

Countering Nominal Christianity (3)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 March 2013

Preacher: Rev. James Maciver

[0 : 00] Let's turn back this morning to the letter of Jude, and the letter of Jude and looking at verses 22 and 23 especially.

We can just read from verse 20. But you beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.

And have mercy on those who doubt, save others by snatching them out of the fire, to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.

Now we've been looking briefly at Jude's letter, and noticing how it is really a letter that's addressed to countering nominal Christianity.

We see something of what that was very briefly, that was to do with fundamental changes in doctrine, and the related ethics, the way of life that's tied up with doctrine and what we believe.

[1 : 09] But we also saw, last time, how that is something we need to build ourselves up against. We saw how this kind of thing comes into the church very imperceptibly, very sneakily.

It just creeps in, as we find there, as we saw the first study in verse 4. Certain people have crept in unnoticed. Last time we noticed, verses 20 and 21, how we have to keep ourselves in the love of God.

It's one of the chief things that he mentions here, in seeking to protect ourselves against being led away, or straying from the faith, from that which is fundamental in its doctrine, the doctrines of the faith, the salvation, as we've seen it, that's what the faith means.

And how in protecting ourselves, or guarding ourselves, is within the love of God that we do that. The love that God has for his people, and the provision that God has made in his love.

And we saw how that was by way of building ourselves up upon our most holy faith. Building our lives upon that foundation of the salvation that is in Christ, of the doctrines that God has given us as foundational.

[2 : 25] And how it's also praying in the Holy Spirit, coming to pray properly. Praying in the way that is led by the Holy Spirit, which all true prayer is.

Even the agonies and wrestlings with God that sometimes you need to have in prayer. And also how it is also anticipating the return of Christ.

Looking forward eagerly to that mercy, to that reception that Christ is going to give his people, that leads to eternal life. That's in many ways just been looking inwardly.

That's looking in on ourselves as the church of God, and seeking to live in that way that protects ourselves against being led away, or straying from the faith.

Now we're going to look, or Lucas, sorry, Jude is coming to look at how we must also look outwardly. Because what he's got in mind in verses 22 and 23, you might say is really just a rescue service.

[3 : 27] When you join the followers of Christ, you're joining a rescue service. You're becoming a first responder to the emergencies that exist in society.

I don't mean by that emergencies in the sense of when people really fall on truly hard times. What I mean by that, and what Jude means by that, is that we become rescuers in the sense of going after and seeking to recover those who have strayed from the faith, as well as those who have never belonged to the faith in the first place.

Those who have never belonged to the church of God, and those who have visibly, or in a formal fashion anyway, belonged to the church, and like those in Jude's day have been led away by other kinds of teaching, have given half a year at least to the other philosophies that exist in the world, and have gone away from the gospel, gone away from the church, gone away from the faith.

We are rescuers, he's telling us, those of us who belong to the church, and particularly those of us who know the Lord, and those of us who are His, and have come to know Him as our Lord, and as our Saviour.

He places us, when He places us among His followers, He places us in the rescue team. And the language that Jude uses here is actually very strong.

[4 : 47] In other words he says here, snatching them out of the fire. He talks about garments stained by the flesh. We'll see what that means in a minute. But it's very graphic imagery.

It's the kind of, it's a picture of things that really show, there's a sense of urgency about this. Snatching people out of the fire means that you're acting as if you're going past a house that's caught fire, and there are people trapped within it, and you have the facility to take them out. You don't stand watching it. You don't stand looking for somebody else to come along. You obviously in that situation would do your utmost, even at times, perhaps even to the danger, endangering your own health and life, to actually rescue people out of that situation.

Because as far as Jude is concerned, that's what everybody is like, that's what people are like, that's the kind of situation, the kind of context people are in, when they are not in the faith.

It's an emergency situation. Because they are in danger of the fire. They are close to destruction. And that's why they're in need of rescue.

[6 : 02] Well, who are in need of rescue? Well, here we find at least two groups. Some commentators say there are actually three. And the translation here in the ASV has followed that, because the language of the verses is somewhat difficult in Greek, and some different translations take different views of what they mean.

But if we keep it to the two groups, there are those who are doubters, you might say. Those who are not fully against the gospel at all.

