

The Primacy of Truth

Jude 1-4

A car pattered past the state trooper at 22 mph. Knowing that such drivers can be as dangerous as speeders, the trooper pulled the car over. Besides the elderly lady driver, he noticed four elderly lady passengers. They were wide-eyed and as white as ghosts.

The confused driver asks, "I was going the exact speed limit. What is the problem?"

The trooper, trying not to chuckle, explained that 22 was the route number, not the speed limit. She was a bit embarrassed as he closed his ticket book and just told her to be careful. But he had to ask, "Before you go, is everyone in this car okay? These women seem *awfully* shaken." "Oh," she answered, "They've been like that ever since we got off Route 127."

If everyone interprets road signs individually, can anyone be safe on the road? If everyone who claims to be a Christian has his or her own take on truth, can they all be right? Can they all bring honor and glory to God in the world? Will they all arrive at the same place safely? Must there not be some uniform standard of truth that will find us all advancing toward heaven in unity?

The tiny letter of *Jude* has been called by many the most overlooked book in the New Testament. This could be because it reads strangely. *Jude* makes odd arguments from Jewish sources that are not part of the Bible. I suspect, a bigger factor for the neglect of *Jude* is that in this age of open-mindedness, flexibility and grace, it smacks of being rather severe, inflexible and even dogmatic.

Nevertheless, in our age ...

- when so many people think that truth is relative from one person to the next,
- when so many people think that all religious paths take people to the same destination,
- when so many people are custom-designing personal belief systems by drawing a little of this and a little of that from Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, New Age and Oprah ...

In an age such as ours, *Jude* may be as timely and needful as any book in the Bible. The author summarizes his purpose in verse 3, which is to urge his readers "to contend for the faith."

Let's be clear as to how *Jude* is using the term, "faith." By "the faith," he is referring to a body of truth and not to an individual's faith by which he responds to God. "The faith" is the historic substance of Christianity to which our individual faith responds. Generally, "the faith" is the whole of the Bible, but only as we understand that the Bible has a single aim, to direct all eyes to Jesus, the Bringer of salvation. So, more precisely, we might think of the gospel, which brings the whole of the Bible to its climax. This is "the faith" we have embraced "by faith."

Jesus came to us as God in the flesh. He fulfilled the Law of God and lived out perfect righteousness before the world's eyes. Then, with no sin of His own to merit God's wrath, He shouldered that wrath in the place of sinners. He did this when He died on a cross. He died in our place, but He also defeated sin and death in our behalves when He was raised from the dead. All of this inaugurated His eternal kingdom.

Jesus ascended into heaven, but one day He will return to establish His kingdom in its fullness. Until then, He has left the Holy Spirit to guide, protect and empower His people as they pull away from an old sinful nature in anticipation of His return. While He was here, He insisted that He is the only Way to the Father. When He ascended, He left eyewitnesses that also made it very clear that there is no other Name under heaven given to men by which they can be saved.

In our age, this is a provocative question: Do you believe this? Jude assumed that his readers did and he wrote to challenge them to “contend for the faith.” “Contend” comes from the realm of athletics and refers to a vigorous, intense struggle to defeat an opponent. Jude might be neglected by the church just because it is not as pleasant reading as other books. “The faith” was under attack in Jude’s day. It has always been under attack through the ages in some sense or another, and there can be no serious observer of the culture who questions that it is under attack today. And, its defense remains worthy of everything that any believer can bring to the fight.

So who was Jude? He briefly identifies himself:

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

The text actually says “Judas.” In that day, you couldn’t shake a tree in Judea without a Judas falling out. It was a form of Judah, the head of the kingly tribe of David (for whom Judea was named), and it didn’t hurt that a great national hero of a Jewish resistance against Greece two centuries earlier was named Judas Maccabaeus. Our Jude is almost unanimously believed to be Judas, the half-brother of Jesus, one of four natural sons of Mary and Joseph named in the gospels. He is “a brother of James.” After the Apostle James was executed in Jerusalem, the only James who would be widely-enough recognized in Christian circles for name-dropping purposes was James, a key elder in the church in Jerusalem. Paul identifies this James as “the Lord’s brother” in Galatians 1:19, so our Jude is Judas, another of Jesus’ brothers. The only reason that most English translations render the name Jude rather than Judas is because that traitor, Judas Iscariot, messed the name up for everyone.

