

A Faith Worth Fighting For: Keep Yourselves in the Love of God

Jude 1:17-23

By [David Strain](#)

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In the pew racks just in front of you you'll find copies of the Holy Scriptures. If you would take one or turn in your own copy of the Bible to the letter of Jude, which is almost at the back, almost at the end of the New Testament. If you go to the very last book, the book of Revelation, and then work back again, you'll find the book of Jude immediately before the book of Revelation on page 1027 in the church Bibles. In a moment, we're going to read the book of Jude together. Before we do that would you bow your heads with me as we pray? Let's pray.

Father, help us please to hear Your voice. Would You make our hearts receptive and responsive to Your Word? Would You train our eyes and focus them on Christ? And teach our hands and our feet to move in fresh obedience according to the dictates of Your Word? Work now, we pray, as Your Word is read and proclaimed, in all our hearts for Your glory, in Jesus' name. Amen.

The book of Jude, from verse 1. This is the Word of God:

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

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

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

Beloved, 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. For 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.

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 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.

Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones. 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." But these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively. 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. These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for who the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.

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.

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. 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 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.

Thanks be to God who has spoken in His holy and inerrant Word.

Well last Lord's Day Evening we began to study the book of Jude and we noticed that Jude is writing a wartime missive to the church. There is a spiritual war raging around us. False teachers were infecting the church with the twin ideas that holiness is an indifferent matter and precision in doctrine is irrelevant. Verse 4, "They perverted the grace of our God into sensuality and they denied our Master and Lord, Jesus Christ." There was moral failure and theological compromise. And Jude is issuing a call to arms. We are, verse 3, "to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints." And we looked last time at verses 1 through 16 where Jude spends the bulk of his time describing and exposing the false teachers and the threat that they pose to the church. They are, he says, verse 12, "hidden reefs." That is, their deepest dangers are often unseen; below the surface. And if we're not prepared, false teachers and false teaching can make shipwreck of our souls. That was last time.

Fighting With Proper Weapons

Tonight we're going to focus on verses 17 through 23 because here now Jude turns from a largely negative assessment of the false teachers to provide now largely positive, constructive help on how to respond to them. I read an article recently about the German military. It turns out there is a crisis of underfunding in the German military resulting in a significant lack of vital equipment. One group of German soldiers belonging to a NATO task force was on a joint training exercise. Not having the machine guns they needed, they mounted broomsticks to their armored vehicles and painted the handles black in an attempt to hide the problem. You can't fight a war with broom handles instead of machine guns. And so Jude wants to do more, you see, than just give us the intelligence we need about the enemy. He wants to do more than simply help us know the enemy. That was verses 1 to 16. He wants to make sure that as we fight for truth and fight for holiness that we have the equipment we need to wage a good warfare and win the battle in the end.

So let's look together at verses 17 to 23. Jude here gives us three tools to use, three vital strategies to help us in the spiritual conflict in which we are all engaged if we are Christians. Very simply he tells us first to look back, 17 to 19, to look up, 20 to 21, and to look out, 22 and 23. Look back, look up, look out. That's how we must fight and win the war.

I. Look Back

Let's think about the first of those - look back; 17 to 19. As I said a moment ago, 1 to 16 Jude is describing the false teachers in their worldliness and their immorality and their error. And in verses 17 to 19 he has one last opportunity to hammer home the same point. It's sort of a summary of what he has been saying so far. Look at it with me. They scoff at the truth. Their teaching and lifestyle, he

tells us, is driven not by divine revelation but by their own “ungodly passions” and appetites, verse 18. Their false teaching is the real root of division in the church, verse 19. They are in fact worldly and not spirit filled as they claimed after all. That has been the message so far in the opening sixteen verses and he’s summing it all up here for us one last time.

False Teachers in the Last Days

But do notice that Jude wants to do more than simply repeat his description of the false teachers’ mistakes. He wants to focus our attention especially on the apostolic word. Verse 17, “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.’” Remember the apostolic word. They said all along this is how it would be in the last time. Now Jude and the apostles that he is references do not mean some distant time, some distant era immediately prior to the final advent of Jesus Christ when they talk about the last time. Jude is confronting, remember, the problems of the church in his own day. For Jude, just as for the New Testament as a whole, the last time or the last days actually refers to the whole period between the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and His final return. The last time was inaugurated when the grave was opened and death was defeated that first Easter Sunday. And Jude says this whole period, just like the apostles said it would be, will be characterized by an ongoing problem. There will be false teachers. Expect it. Get ready for it. That’s the message to the church in Jude’s day and in our own.