And it seems in Jude's day that they were probably people who did belong outwardly to the church, but were led astray by false teaching. The false teachers that he mentioned that had crept into the church and had actually led them away, so they were no longer squarely set on the faith.

And even if they were attending church services, they weren't certainly committed to Christ and to following Christ. And they were in a category of doubters. They weren't fully away or fully opposed to the faith or to the gospel, but they weren't committed to a dinner.

They were sort of wavering. And that's what the word doubt actually means. But there were other ones that were, you might say, the convinced ones. The ones who were convinced against the gospel.

[7 : 19] The ones who were convinced that this was not, this definitely was not for them and that there was something about it that they just didn't want to know. And even if they had once belonged to those who had been in the church, they were certainly no longer like that.

They were convinced and vehemently set against it. Now the point is that when you think of both groups, the point is not asking ourselves were they ever saved or not.

Even if they had once attended services or church activities in Jude's day, the point he's making is not to ask the question, well, I wonder if they were saved or if they're not.

That, of course, is an important question, but that's not the one that Jude is dealing with, because ultimately only God knows that. We have to assume, as Jude is actually saying, that those who don't show that they belong to the faith, even those who might be near, but yet are not committed, as well as those who are outside, they're all in danger.

They're all actually facing the kind of situation where you've got somebody trapped in a house that's on fire, and if they're not rescued, they're going to die. Everybody who dies today without being saved will go to hell.

[8 : 38] The fire of hell that the Bible speaks about, I know people don't like this kind of language and this kind of idea, but it's part of the gospel. You and I believe it, you and I understand, that's what God is saying to us.

I know there are ways of saying it, and there are ways in which we present it that are not acceptable. But still, that's the truth of it. Everybody who dies today before this Lord's day is done, who are not saved, will actually be lost.

And we're lost in the way that the Bible speaks about. That's why it's an emergency. That's why it's such a solemn thing. They are in danger of the fire.

Therefore, the urgency of the situation is really brought out by Jude. He says, You're rescuers, and as the people of God, the rescuing ought to be a prime priority, a prime thing of importance in your thinking and in your actions.

So let's see what he's saying. He's talking about these ones who doubt, first of all. Have mercy on those who doubt. They are the first ones, he mentions, are in need of rescue.

[9 : 57] Seems that they're drawn away, but yet they have some reservations. They're not quite sure where they stand, perhaps. They're not sure about committing themselves to the Lord and to following Him.

Yet they're not sure about going away from them altogether, kind of hedging their bets. They're wavering. They're hesitating. They're in between, if you like. And, in fact, there are some people like that, very often like that, even within the church, and within the hearing of the gospel, and within the church formally and openly.

Maybe there's someone, maybe it's even yourself today, you find yourself perhaps in that category. Maybe this is a description of yourself, that you're one of the doubters.

That you're someone who would not oppose the gospel openly, who would say you believe in God, who would say that all of these things you find in the Bible are convincing, in the sense that you believe Christ rose from the dead, that He did all these things that the Bible mentions about Him, that God sent Him into the world to die for sinners.

But yet there's still that uncertainty, there's still that wavering, there's still that hesitation in committing your life to Him, and to God, and to coming to know God as your Father.

[11 : 13] There's a situation where, you remember Elijah on Mount Carmel, when he had that great contest with the prophets of Baal, the false prophets, in many ways what Jude is saying, is illustrated by Elijah's time.

The prophets of Baal, who had infiltrated the people so much, and under the way that Jezebel, especially Ahab's wife, had promoted the cult of Baal in Israel at the time.

She was their patron, and through her patronage, these false prophets had increased, and were doing their deadly work amongst the people. And so many of the people had come to accept the teachings of the false prophets, and the worship of Baal, and displaced the worship of God by that. And you remember that Elijah gathered them all together on Mount Carmel to this great contest, and before the contest actually took place, this is what he introduced it by saying, how long are you going to hesitate, or the word really is to limp along, between two opinions.

If God be God, serve him. If Baal be God, serve him. And that's really pretty much what Jude is saying in regard to reaching out and saving the doubters.

[12 : 36] The doubters are people who are limping between two opinions. And that's why it's such an important thing, what Jude is saying.