So why did not Jude, nor for that matter, James, identify themselves as the Lord’s brothers in their respective letters? Perhaps, they thought that in light of twelve called Apostles, that would be a presumptuous appeal for credibility. Besides, Jesus taught that all who do His will are His brothers and sisters. When He said that, none of His brothers believed in Him. They even thought He might be a bit touched on one occasion. Only after the Resurrection did they become believers.

So, in the narrative of the New Testament, Jude is a peripheral character. Nevertheless, his passionate plea for believers “to contend for the faith” carries the weight of sacred scripture, and like all scripture, it is living and vibrant and timely for the church today. In his introductory comments, we get a sense of why “the faith” is worthy of our efforts to keep it pure.

I. The Union of the Devotees to “the Faith” (1b, 2)

A. Our Divine Standing Comes by “the Faith” verse 1b

To those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ:

We should be united in our fervor for God’s truth because we have each been called to God through that truth. Our salvation was initiated by God. It was an idea born in His grace. “Called” typically refers to an invitation, such as to a banquet. Salvation always begins with the call of God and not by the inquisitive nature or religious curiosity of a man. We are “loved by God.” The structure of the language speaks of something completed in the past but enduring into the present. We were “loved” when Jesus died for our sins. Because He was raised from the dead, we know that we remain “loved”. We are “kept by Jesus.” The idea is that we are guarded, watched and firmly held. Whatever we encounter in this life, we are assured that Jesus is a faithful and strong Companion. We do not fear for our security when we remain near to or abide in Jesus.

B. Our Perpetual Blessing Comes by “the Faith” verse 2

²Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.

“Mercy” is God’s pity and regard for the misery that accompanied our sins. Everything we endured we brought upon ourselves by willful rebellion against what we knew to be right. We made a mess of our lives. The cold, hard hand of justice could have left us to rot in the mire, but we received mercy from God because of Him Who is Truth and we continue to receive it. Through the intercessory ministry of Jesus to us, we can approach God’s throne “with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

“Peace” comes from a word that means “to join”. We were estranged from God, at odds with Him to put it mildly. Paul describes our previous state in terms like “enemies” and “objects of wrath.” Jesus, put us back together with ourselves, with others and, especially, with God. But, this peace was not a one-time clearing of the slate. Temptations within us and trials from without can cause us to question whether we are really at peace with God. When we simply cling to “the faith,” the “great and precious promises” of God to us, His peace inevitably prevails in us.

And of course, “love” put it all in motion. God loved the world. He sent Jesus. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” (1 John 3:1).

C. “The Faith” Has Been Awfully Good to Us

Called, loved and kept ...recipients of abounding mercy, peace and love - we placed our faith in Jesus through “the faith” that reveals Him. We know the power of that truth. Does it make sense, then, that when “the faith” is distorted or cheapened that it can wield the same power in the lives of others? Does it make sense that in the name of some celebrated tolerance, we are to say nothing when the truth is deviously misrepresented? It is truth that has secured our standing in Christ. It is truth that has secured the blessings of mercy, peace and love that just keep appearing to us over and over. But, if the truth is what secured our standing and our blessings, what can lies secure for those who are lost and without hope. Deviations from the truth secure nothing.

It would be unbecoming and foreign to the nature of Jesus in us were we to adopt an aggressive posture of “doctrinal watchdogs” or “truth police.” Every difference doesn’t require a fight. That mistake has been made too many times. The dogmatic spirit of some has probably made the “anything goes” alternative seem attractive. But, there are times and places and certain bones of contention that make a rigorous defense of historic Christianity an urgent thing in which we must engage.

II. The Urgency of the Defense of “the Faith” (3)

³Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints ...

A. Jude Laid Aside His Envisioned Masterpiece to Write a Needed Tract

It is not clear that Jude had actually started his book on “the salvation we share” but he had been thinking about it. And, what a theme for a book, especially, if Jude had all the time in the world to reflect and to revise. It would be interesting to know what he had in mind or if he ever got around to writing it, but circumstances thwarted his plans. Something more pressing seized his heart, so much so that he settled for writing a letter he could never possibly have desired to write.

I can appreciate how he feels. Last month I preached a series on *Ruth*, a nice little story on its own merits about an alien outcast and her kinsman-redeemer that directs our minds toward the redemption that Jesus brought to all of us. Several people have told me that *Ruth* is one of their favorite books. It was easy for me to get ramped-up to write the next message. But, in this bizarre age as it pertains to “truth,” *Jude*’s is a message that needs to be preached. I don’t anticipate hearing that *Jude* is anyone’s favorite Bible book. Frankly, if I do, it may frighten me just a little.