The Word is Our Weapon

Now in the course of Jude’s argument so far, we’ve seen him quote from extra-Biblical sources, unscriptural traditions. Probably they were enlisted and used by the false teachers themselves as they sought to find authority for their own arguments and errors. So back in verse 9 he cites a book called, “The Assumption of Moses,” then verse 14 he refers to the “Book of Enoch.” He seems to be using the false teachers’ own stories against them. But the thing to notice now is that when it comes to preparing and equipping the church to stand firm and stay faithful when the battle begins to rage, you see where he directs our gaze - to the apostolic Word. “You, beloved, remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember what Christ’s own authoritative spokesmen said to you. Remember the apostolic Word. Look back to the truth you have heard from them. Keep coming back to the apostolic testimony. That is a sure guide and a safe rule. Here is the principal weapon of your warfare. Here is the primary armament in your arsenal - the apostolic Word!”

How will you stand faithful and contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints if you neglect the apostolic Word? It has been preserved, our confession says, it has been committed “wholly unto writing” in the pages of the New Testament scriptures. A well-thumbed Bible, do you see, is the best and the final

defense against error and the simplest and most effective counter to temptation. Know the Word! Love the apostolic Word! Do you know your Bible? Do you love the apostolic Word? Look back. Remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. Be men and women of the Book. It is the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. Without it, you are defenseless against the enemy. Look back.

II. Look Up

We Are Kept and We Are Keeping

Then secondly, verses 20 and 21, look up. Now I want you to see carefully how these two verses are put together. Grammatically there is one central imperative, one central command, surrounded on either side by explanatory clauses that tell us how to do it. Verse 21, look at the central imperative. "Keep yourselves in the love of God." That's the fundamental concern here. That's the key command. This is what Jude wants us to make a priority. Now you'll remember back in verse 1 Jude has characterized all true Christians as people who are "beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ." Beloved and kept - that's who we are if we're believers. Nothing can change that. Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Nothing! Good news - we are beloved and we are kept! And yet, verse 21, we must also keep ourselves in the love of God. Isn't that interesting? We are beloved and kept, yet we must keep ourselves in the love of God. Both are true! The one doesn't cancel out the other. God keeps us in His love and He does it enabling us to keep ourselves in His love. God preserves us by empowering us to persevere in Him. We are to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling for God is at work in us to will and to work for His good pleasure." God is at work in us so we busy ourselves to work for Him. We must keep ourselves in the love of God.

Haven't you found at times things are going along well enough, you're growing as a Christian, God is teaching you from His Word, you're encouraged, there's a measure of joy, you have peace, you love His praises, you love being with His people, you love the Lord's Day. And then something in your routine changes. Work pressure, perhaps, begins to mount, family stresses intrude, you're tired, and you neglect the Scriptures and then you yield to temptation. In little things at first - an unkind word, a lustful glance, a gluttonous indulgence. But sin does have a way of growing, doesn't it? And soon you're snapping at your children, passing days, whole days, in hostile silence with your spouse, drifting away from church. Rarely under the means of grace, your heart has grown cold and the sense you once had and enjoyed of intimacy and communion with Christ, the taste you had of the love of God in your heart is conspicuous now, mainly by its absence. How easy to drift. Keep yourselves in the love of God! It's a vital word of exhortation. Be vigilant. Keep watch over your heart. Shepherd it constantly. Let it never stray from the love of God.

Building Yourself Up

Well how do I do that? Look at the text surrounding that central imperative. There are three participles, if you want to know, that tell us how to do that. Keep yourselves in the love of God - how? By first of all, "building yourselves up in your most holy faith," and secondly, "praying in the Holy Spirit," and thirdly, "waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ." Those are the three tools Jude gives us to keep ourselves in the enjoyment of the love of God. First, "building yourselves up in your most holy faith." He's using construction language, isn't he? The church is like a building site. That's the point. We are to build ourselves up. Don't overlook the plural. That's important too. "We" are to build ourselves up. This is a group project! If we are going to mature and be built up it is something we must do together. You need the whole people of God. Spiritual growth in your life is the work of the whole church, therefore, do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together as some are in the habit of doing. You need the body of Christ around you. You need to gather Lord's Day by Lord's Day. You need to be in fellowship with the people of God - building ourselves up, building on another up, each contributing to the growth of the whole.