And what Elijah was saying to them, basically was this, decide. It's time for decisions. It's time to actually make up your mind before it gets too late.

And the time is now, Elijah was saying, how long are you going to limp along between two opinions? If God be God, serve him. Do it.

And along with that, there's the convinced. Mercy on those who doubt, save others by snatching them out of the fire. To others show mercy with fear, hating the garment, even stained by the flesh. Well, there's the convinced. Don't we need to say about that for the moment? It's just that there were people who were convinced against the faith, just like you find out in our communities today, people who will tell you, I just don't believe the Bible anymore.

[13 : 41] I really don't want to think about the Bible being a basis for life, for my life in terms of moral standards, in terms of what I do with my life, in terms of what's beyond this present life in this world.

They've listened to some teaching or other that's convinced them that the Bible's not true, that it's not something relevant anymore to human life or human society. They're convinced against the faith.

Does that mean you just leave them? Does it mean that you say about them, well, there's no point in going to these people, they're not going to actually believe and accept the gospel anyway.

They're saying to me, they're convinced against it, so what's the point? Let's just leave them where they are. No, Judas is saying. You rescue us. You don't leave people in the midst of a fire just because they say, I don't think it's worthwhile being rescued anymore, or I don't believe that you

should actually come and interfere with my life.

You just get on with the job when you rescue them. Now, it means that in terms of how we approach things, there might be a very big difference between how you approach someone who's a doubter and someone who's a convinced opposer of the gospel.

[14 : 53] Maybe that's why Judas is using the kind of language there that says snatching them out of the fire. Sometimes you need the kind of approach that's very firm and very robust and just really deals with things bluntly.

Other times you need to be gentle, you need to be patient. Whatever methods must be used, and there is a variety, and you need to take account of what people are like, the fact is we have to be rescuers.

We have to see people are in danger, and that people are in danger perhaps without even knowing it. And we who have the gospel have the privilege of knowing that there are people in need of rescue, and that as they stand in need of rescue, we are the people that God has given the privilege of being rescuers to.

We are the ones that God has instructed to be the first responders to the emergency. Well, is that how we see things today? Are we as Christians concerned with those who are outside of the faith to the extent that we see them in great danger?

Are we concerned so as to be moved to do our utmost whatever we can do? It doesn't have to be something that's very prominent publicly. It doesn't have to be something that people admire.

[16 : 21] It doesn't have to be something where you're in the leadership of the church. It doesn't have to be anything like that. But everyone who knows Christ is a rescuer, is a first responder, has something to do to reach out for the rescue of those who are in danger.

And how are we to do it then? How is that rescue to be carried out? Well, there are three things that he mentions in the way that we are to seek to rescue people. And of course, when we're saying rescue, it doesn't mean that we actually come to save them spiritually.

God alone can save. But we are the way in which God comes to use the means that we are, the instruments that we are, in order to actually come to have people saved.

Well, the first thing is show mercy. Have mercy on those who doubt. Now, you ask, well, what is mercy? And in order to define what mercy is, you need to go to God himself first.

And realize that the mercy that we must show is patterned on the mercy that God has shown to us. Mercy presupposes, and mercy, in order to understand what mercy is, you have to actually see that the people who receive mercy are totally undeserving of it.

[17 : 43] If I was deserving of mercy, what I receive would not be mercy. Mercy means you give something to someone who doesn't deserve what you give them.

In fact, when you think about ourselves, it's not just that we don't deserve God's mercy in which we find his pardon and forgiveness of sin and his acceptance of us and all the rest of it that comes to us in Christ and is displayed by Christ.

It's not just that we don't deserve all of that. We actually deserve the very opposite of it. And that's why mercy is such a wonderful thing. Because the mercy you receive from God is mercy of which you say, Lord, I deserved the opposite of this, which is your condemnation.

That's what me, that's what I as a sinner actually deserve. And instead of that, God has gone to the other extreme. And he's given me what I don't deserve, he's given me in his mercy to know his forgiveness, his acceptance, his salvation.

And that mercy of God is the pattern for our own mercy. We show mercy as God has shown mercy to us.

