

The Corruption of Christianity

2 Peter 1: 16-21; Jude.

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PART THIRD. EARLIER MINISTRY, CONTINUED.

There were two masterpieces of evil which the preaching of the gospel had to meet — the self-righteousness of the Jew, and the idolatry of the Gentiles. If you trace the history of the propagation of the gospel onward, you find another character of evil prominent. Still you do not find this third form of evil in the later epistles — 2 Thess., 2 Peter, epistles of John. The Spirit of the Lord was occupied in warning about the seducing spirits. Nothing would preserve the little children from that seduction, but walking in the power of the unction of the Holy Ghost which they had received.

The whole subject of Jude is taken up with the delineation of evil, which has its rise in the bosom of Christianity. The evil which will bring in the execution of judgment, is the evil that has its seed-bed and its ripening in the midst of professing Christianity. The Spirit of the Lord has seen it needful to delineate the evil, in order to preserve the saints during its progress, as in Peter, "Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness." (2 Peter 3: 17.) There is nothing so striking as the mercy of the Lord in this. We might have questioned whether, as all had so departed from the truth, we might not give all up. The word of God marks its sufficiency in this respect. He will not leave His people without a guide in the darkest time. The remedy is there; the principle by which the soul is to be sustained is there. And not merely that the saints of God shall be secure in Him in their individual interests, and get safe to land, but God has provided that the subjects of this grace shall, while they are in this present world, be witnesses, and He has left them here for the very purpose. It is a wonderful mercy to any of His people who are put into this place of witnessing, but it will be plainly a sorrowful place. "My flesh," says Paul. "had no rest." There were always men bearing a witness more or less clearly of the grace of God. Be assured a testimony in the last days will be attended with peculiar difficulties and trials, because it is further on in the evil. It is the "deceivableness of unrighteousness" that works up to the last stage before judgment comes. If you look at that fearful picture in 2 Timothy, you will find that it is not the sensual outbreaks of lust, but rather all that is more intellectual, and above all "having a form of godliness."

This being so, the Lord directs His saints to the character of evil, not that we are to point to an evil that cannot touch us, but to be assured *that the evil that is at any time prevalent is that by which each saint will be affected.*

I do not think that any of us have any idea of what the real type of a Christian is. The Church has let this truth slip. In the early ages of the Church "they took joyfully the spoiling of their goods," and longed for a martyr's crown. This is where our souls must be brought before the Lord, and we shall find that there is His grace to meet us amidst all that would press us down. The testimony may be feeble, and yet true. I notice the position in which the Lord would put His saints in the midst of the prevalence of this evil.

Observe the commencement of the epistle: "Mercy unto you, and peace and love be multiplied." (v. 2.) There is no limit to the grace of God. The divine blessing comes to be the portion of the soul that is set to receive what God has to give. I believe it is much more individual action than we think. There is no consulting between hands and feet as to action. Their harmony lies in healthful fellowship of life, subject to the Head above. *The unity of the body is maintained, and just so as each individual is actuated and guided by the Head.* If near to Christ, I do not dare to allow anything to come in between my soul and Him. In this way there would be no schism in the body.

At the time this epistle was written there were many things in the Church that one would not sanction. (v. 12.) Individuality of responsibility to Christ presses itself here. (vv. 3, 4.) Some you must take care of, not in the way of suspicion, but where their principles are marked out; you must beware of them. This contention for the faith, what is it? Laxity about doctrine to one whose soul has been buffeted about by Satan will only be another form of carelessness about Christ. "If the foundations be destroyed, what shall the righteous do?" If that which is to be the basis on which I build is destroyed, what am I to do? This "faith once delivered to the saints" is a comprehensive revelation of what God has given about His grace, that which gives us the living connection with all the fulness of the Head.