And notice the construction material with which we build. Building yourselves up "in your most holy faith." Jude has already called us to contend once and for all, "to contend earnestly for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints," back in verse 3. Fight for the faith. Defend the truth. That was his call. But listen to this now. This is Jude's point here. Fighting for the faith is only safe for us if we are building ourselves up in it first. Fighting for the faith is only safe when we are being built up in it. I know some fighters, maybe you do too - they're always on a crusade, aren't they? They are heresy hunters, always looking for other people's mistakes. But there is an air of bitterness, a tragic sourness of character about them, that tells me at least that whatever else may be true the faith they seek to defend is no longer nourishing their souls. Is the truth of the Word of God watering the roots of your life and feeding your soul? Build yourselves up, together, in the church, in your most holy faith. Some people fight about the faith. We are not called to do that. We are not called to fight about the faith. We are called to fight for the faith and you can only fight for the faith if it is precious to you, if it is your life, your joy, your treasure, if it is your daily food, if it is the health of your heart. So which is true of you? Do you fight about the faith or do you fight for it? How you answer that question, I think, will reveal whether the faith, the truth of the Word of God, really is nourishing the roots of your soul and strengthening you in your communion with Jesus Christ.

Praying in the Holy Spirit

"Keep yourselves in the love of God" first by "building yourselves up in the faith," and then do it secondly by "praying in the Holy Spirit." Now just to be clear, Jude is not talking about speaking in tongues or some ecstatic way of praying. Some commentators take it that way. But look at the text again. He is contrasting, do

you see, he is contrasting the life of false teachers with the life of a true child of God, isn't he? The false teachers, verse 19, are "devoid of the Spirit," but those who keep themselves in the love of God pray in the Spirit. The Spirit animates their lives and moves them to communion with God. The Holy Spirit draws their hearts out in faith to look away from themselves to the Savior. There is really no other way to pray. There's no other kind of prayer. It isn't prayer at all unless it is prayer in the Holy Spirit. It's merely words. It is a form and a performance and a routine but it isn't prayer. It's a show and a pantomime; not prayer. Keep yourselves in the love of God by praying in the Spirit, depending on Him for power to pray and boldness to pray; praying depending upon the Spirit for access to the throne of God and for the faith to plead God's promises. Pray in the Spirit.

And isn't it so helpful these two things come together in verse 20 like this? A commitment to feeding on truth - "Build yourselves up in your most holy faith" - and a commitment to praying in the Holy Spirit, Spirit-filled prayer, both together. Paul is directing us here, isn't he, to the means of grace, to the Word of God by which He speaks to us, and to prayer by which we respond and speak to Him. How will you go on and grow and persevere? How will you stay in the fight and wage a well-fought campaign? Make use of the means that God has ordained. Be men and women of the Word and men and women of prayer. It's also helpful, I think, that Jude brings together a commitment to truth and to Spirit-filled prayer because it reminds us that anyone who claims to be a Spirit-filled servant of the Lord who is not a truth person, a Bible person, is a liar. And anyone who claims to love the truth but does not minister and serve and live resting on the help of the Holy Spirit does not know the truth at all.

Waiting for Mercy

And then the third thing we do in order to keep ourselves in the love of God - build yourselves up in your most holy faith, commitment to Spirit-filled prayer, then thirdly, verse 21, "wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life." He's talking about the final return of Jesus at the end of the age where His mercy tasted and enjoyed here will be at last consummated and made full leading to everlasting life. And Jude is simply calling us to keep our eyes on that coming day. As Wiley prayed earlier, "Even so, come Lord Jesus," is to be the prayer Jude wants often on the lips of every child of God. "Come, Lord Jesus." Live today in the trenches of the spiritual battle while temptation rages and opposition presses you hard and the battle is hot and hard and sore. Live today knowing Jesus is coming back soon. It will help you persevere to the end. When did you last think about the return of Christ? When did you last feel your heart ache for heaven? When did you last feel the pull of eternity making you long to see Jesus? Live today, Jude is saying, as if Jesus were coming back tonight. Live today, ready to be with Him forever.

And before we move on, did you notice the robust Trinitarianism of Jude's instructions in these verses? Do you see that? Praying in the Holy Spirit, keep

yourselves in the love of God, wait for the mercy of Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. You see that, for Jude, the Christian life is a life surrounded and hemmed in and saturated by Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jude's doctrine of the Trinity is intensely practical, isn't it, filled with implications for our lives. The Holy Spirit empowering prayer, the love of God motivating obedience, the return of Christ propelling us on until He comes.