[19 : 08] We show in that same way mercy to those who are in need, to those that need to be rescued. In other words, we're not to be selective. We cannot actually say to people about people in our communities, well, yes, that person and that person, these are the targets of my evangelism, these are the people that I must go to with the gospel, but I can't really go to others because they're not the same as myself, they wouldn't understand anyway, I find them very awkward people.

Whatever ways we actually make up reasons, why we leave people out of the scope of our mercy, they're all illegitimate. I know that makes difficulties and it makes difficulties and challenges for us, but that's how it must be.

Because when you think of the mercy of God, the mercy of God is for sinners of all kinds. And the mercy of the rescuers that God's people are to be is for all kinds of people, not selective, not the

people we would choose ourselves, but everybody who needs to be rescued is to be the target of our rescue.

And not only that, but it means that we take the initiative. God didn't wait until we came to him to ask for his forgiveness forgiveness before deciding to be merciful to us.

He took the first step. He came towards us. He came across the great divide that our sin caused.

And he came across that great divide reaching out to us in our lostness in his mercy.

[21 : 02] As the psalmist said as we sang, Lord, if you were to mark out iniquity, who could stand? But with you there is mercy, with you there is forgiveness.

You have come across to us in your mercy, so that you may be feared, so that you may be respected. And that's the pattern for our mercy as well. Not only do we think about it in terms of applying it to everybody as we see their need of being rescued, but we take the initiative.

The people of God are instructed by God, having the pattern of God's mercy itself, their instruction to go in his name, to take the initiative, to reach out towards those who are in need of rescue.

That's the first thing. We do it in mercy, in reaching out in mercy. Second thing, snatching them out of the fire. Well, that means, obviously it's an emergency situation.

You see something on fire, you know that somebody may be trapped in that fire. You have to do everything in your utmost, as we said, to get them out. You snatch them out of the fire. It's a phrase taken from Amos chapter 4 verse 11, where God is speaking through Amos about Israel, and that Israel was by him, by God, snatched as a brand from the burning, as a burning piece of wood that you want to preserve, you didn't want to lose, you pluck it out of the fire, you don't let it get destroyed.

[22 : 37] That's what he's saying happened to Israel. That's how God rescued them from Egypt. They were near, disaster. But God reached out and plucked them as a brand, as a stick from the burning.

And that's the imagery behind the rescuers, and the rescuing of those who need to be rescued. snatching them out of the fire. Whatever that says in terms of method and abruptness, I think the main emphasis in it is the urgency of the situation.

The fire is about to devour them. They are so near the fire, they are about to be burnt. You don't leave them, you go and snatch them out of it.

You do everything possible to rescue them. The problem, of course, is that people don't realize that they are actually near the fire.

That's one of the problems of our sinfulness and our fallenness. We do not realize, until God brings it home to us, just how dangerous it is to be unsaved.

[23 : 48] Just what a dangerous situation it is to be without Christ, to be without faith in Christ, without the salvation that is in him being ours, properly and in our possession.

It's as dangerous spiritually as somebody whose house is on fire and is in need of being rescued. That's why Jude is using this language.

We could choose, of course, not to believe that and not to accept it and to dismiss it. The truth of it is still there. It's not going to go away. It's still true whether we accept it or not. Just as every other aspect of truth is.

And today if you're a doubter, if you're wavering, if you know that this is what the Bible is saying but still you're hesitating, well what Jude is saying and what God is saying through Jude is don't wait for the rescuer to reach you.

Don't wait for the church to do what it ought to be doing in its business of rescuing you. Because sometimes the church isn't up to the job. If you're today hesitating in leaving what's on fire and about to catch up with you, leave it.

[25 : 06] If you were in your own house, God forbid, and was on fire, you wouldn't actually wait until the rescuers came and say, well I can't leave this place until the rescuer takes me out.

You'd get out. You'd do everything you power to save yourself. You'd leave everything behind in order to save yourself and others. How much more with your soul?

How much more with your salvation? How much more with our acceptance with God? How much more with our eternity? Snatching them, he says, out of the fire.

Now that's addressed to the rescuers, that's addressed to those who must look at the situation as an emergency situation, who must engage in evangelism, in the work of recovery, whether it's people who strayed from the church, or people who've never been in the church, doesn't really

matter, at the end of the day, it's a rescue job, whatever way you regard people, whatever way they've come to be outside of the faith.