From 2 Timothy 4: 2-5, it is clear that even the man of God, maintaining sound doctrine, must count upon "affliction." He may reckon that he will have to labour with many tears and conflicts. In 2 Tim. 4: 6-8, Paul says, "I have *kept* the faith." He would not surrender it, but he had to meet persecution and coldness, and a thousand oppositions personally. The next thing is, "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness." So in Jude, there should not be the least surrender of God's truth. We need to have our souls exercised as to what the truth is. We should rather give up a limb than give up God's truth.

Jude 4. Grace was turned to evil, and insubjection to Christ The first. evil there was the profession of Christianity taken up to cover ungodliness. What is the argument here? He had been speaking of contending against corrupt Christianity, and, lest it should seem strange, he reminds them of what had been before. There was apostacy in Israel met in the same way by judgment. Then he passes on to the angels. Man does not like to feel his own ignorance — that he cannot look beyond God's revelation. How wonderful! There is not a sphere of existence in the whole range of God from whence motives are not drawn by God's Spirit to guide us. There were angels, and apostacy once thinned their ranks. Then in Jude 7, he gives an instance of natural corruption, upon which there was the manifest intervention of God's hand in judgment. These are put out as beacon-lights, or expressions of what God has effected in His dealings in the past, and which will have their answer in His judgment of the apostacy of Christianity.

Jude 8-11. Here he gathers up the ruling principle of this evil in three well-known characters in Scripture. The "way of Cain" — way of infidelity, the opposite to Abel's way; and not only the way of infidelity, but also the cruelty and dislike which it always will have to men of faith. Infidelity has many shades. Wherever faith is not in exercise, there will be the natural infidelity of the heart. Is my thought brought into subjection to Christ? The range of faith should be there. I should say with Paul, "I am not sufficient to express a thought."* The spirit of the age is the spirit of infidelity. Let us look abroad for a single moment, and we see the counterpart of what is here represented. Balaam is just as distinct, taking up the truth of God and using it for covetousness. It is not given for selfish ends. He was teaching association with the world. A man who takes up God's truth short of the glory of Christ comes under this censure. He may go on and preach for reward to subserve his purpose. Our souls ought to be jealous when the teaching of Christianity is for gain. How ready are our hearts to think that gain is godliness! Oh that our hearts were divested of this!

*This is probably a paraphrase of 2 Cor. 3: 5. — ED.

"The gainsaying of Core" is direct rebellion against all constituted authority; it is man's self-will exerting its supremacy. There is a rooted dislike to all that bears the impress of faith now — and this is infidelity. It may be said this picture has features so developed, that they must have been seen in the Church, and put out. But mark, God might take up the first line of evil that we might be guarded against it all the way. It needs spirituality to detect it. That man is not a Christian who sets aside the doctrine of Christ. The mystery of godliness is this: "God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory." (1 Tim. 3: 16.)

Jude 20, 21. There is nothing more sustaining than this. Our own proper place is so full of blessing, and so simple in its character. How can I build myself up? By constantly having my heart exercised upon the object of faith, seeking to have the ignorance of my mind removed, meditating on the word, getting the heart nourished by all that feeds our faith; not satisfied, but as the faith is nourished.

Oh, if building up ourselves were our object, how constantly would this book be the object of our *meditation*, not of our reading only! We cannot get on in this faith unless meditating on the word. I cannot get nourishment by prayer. Everything should be the subject of prayer; but "praying in the Holy Ghost" is understanding what is for God's glory, and expressing it before Him. It is the range of the thought of God's Spirit. This we are called to; and not merely the apostles, but those who are "preserved in Jesus Christ."

You and I ought not to be satisfied with going on an hour without the consciousness of the love of God. There is no cloud upon Jesus. Nothing can intercept our joy but getting our hearts occupied with things below. I may wander from my place of rest; but "*keep yourselves in the love of God.*" Mercy will come and take you out presently: "Looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life." It is one thing to exhort others, and another to be up and enjoying the reality of the beams of God's love. There is that in the love of God which will enable us to go on, and gives the power of service.