III. Look Out

Mercy For the Doubter

So look back to the apostolic Word. Don't forget the apostolic Word. And then look up to the triune God. Cling to Him, rest on Him, and use all the means He has ordained to keep close to Him and stay in His love. And then finally, look out - verses 22 and 23. How will we interact with others when we know this brother is struggling with temptation and has fallen often? When we know that sister has come under the spell of error? How should we interact? Well look at Jude's wise counsel. First he deals with doubters. Doubters, he says, do not need a harsh smack down. It's not a rebuke a doubter needs; it's mercy. Have mercy on those who doubt. They haven't left the faith; they have not turned their backs. They have doubts. They are insecure. They don't understand how all the pieces fit together. Perhaps there have been providential trials in their lives so overwhelming they're left with unanswered questions. They don't see how to integrate it all. Fragile and weak they need mercy! That, after all, is why we all need to keep looking up, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that brings eternal life, isn't it? The truth is, we're all weak and we all need mercy. Even the strongest believer among us needs mercy. And won't you show others the same mercy you instinctively know is the great need of your own heart? That's Jude's exhortation. When you meet a struggling brother or sister show them mercy, because it's mercy you need too. Help them to fix their eyes on Jesus. Open the Word with them. Pray with and for them. Have mercy on those who doubt.

Rescuing the Unbeliever

And there's another group. Look at the text - verse 23. Save others by snatching them out of the fire. There are doubting believers but then there's this group, clearly not Christians. They are liable to the fires of judgment, Jude says. Save them! Pluck them from the precipice on the brink of which they stand already, teetering, ready at any moment to fall and to forever be lost. Save them! This is why we contend for the faith. This is why we pray in the Spirit. This is why we stay in the fight - to save some from the flames! We don't preach the Gospel to mend society, you know. The mission of the church is not to cure social ills. This is our calling - save others by snatching them from the fire. They are ready to fall into the furnace and be consumed everlastingly. But the Gospel can rescue

them. And you, people of God, you are the delivery system for the Gospel of grace by which you may save some from the judgment to which their rebellion and disobedience is sending them.

Showing Mercy With Fear

And then there's finally a third group. Have mercy on those who doubt, save others by snatching them out of the fire, and to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garments stained by the flesh. Mercy again is the attitude; this time, however, it's to be mixed with fear. Jude is sounding a cautionary note, isn't he? Apparently this third group have been swept along by the sensuality and the morally compromised lifestyle promoted by these false teachers. And therein lies the danger for the people of God. As you show mercy to backsliders who have fallen back into a pattern of worldly living, beware the snares of temptation yourself. Show mercy with fear, hating even the garments stained by the flesh. There's a super sensitivity, a scrupulous commitment to keeping our distance from sin that should mark our approach. I rather fear that we have become so inured to worldliness in the church in these days that we almost see this kind of sensitivity to sin as kind of fear and trembling about even the garments stained by the flesh as a sign of legalism. It's not legalism; it's godly wisdom. To change Jude's metaphor, he's warning us not to play with fire. Do not toy with sin. As you minister to others, guard yourselves, tremble at the weight of eternity, at the polluting power of sin show mercy, but tremble, be afraid, guard your heart.

And did you notice that in all of that, all that Jude has said, for all the strength of his rebukes and the directness of his denunciations of error, there is not the slightest hint of a vindictive or punitive spirit toward those who struggle or who may even be lost. No, isn't his concern to win them back? That's what verses 22 and 23 are all about. To save them, show them mercy. What a strange war Jude asks us to wage. How countercultural when the greatest weapon we wield is mercy. It's love. Win them! Save them! Pluck them from the flames. Tremble but show mercy. Hate sin but show mercy. Go after them and bring the wandering sheep back. Jude's point, do you see, is really very simple in the end. When we look back, remembering the apostolic word, and when we look up clinging to the grace of the triune God, we will find ourselves beginning to look out to the lost and the backslidden and the wandering showing mercy and seeking to win all for the glory of God.

Look back, look up, and look out. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank You for Your Word. We confess how prone our hearts are, indeed, to wander, that our hearts should grow cold, that we fail to keep ourselves in the love of God. Thank You for the exhortations of Scripture to be in the Word, to be with Your people, to pray clinging to the help of the Holy Spirit, and to live today looking for, expecting, longing for the Savior's final return. Help us as we renew our commitment to the spiritual disciplines, to love the lost, to

weep over the backslidden, and to show mercy. For Jesus' sake we pray, amen.

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