But it's also addressed to any today who are here, and not yet committed their life to Christ, you're in great danger.

[26 : 18] And every day that goes on, the danger gets greater for you. The fire is getting closer. You've got to get out of it.

You've got to stop hesitating. You've got to make the move. You've got to actually accept and decide for Christ.

Snatching from the fire, the urgency of the situation, the action that knows the situation is urgent. So there's mercy, there's that urgent action, and there's with fear.

To others show mercy with fear, hating even the garments stained by the flesh. The fear there would appear to be not just the fear of God, which is reverence and awe of God, although that's possibly part of it, there's also, well that itself leads into fear of contamination, the contamination of sin.

The imagery there, the garments stained by the flesh, it's a very graphic, sometimes the Bible shocks us by its language when you really come to understand what it's saying.

[27 : 32] This is undergarments, the word that's used is chiton in Greek, it's the undergarment then, in those days worn under your outer garments. The kind of thing that Jesus wore, that was of one piece, and its undergarments soiled by bodily discharges.

If you had somebody's undergarments soiled by bodily discharges, you wouldn't put them on, you wouldn't actually want to wear them, obviously. Well that's the illustration that Jude is using for sin and for a sinful lifestyle, even people who live a very sinful, openly sinful lifestyle, and therefore have defiled their lives as the Bible describes sin as defiling us, that's the kind of picture that Jude is giving us there of the soiled undergarments, well that's the kind of, when a lifestyle is lived openly in sin, that's the kind of thing that's used to describe it.

And when you go and rescue these people, you have to be careful that you don't actually take something of their lifestyle to yourself, and are sucked in, or drawn away, as some people have been, to the kind of lifestyle Jude is seeing, perhaps even some who once belonged to the church. What he's saying is, you're going to be tempted when you're dealing with people who need rescued. The lifestyle some of them live will be a temptation to yourselves.

You're going to find some of the practices of sin, and the pleasures of sin, and the things of this world that are sinful in themselves. You're going to find these presented to you as if they're attractive, and indeed as they are attractive to the flesh, to your own inner sinful lusts.

[29 : 31] That's why many people have come to grief in trying to rescue others from a sinful lifestyle. They themselves were tempted, and led us through, and led into the very things they were trying to rescue others from.

Why, we have to be careful. That's why this is balanced up by the previous verses. Keep yourselves in the love of God. As rescuers, don't yourselves be led away into, straying from the faith.

And the best way of ensuring that, of course, is to keep yourself in the love of God. That means love holiness. Don't just practice it formally, love it.

Relish it. Be in love with it. And when you're in love with it, that itself will, to a great extent, ensure that you hate the garment stained by the flesh, that you have a hatred of sin and a sinful lifestyle, that when you're seeking to rescue other people, your love of holiness, your keeping of yourself in the love of God, will ensure that you're not thrown away by the temptations that these situations present.

Remember, the enemy is skillful, stealthy, sometimes imperceptible, and in the temptations with which we're tempted, temptations that are addressed to our eyes, to the lust of the eyes, temptations that are addressed to our sinful appetites, all of these will be skillfully designed by the enemy to lead us astray.

[31 : 18] Keep yourselves love of God, hating even the garment stained by the flesh, hating everything to do with a sinful lifestyle, and yet being committed at the same time to the rescue of others.

So there it is, countering nominal Christianity, looking at people in need, spiritually and morally, as in danger of fire, showing mercy, snatching them out of the fire, doubters as well as those who are convinced, and doing so with mercy, with urgent action, and with fear, with the fear of God, the fear

of being ourselves contaminated by sin and sinful practice.

And if we do that, we will be the church of God. We will be the church as it ought to be. We will be the church that Christ himself sends out to bear testimony to his mercy and his grace.

Let's pray. Lord, our God and our gracious Father, we thank you for your mercy, for your fatherly care of us, for the way in which you instruct us, for your keeping, for the power that you give to us in our lives to face temptation, to overcome the wiles of the devil.

We bless you, O Lord, for all your sufficiency and grace to us, and we pray that you would help us to heed your word, and that whatever our relationship is with you today, that we might be concerned to constantly seek to improve it on our own part.

[33 : 15] And we pray this with the pardon of all our sin, for Christ's sake. Amen.