

COMMUNITY AT RISK

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A Picture of Community

Psalm 133

(A song for pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem. A psalm of David.)

¹ *How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony!*

² *For harmony is as precious as the anointing oil that was poured over Aaron's head, that ran down his beard and onto the border of his robe.*

³ *Harmony is as refreshing as the dew from Mount Hermon that falls on the mountains of Zion.*

And there the Lord has pronounced his blessing, even life everlasting.

This is a picture of Christian community, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Four characteristics are highlighted for us:

- It is wonderful (full of wonders).
- It is pleasant (pleasing to the heart and mind, and to God).
- It is precious (as precious/valuable as the Lord's anointing!).
- It is refreshing (like the morning dew, God's daily blessing).

Through our common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we have been united at the spirit level, baptized into one body, one family, one nation.

Community Under Threat

Yet, the Christian community has been at risk since its inception. It is always under threat of disruption and even destruction—from without and from within.

The danger is so imminent, so prevalent, that one New Testament writer dropped all his other business just to address the most insidious aspect of this virulent threat that worms its way into the church: church leaders who present a counterfeit Gospel message and lifestyle.

Pastors and deacons have been given to the church by our Risen Lord to safeguard the sheep—to protect them from predators, while they feed and nurture them to health and productivity in God's Kingdom. When the very ones who are to protect the people of God turn to their undoing, the community is at grave risk.

Eugene Peterson, translator of *The Message*, offers this introduction to the letter of Jude:

“Our spiritual communities are as susceptible to disease as our physical bodies. But it is easier to detect whatever is wrong in our stomachs and lungs than in our worship and witness. When our physical bodies are sick or damaged, the pain calls our attention to it, and we do something quick. But a dangerous, even deadly, virus in our spiritual communities can go undetected for a long time. As much as we need physicians for our bodies, we have even greater need for diagnosticians and healers of the spirit.

“Jude’s letter to an early community of Christians is just such diagnosis. It is all the more necessary in that those believers apparently didn’t know anything was wrong, or at least not as desperately wrong as Jude points out.

“There is far more, of course, to living in Christian community than protecting the faith against assault or subversion. Paranoia is as unhealthy spiritually as it is mentally. The primary Christian posture is, in Jude’s words, ‘keeping your arms open and outstretched, ready for the mercy of our Master, Jesus Christ.’ All the same, energetic watchfulness is required. Jude’s whistle-blowing has prevented many a disaster.”

Now, read the 25 verses of Jude’s letter.

¹ I, Jude, am a slave to Jesus Christ and brother to James, writing to those loved by God the Father, called and kept safe by Jesus Christ. ² Relax, everything’s going to be all right; rest, everything’s coming together; open your hearts, love is on the way!

³ Dear friends, I’ve dropped everything to write you about this life of salvation that we have in common. I have to write insisting—begging!—that you fight with everything you have in you for this faith entrusted to us as a gift to guard and cherish. ⁴ What has happened is that some people have infiltrated our ranks (our Scriptures warned us this would happen), who beneath their pious skin are shameless scoundrels. Their design is to replace the sheer grace of our God with sheer license—which means doing away with Jesus Christ, our one and only Master.

⁵ I’m laying this out as clearly as I can, even though you once knew all this well enough and shouldn’t need reminding. Here it is in brief: The Master saved a people out of the land of Egypt. Later He destroyed those who defected.

⁶ And you know the story of the angels who didn’t stick to their post, abandoning it for other, darker missions. But they are now chained and jailed in a black hole until the great Judgment Day. ⁷ Sodom and Gomorrah, which went to sexual rack and ruin along with the surrounding cities that acted just like them, are another example. Burning and burning and never burning up, they serve still as a stock warning.

⁸ This is exactly the same program of these latest infiltrators: dirty sex, rule and rulers thrown out, glory dragged in the mud.

⁹ The Archangel Michael, who went to the mat with the Devil as they fought over the body of Moses, wouldn’t have dared level him with a blasphemous curse, but said simply, “No you don’t. God will take care of you!” ¹⁰ But these people sneer at anything they can’t understand, and by doing whatever they feel like doing—living by animal instinct only—they participate in their own destruction.