But, what was *Jude* going to write about “salvation” to his own people that would not be more masterfully addressed by the author of *Hebrews*? He could write to Gentiles, but what might he say about salvation that Paul would not say better in *Romans*? The Holy Spirit knew what books would be preserved for the church through the ages, and He needed one that urgently calls His people to a passionate defense of the truth. It’s probably not the book anyone will want to read to the little ones at bedtime, but *Jude* is Spirit-breathed, amazingly current and not to be ignored.

B. “The Faith” Has Been Entrusted to Us

We did not unearth this body of truth that identifies us as Christians. It is the product of the Holy Spirit, and it has been “entrusted” to us. The community of “the faith” cannot guard “the faith” if they do not know it, love it and obey it. To be “entrusted” with it implies a burden to hand it down to subsequent generations. The church cannot do that if she is overly preoccupied with “the next new thing” or if she heeds the marketing voices of the world that tell her to “be relevant.”

The Bible claims to be “living and active.” In other words, it claims an axiomatic relevance that does not have to be manufactured by some preacher who wants to grow a church. To search for clearer ways to make God’s truths known should be the burden of any sincere Bible teacher. But, to use bits and pieces of it as a springboard to advancing this project or that vision, or, to develop some “sermon” that is 90% pop psychology – that is not the responsible guardianship of a trust.

C. “The Faith” Has Been Entrusted to Us “Once for All”

Jude believed that “the faith” was delivered in tact to the saints and that we should not anticipate additional installments. Therefore, I conclude that nothing significant happened when Joseph Smith ventured into the woods a couple of centuries back. I conclude that various belief systems do not all wind up at the same place. Competing truths cannot be true, so I conclude that when we say nothing in response to the “anything goes” spirit of the age, we drop the ball in regard to our sacred trust.

III. The Unscrupulousness of the Distorters of “the Faith” (4)

... ⁴For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.

A. Deceivers Slithered into the Church

I do not believe that the church can effectively rail against every belief system that stands opposed to historic Christianity, but that is not what *Jude* addresses. This letter is about error within the church. “Secretly slipped in” implies some dishonest stealth tactic. Whether it was an appeal to people’s needs or to their fascination with novelty or originality, the sheep were not grounded enough in truth to recognize the error of these wolves, these “certain men” as *Jude* calls them

B. They Introduced their Twisted Expression of “the Faith”

These teachers were opposed to all law in the name of grace. “Grace is bigger than law. Grace accomplishes what law cannot.” That’s true enough as far as it goes, but these men twisted grace by presenting its power over the law as a cover for a person to sin without consequence. “Sin to your heart’s content. Sin imaginatively. Sin creatively. It doesn’t matter, because grace will cover it.” There is some logic present until one remembers that God hates our sin. Only an unrepentant, “godless” heart could arrive at the conclusion that a gift from God promotes what God deplors.

C. They Introduced their Twisted Doctrine of God

The heresy *Jude* addressed had tendencies of Gnosticism that challenged the very nature of God. Gnostics believed that the material world was innately evil and that the spiritual realm was good. They believed that the “god” of the Old Testament who created the world was different from the “God” they endeavored to know through some cliquish enlightenment. From this highest God descended a series of lower gods, each less pure as they descended away from this top god. Way, way, way down the line was a god mean, impure and ornery enough to create the physical world.

One of the emanations near the top was the Christ, Who descended on the man, Jesus, when He was baptized and left him before the events surrounding his death. So, they denied the Sovereignty of the one true God and they denied Jesus Christ as uniquely this God manifested in human flesh. And that, according to *Jude*, was also sufficient to indict them as “godless.”

I cannot say that that the distortions to “the faith” that can be observed in many Christian circles today are as sinister as the ones described in *Jude*. But, I know that we have been entrusted with “the faith.” And, I know that ignorance breeds error. And, I suspect that the church in our age is being seduced by erroneous ideas much more severely than it is being attacked by persecutors from the outside. So, we don’t need to be ready to fight every time we hear anything that doesn’t ring true. It’s okay to seek clarification. But, we also don’t need to be shamed into silence when we recognize that truth is under attack, especially, among those who profess to honor Christ.

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