, beloved, and kept - this is who they were now. Mercy, peace, and love - these are the things Jesus desired for them.

The new identity and rich assurance - this is what was at stake. All of this sits on the bedrock of the reality of the gospel. The bedrock was threatened. That was the reality of danger.

Illustration:

Machen understood this. He had not just an academic mind but a pastoral heart. He saw the stakes. Machen knew all too well that ideas have consequences. And bad ideas have victims.

Listen to these quotes from his classic work, Christianity and Liberalism (**READ quotes**):

The grace of God is rejected by modern liberalism. And the result is slavery - the slavery of the law, the wretched bondage by which man undertakes the impossible task of establishing his own righteousness as a ground of acceptance with God. It may seem strange at first sight that 'liberalism,' of which the very name means freedom, should in reality be wretched slavery. But the phenomenon is not really strange. Emancipation from the blessed will of God always involves bondage to some worse taskmaster...

Weary with the conflicts of the world, one goes into the Church to seek refreshment for the soul. Alas, too often, one finds only the turmoil of the world. The preacher comes forward, not out of a secret place of meditation and power, not with the authority of God's Word permeating his message, not with human wisdom pushed far into the background by the glory of the Cross, but with human opinions about the social problems of the hour or easy solutions of the vast problem of sin. Such is the sermon.

Application:

Back to Jude. We must not be naive. He is not the only one to warn us of such danger. Paul, Peter, and John do as well. Repeatedly. And each was but echoing the words of Jesus.

We must grapple with the reality of false teaching and its dangers. For damaged doctrine damages people. Think back to Psalm 1 and the contrast between what is rooted and the chaff.

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III. THE NECESSITY TO STAND

That takes us to the necessity to stand. The danger demands a response (**READ Jude 3**).

A) Contending for the Faith

There are two things here. First, the what we are to do - to contend for the faith.

1. Image

This is an image from the athletic arena, likely a wrestling match. Jude has in mind something that involves a strenuous struggle, something that must be continuous and may prove costly.

2. Meaning

This contending will mean mental exertion - striving to understand opposing ideas and how to engage them. This contending will mean moral exertion - striving not just to talk but to walk this out, to live in a consistent manner with the faith we profess, especially when under duress.

B) Contending in the Faith

What are we to do? To contend for the faith. But how? By contending in the faith.

1. With conviction

Again, consistency is called for. We are to contend with conviction. Conviction as to whose hand is upon us, whose strength is in us, who ordains all times, and who alone can change hearts.

2. With compassion

We are to contend with conviction. But also with compassion. Think with me here. It is not the gospel of grace for which we are contending if we do not so in a gracious manner. We must always speak the truth in love. Otherwise, it is better not to speak at all. That is a serious thing.

Jude is speaking here to the necessity to stand - both the what and the how.

Illustration:

Machen preached his last sermon at Princeton on March 3, 1929. It was called "The Good Fight of Faith". In it, he examined the life of the Apostle Paul and pointed out the chief battles Paul fought were against the enemies in his own camp. There was conflict all the time.

And something paradoxical at work. In Paul, we see that the peace that comes only with the gospel sends us into battle. And that peace alone can sustain us in the battle ([READ quote](#)):

Those who have been at the foot of the Cross will not be afraid to go forth under the banner of the Cross to a holy war of love...Peace indeed is yours, the peace of God which passeth all understanding. But that peace is given you, not that you may be onlookers or neutrals in love's battle, but that you may be good soldiers of Jesus Christ.

Application:

Those are words not just for seminarians in 1929. They are for us today as well. With the gospel, we have peace - a peace that sends us into battle. And then sustains us in that battle.

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CONCLUSION:

The stakes are clear. What of the guarantees? There's a sense in which we don't know how this will turn out. You might say we have no guarantees. Think of Machen's experience. He was constrained to leave his beloved Princeton. He was forced out of the church in which he was ordained. He died at age 55 on January 1, 1937 of pneumonia brought on by overwork and a series of engagements in North Dakota. Some might say it was a waste and an untimely death.

We have no guarantees. But there's another sense in which we have every guarantee. For truly, in the Lord's sight, nothing is untimely or wasted. Even in this life, King Jesus is ever working in mysterious ways. And, beyond that, given what He has promised, we have assurance that a day is coming when He shall return. Our faith will be made sight. All wrongs will be made right. Every knee shall bow. And every one of His beloved witnesses will be upheld. Nothing is untimely or wasted. In the greatest possible sense, we really have every guarantee.

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