¹¹ *I'm fed up with them! They've gone down Cain's road; they've been sucked into Balaam's error by greed; they're canceled out in Korah's rebellion.*

¹² *These people are warts on your love feasts as you worship and eat together. They're giving you a black eye—carousing shamelessly, grabbing anything that isn't nailed down.*

They're—

Puffs of smoke pushed by gusts of wind;

late autumn trees stripped clean of leaf and fruit, doubly dead, pulled up by the roots;

¹³ *wild ocean waves leaving nothing on the beach but the foam of their shame;*

Lost stars in outer space on their way to the black hole.

¹⁴ *Enoch, the seventh after Adam, prophesied of them: "Look! The Master comes with thousands of holy angels ¹⁵ to bring judgment against them all, convicting each person of every defiling act of shameless sacrilege, of every dirty word they have spewed of their pious filth."*

¹⁶ *These are the "grumpers," the bellyachers, grabbing for the biggest piece of the pie, talking big, saying anything they think will get them ahead.*

¹⁷ *But remember, dear friends, that the apostles of our Master, Jesus Christ, told us this would happen: ¹⁸ "In the last days there will be people who don't take these things seriously anymore. They'll treat them like a joke, and make a religion of their own whims and lusts." ¹⁹ These are the ones who split churches, thinking only of themselves. There's nothing to them, no sign of the Spirit!*

²⁰ *But you, dear friends, carefully build yourselves up in this most holy faith by praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ staying right at the center of God's love, keeping your arms open and outstretched, ready for the mercy of our Master, Jesus Christ. This is the unending life, the real life!*

²² *Go easy on those who hesitate in the faith. ²³ Go after those who take the wrong way. Be tender with sinners, but not soft on sin. The sin itself stinks to high heaven.*

²⁴ *And now to Him who can keep you on your feet, standing tall in His bright presence, fresh and celebrating—²⁵ to our one God, our only Savior, through Jesus Christ, our Master, be glory, majesty, strength, and rule before all time, and now, and to the end of all time. Yes.*

Let me highlight a few of Jude's more salient words.

³ *Fight with everything you have in you for this faith entrusted to us as a gift to guard and cherish.*

This is a battle for which we all must be prepared. Not everyone you meet in church will have your best interest in mind. Some will put themselves first.

⁴ *Some people have infiltrated our ranks... who beneath their pious skin are shameless scoundrels.*

Superficial piety (the appearance of godliness) may mask their aim to take advantage of you, to use you for their own benefit.

⁴ Their design is to replace the sheer grace of our God with sheer license—which means doing away with Jesus Christ, our one and only Master.

Some people view God's kindness and mercy as His permission to do whatever they want, with no accountability. But there IS accountability. Jude offers three historical examples to prove this:

- The Jews whom God rescued from Egypt, then destroyed in the wilderness for their faithlessness.
- The angels who rebelled and left their place of obedient service and are now confined to the abyss, awaiting judgment.
- Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, whose perversities led to their flaming destruction.

⁸ This is exactly the same program of these latest infiltrators: dirty sex, rule and rulers thrown out, glory dragged in the mud.

Not only are they licentious themselves, but they want to do away with standards and standard-bearers (claiming that no one can say what is right in the eyes of God), and drag God's glory through the mud.

¹⁰ But these people sneer at anything they can't understand, and by doing whatever they feel like doing—living by animal instinct only—they participate in their own destruction.

If it feels good, they want to do it, and they don't think the church or its leaders should stand in their way.

¹⁶ These are the "grumpers," the bellyachers, grabbing for the biggest piece of the pie, talking big, saying anything they think will get them ahead.

They spread a sour feeling in the church, sowing discord wherever they find a listening ear—but it's all about getting their own way.

¹⁸ "In the last days there will be people who don't take these things seriously anymore. They'll treat them like a joke, and make a religion of their own whims and lusts."¹⁹ These are the ones who split churches, thinking only of themselves. There's nothing to them, no sign of the Spirit!

Here's what you can do to protect yourself!

²⁰ *But you, dear friends, carefully build yourselves up in this most holy faith by praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ staying right at the center of God's love, keeping your arms open and outstretched, ready for the mercy of our Master, Jesus Christ. This is the unending life, the real life!*

And here's what you can do to protect others.

