

Contend for the Faith

Jude 1-25

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This morning I'd like to begin by jumping in and reading the first four verses of the book of Jude. It's a tiny book right before the book of Revelation. It might be easiest to turn to the back and then work your way backwards.

Jude is often lumped together with 1 & 2 Peter, so after having worked through both of those we thought it would be good to teach on Jude before we jump into Daniel next week.

Jude isn't a very familiar book or figure. We believe Jude was the youngest half-brother of Jesus, and the brother of James who led the Jerusalem church. The book of Jude is tiny. He is what you'd call a man of few words, but as we'll see his tiny letter is very dense.

Jude 1-4¹

¹Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James,

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

²May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you.

³Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. ⁴For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Well, if you've ever watched a spy movie you know that one of the biggest threats to the agency and their mission is to have a mole in their midst. Someone who has crept in unawares. Someone who thwarts the mission from the inside. The threat is severe. And there is usually one character who calls everyone's attention to it, though others are reluctant to believe that there could be this interloper in their midst ... until it's too late and they've been overcome.

This is the sort of scenario Jude is writing about in the church. Just consider the book of Jude like a Christian spy movie.

But here's the thing. You probably know someone who's experienced this spy drama in their own church; maybe you yourself have a story like this in your history with the church. Stories of hypocrisy. Manipulation. Lies. People who, unnoticed, lead others astray, cause division, and before you know it, it's too late.

This is why Jude's letter is important. Because it's not just a modern problem, but one that has been around since the beginning of the church.

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

I know we never want to be this sort of a toxic church. And if you are new or visiting, you don't want to be a part of that sort of church. Thus, Jude's letter, urging us to contend for the faith is an urgent message we all need to hear.

We see in verse 3 that it was so urgent Jude had to change his original plan. He had wanted to write to these believers—people that he calls beloved by God and kept for Jesus—he had wanted to write to them about their common salvation. But instead of writing about what they share in common, he was compelled to write about those who've distorted their common salvation.

You see the problem was that certain people, though he doesn't name them, have crept in unnoticed. You can just call them “creepers” if you want. It's not a distant threat. This isn't some culture war out there, but it has slipped into their midst.

So what's wrong with these people? Jude expounds this concept as he goes on, but he is worried because they are attacking the very foundations of the faith. And we'll see, it's not that he is only worried about their theology, but he is really worried about how they are living it out. They talk like Christians but they don't walk like Christians. These people are ungodly. These people have cheapened God's grace. Perverting God's grace by saying it allows them to follow their own passions of sensuality and immorality.

These people are also denying Jesus as Lord. But know that these aren't separate offenses, rather it's one idea. You see, we are not freed by God's grace to follow our own passions; we are freed by God's grace to follow Jesus our Lord and King.

Jude wants us to understand that God's grace expects a whole-life response. And so Jude calls his readers and us to contend, to strive and exert all our energy for the faith which was “once for all delivered” (v. 3). A faith that is entrusted and authoritative, as opposed to those who deny the authority of Jesus.

Now, I assume when Jude's readers heard these first few verses their minds went into overdrive. Suspicions arose. People started giving one another sideways glances, trying to figure out who these infiltrators might be. And maybe you feel that too, or maybe you think, oh Jordan is just talking about someone else, some other church out there. But as we'll see, Jude's call to contend for the faith in the face of those who distort it, is a call for all believers. Because the temptation to turn from Christ and pervert God's grace is always before us. So we must contend.

Jude calls us to contend for the faith by showing the need to contend, how to contend, and the power to contend. That's what we are going to look at. The need to contend, how to contend, and the power to contend.

NEED TO CONTEND

Now if you heard Jude's claim that there are infiltrators in your midst distorting the faith, your first response is what? I knew it! Or maybe, prove it. And that's what Jude does in verses 5-16. If these people are unnoticed, then the first thing that Jude needs to do is to help us notice the problem, our need to contend. Like a doctor, Jude is going to help us diagnose the problem.

He is going to show us the features, the fruit, and the fate of infiltrators.

Their Features

In verses 5-11 Jude gives us many examples from the past as a way to reveal the features of these people, to show that they've always existed, and to show what God does about it.

He starts with three examples from the Old Testament, gives some character traits, gives a positive example with Michael the archangel, more character traits, and then three more examples from the Old Testament.

Look at Jude 5-7 and the three Old Testament examples: "Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day—just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire."

Here Jude gives us two examples from the past of those who seemed like they were "in," but in reality were like Sodom and Gomorrah both in ungodliness and judgment.

You would assume that the people saved out of Egypt and the angels were good to go. But in reality they didn't believe. They weren't following what God had for them. So Jude compares them to Sodom and Gomorrah, using the language "just as" and "likewise." For each followed their own passions—notable among them are their sexual immorality and unnatural desire. Likewise also, judgment came. We don't have to look outside the church to find those people who take God's grace for granted and follow their own lusts and passions.