²² *Go easy on those who hesitate in the faith.*

²³ *Go after those who take the wrong way. Be tender with sinners, but not soft on sin. The sin itself stinks to high heaven.*

The Threat Within

While the threat described by Jude comes from the top down, it is not limited to leaders; seeds of the same errors can be found in the hearts of those who fill the pews of our churches.

The biggest threat inside the Christian community is individualism. It shows itself, on the one hand, as the rejection *by the people* of appointed leadership ("We don't want anyone to rule over us!"); on the other hand, as the rejection *by the leaders* of the power of the Holy Spirit given to every believer ("We will tell you how to lead your lives.").

And the strongest advocate of individualism is selfish pride, whose offspring are a critical spirit and self-righteous judgment of others.

A Plan for Revival

King Hezekiah of Judah initiated an historic revival among God's people. After cleansing and preparing the Temple to resume the ordained sacrifices of worship, the king issued a call to all Israel and Judah to reunite in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover of the Lord. His letter of invitation read (2 Chronicles 30:6-9):

"O people of Israel, return to the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, so that He will return to the few of us who have survived the conquest of the Assyrian kings. Do not be like your ancestors and relatives who abandoned the Lord, the God of their ancestors, and became an object of derision, as you yourselves can see. Do not be stubborn, as they were, but submit yourselves to the Lord. Come to his Temple, which He has set apart as holy forever. Worship the Lord your God so that His fierce anger will turn away from you.

"For if you return to the Lord, your relatives and your children will be treated mercifully by their captors, and they will be able to return to this land. For the Lord your God is gracious and merciful. If you return to Him, He will not continue to turn His face from you."

Their ancestors had been unfaithful to the Lord, turning their backs on Him, worshipping other gods and depending on their own strength to defeat their enemies. They were stubbornly unsubmitive, insisting on protecting their pet sins.

The result was their undoing, their overthrow by aggressive forces, and their captivity. It can happen to anyone who is stubbornly unfaithful and unwilling to let God be their God.

The answer Hezekiah promoted was: return, come, and serve. It still works today! Return to the Lord (rebuild your fellowship with Him), come together with His people (rebuild your fellowship with the church) to worship and serve the Lord.

How can we break down those strong attitudes, those stubborn mindsets? How can we be revived? Through prayer. The greatest enemy of revival is prayerlessness. “The family that prays together, stays together” doesn’t only apply to the nuclear family of dad, mom, and kids—it also applies to the church family.

You can’t pray with people for long and still hold grudges, or fears, or judgments against them. Praying will stop your sinning, or your sinning will stop your praying. The absence of prayer is a downward spiral of spiritual depletion.

Protection for the Community

Let me conclude this morning with the words of Apostle Peter, as he urges the attitudes and behaviors that will protect and strengthen the community and fellowship of the church.

1 Peter 3

⁸ Finally, everyone must live in harmony, be sympathetic, love each other, have compassion, and be humble. ⁹ Don’t pay people back with evil for the evil they do to you, or ridicule those who ridicule you. Instead, bless them, because you were called to inherit a blessing.

¹⁰ For the Scriptures say (Psalm 34), “People who want to live a full life and enjoy good days must keep their tongues from saying evil things, and their lips from speaking deceitful things. ¹¹ They must turn away from evil and do good. They must seek peace and pursue it. ¹² The Lord’s eyes are on those who do what He approves. His ears hear their prayer.”

What to Do Now

This is a day for repentance, for that is where revival begins. Let’s clean out the Temple today. Let’s toss out anything that corrupts or defiles.

Is there stubbornness in your heart or mind? Do you resist letting God have His way? Today, present yourself to God as a living sacrifice.

Do you protect your pet sins, and make excuses for continuing in them? Your rebellion is greater bondage than the sin you are hiding. This is a day to humble yourself before the Lord.

Give account today before the Throne of Grace, or you will give it later before a Throne of Judgment.

Bring your stubborn heart to an altar of prayer. Bring your judgmental thoughts to the altar. Bring your critical spirit to the altar. Bring your unloving ways and words to the altar today. Bring them, and leave them there.

Lay them before the Lord and ask Him to burn them out of you and set you free.

Invite the Holy Spirit to fill you again.
Let God pour His love into your heart afresh.

This is a day of repentance and revival! Let the church be the church! Let our Master, Jesus Christ, receive the honor and glory and praise!