He goes on in verse 8 and 10 to give a description of their character. They rely on their own dreams for authority, rejecting right authority, they speak ill of angels, they defile the flesh, and act instinctively.

Then in verse 9 he gives us an interesting story about the archangel Michael: "But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you.'"

Now, you might be thinking, I don't remember this stuff about Michael and Moses at the end of Deuteronomy. That's because it's not there. This is a story that comes from a work called the Assumption of Moses.

One of the fascinating things about Jude is his utilization and quotation of Jewish works that are not in our Bible. He uses the work of Philo, and here with the Assumption of Moses, and then later includes a long quote from the book of 1 Enoch.

This shouldn't worry us. We have to understand that Jude's culture was saturated with religious texts. Jude and his brothers grew up hearing from the Bible as well as other religious texts. We still have access to many of these texts and we usually group them into works called the Apocrypha or Pseudepigrapha. They weren't considered Scripture by early Christians, but that doesn't mean they don't have an important message for believers.

It should make sense, then, that Jude would use common works, especially parts that interact with Holy Scripture, in order to communicate his message.

So the point of the archangel Michael's example is that not even the highest created being you can think of would usurp Christ's authority in pronouncing judgment. And so we, like Michael, should follow Christ's authority.

Jude then follows with three more examples from the Old Testament: "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" (v. 11).

These individuals give greater clarity to the way of Jude's modern-day intruders. Whether it's Cain's jealousy and anger, or Balaam's greed, or Korah's selfish ambition, we find people who act instinctively—following their own passions instead of God's authority.

If that is their features then what is their fruit?

Their Fruit

Jude shows us the fruit of these people in verses 12-13: "These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves." Hidden reefs mean destruction for a ship at sea without any warning. Similarly, shepherds feeding themselves are shepherds who devour the flock they are meant to build up and protect.

He then calls them, "waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted." These people promote a way that promises fruit but delivers no harvest. You can just imagine what they might be saying, "So many more might come to the faith if you just don't worry about how people live..."

Lastly, "wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever." Jude takes us back to the sea with this imagery. Wild waves will toss you around. Their shame will become your own. If you follow them, like a wandering star, you will be taken to places you never expected.

Jude is revealing the fruit of these people so that you will know the cost of not contending for the faith. For they will deceptively drain you; they will disappoint you; and ultimately, they will destroy you.

Their Fate

And as we've seen throughout, destruction and judgment is their own fate as well.

In verses 14-15 Jude quotes a prophecy from 1 Enoch, but it's drawn from Deuteronomy and Isaiah. Here's the prophecy: "It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, 'Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him.' These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires; they are loud-mouthed boasters, showing favoritism to gain advantage."

That was an ungodly amount of "ungodly."

Whereas God's grace is supposed to cultivate godliness, ungodliness is the product of those who take God's grace for granted. These ungodly are grumblers, malcontents (those who will never be satisfied and are rebellious), those who follow their sinful desires, loud boasters, and those showing favoritism for advantage.

But long ago it was foretold that the ungodly would be judged by the Lord. So then, how do you contend?

HOW TO CONTEND

At this point in Jude you've been told to contend, you've been told that there are unnoticed people among you who are going to bring disaster on your people. So what do you want to do?

If you're like me you want to find them and bring the hammer down. Bring some judgment on them. Like the Salem witch trials. The Spanish Inquisition. Joseph McCarthy in 1950s America?

Is this what Jude has in mind? I don't think so. For Jude, contending looks quite a bit different than these pictures. It is not a contentious struggle over others.

For Jude contending doesn't mean bringing your judgment on people. Because like the archangel Michael showed us, judgment belongs to the Lord. In fact this is one of the overriding themes of the book. The ungodly are being "kept" for judgment.

In verse 6 the angels are "kept" in eternal chains. In verse 13 these people "have been reserved" (or kept, it's the same Greek word) for utter darkness. Then in verse 14 we are told explicitly that the Lord is coming to execute judgment.

In fact much of the former section shows not only what these ungodly look like, but also what God is going to do about it, for he has dealt with it before.

Now, of course there are times for believers or elders to take a more active role in church discipline. I'm thinking of 1 Corinthians 5:11. We affirm all of that. And Jude isn't excluding those practices, it's just not his emphasis in this letter.

So, how does Jude want us to contend for the faith? There are two main ideas in verses 17-23.

Remember

The first is to remember. Verses 17-19 say: "But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you, 'In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.' It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit."

Here we find a synthesis of the earlier section and we're told to remember that people like this will be in the Christian world and even in the church. Scoffers—those who ridicule or derisively mock. People who follow their own ungodly passions rather than considering others or being submissive to God. These are people who cause divisions. Who are worldly. Who are devoid of the Spirit.

We are told to remember so that we are not surprised or exasperated by them. Remember so that we will be vigilant, watchful, and even expectant.

And in remembering the second idea is elevated.

Keep yourself in the love of God.

Look at verses 20-21: “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.”

The way you contend is to keep yourself, or persist in the love of God. And how do we do that? He gives us three ways.

How do we keep ourselves in God’s love? **By building ourselves up in our most holy faith.**

Rather than causing division you edify one another. Rather than sexual immorality, you follow God’s design. Rather than scoff you encourage. Rather than pervert God’s grace you build on God’s grace leading to godliness. Jude is asking for your faith to be worked out in all your life.

What do you think?

Are you able to notice and flee wrong teaching and living? Are you caught up in sexual immorality thinking it’s no big deal? Is your life producing godliness or ungodliness? Are you sowing seeds of division or building others up?

This charge is a big task, and there are lots of ways to accomplish it. As a church family we seek to build one another up in the faith through worship, learning and serving, community groups, and going. And we invite you join us through these pathways.

Next, we keep ourselves in God’s love by: **Praying in the Holy Spirit.**

Rather than being devoid of the Holy Spirit, you are full of the Spirit. Rather than blaspheme, you pray. Rather than following your own ungodly passions and desires, you submit yourself in prayer through the Holy Spirit to Jesus our Lord.

At the heart of it, prayer is submission to God. Prayer is a subversive act against putting ourselves on the throne, and instead submitting and listening to the rightful ruler of all. Prayer in the Holy Spirit is essential to keeping yourself in the love of God.

Thirdly, we keep ourselves in God’s love by: **Waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.**

Rather than worldly, you have an eternal mindset. Rather than taking God’s grace for granted and doing your own thing, you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.

How do you treat God’s grace? Do you take God’s grace for granted? Does sin burden you anymore, or have you become numb to it. In your heart do you say, well, God will forgive me anyway.

But I tell you, Christ’s mercy is not cheap. For his grace demands a whole-life response and gives us an eternal mindset so that we do not live for the things of this earth, but live for the resurrection to come.

Starting in verse 22, he guides us on how to treat others, even potentially these infiltrators. He says “have mercy on those who doubt.” For those of us who wait on mercy show mercy to those who are still wrestling with the faith. Not all doubters are heretics, and those who doubt need to know God’s mercy through you.

Next, he says to “save others by snatching them out of the fire.” Fire is how he described the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah. There’s debate on this, but I tend to think he’s saying that we shouldn’t treat anyone as being too far gone, too lost to God’s judgment.

Lastly, he gives a warning to “show mercy with fear.” Showing mercy can be dangerous, lest we be taken in. So as we show mercy we must also fear God and hate ungodliness.

We contend for the faith by keeping ourselves in the love of God.

But at the end of his book, Jude shows us that we have no hope of keeping ourselves without the power to contend.

POWER TO CONTEND

Jude 24–25 says: “Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”

There are few more beautiful passages of Scripture than this one. Here also we enter into a great mystery of our faith. Because, the only way for you to keep yourself in the love of God is through the power of the One who keeps you for all eternity.

If you remember back in verse 1 we find the same theme here, Jude is writing to those *kept* for Jesus. In fact all of Jude is about “keeping.” There are those kept for judgment and those kept for Jesus. Our only hope of a godly life, of keeping ourselves in the love of God, is first and foremost grounded in the truth that God has saved us through Jesus our Lord.

You can build one another up, because there is a firm foundation at the foot of the cross. You can pray, because Christ opened up a way. You can have mercy, because you were first shown mercy so that you might be blameless before God. You can wait, because your hope is not in yourself, but is in Jesus and his death, burial, and resurrection to everlasting life.

There is nothing more powerful than the Lord’s keeping.

So at the end of the day I think Jude is doing something terribly clever in this letter. Important for every Christian in every age.

He sets you up saying there are ungodly infiltrators in your midst—in your house—though he doesn’t name them. Then he says God is the one keeping them for judgment. You must contend to keep yourself in the love of God, though it is ultimately God who keeps you.

You see, instead of a magnifying glass, used to expose and root out the infiltrator, Jude is meant to be a mirror for us to hold up to ourselves for self-examination. A mirror to help us see clearly. Jude invites us to examine ourselves with one picture to flee and one to pursue.

How do you look in the light of Jude’s letter?

Do you follow your own ungodly passions and desires without regard for Christ's authority and God's grace? Do you follow your own sinful desires into sexual immorality, thinking it's no big deal? Do you grumble, speak poorly of one another, and cause division?

Or are you one who strives to keep himself in the love of God? Building others up in the faith. Praying in the Holy Spirit. Waiting for eternal life. Showing mercy.

Which portrait fits you now? Which portrait do you want?

Because no matter who you are or what you've done God is ready to call you one of his beloved and to call you to "contend for the faith."