CONTEND FOR THE FAITH

Jude 1:1-25

Key Verse: 1:3

“Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people.”

The main idea of the book of Jude is that believers must contend for the faith. In Jude’s time false teachers had infiltrated the church and perverted the gospel truth. They claimed to believe in Jesus, but denied that he was the only Sovereign and Lord. Their so-called “faith” was not the unique Christian faith based on the gospel truth. They imported ideas from other religions, philosophies and cultures and made their own kind of “faith.” We call it syncretism; it is like picking what to believe as one chooses food at a buffet. This kind of “faith” is not saving faith, and it always leads to ungodliness. This is still true today. We live in a multicultural, relativistic, global society in which “faith” is fluid and subjective. Yet faith in Jesus Christ is unique; it is the timeless truth; and it is the only way of salvation; it cannot be compromised. As this faith comes under attack, we should learn how to stand firm, keep it and contend for it. Let’s learn how to do so.

First, a call for believers to contend for the faith (1-19). The writer of this letter identifies himself as “Jude, a servant of Christ Jesus and a brother of James” (1a). Jude, called “Judas” was also a brother of Jesus (Mt 13:55). Jude did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah before his glorification (Jn 7:5). But after Jesus’ resurrection, Jude believed in him as the Christ and his personal Savior (1,4,25; Ac 1:14). He acknowledged Jesus as the only Sovereign and Lord (4,25). While Jude was not one of the Twelve Apostles, he called himself “a servant of Jesus Christ.” This denotes that he belonged to Christ and represented him in proclaiming apostolic teaching as his servant. Jude’s brother James was a prominent leader in the early church (Gal 2:9).

The recipients of this letter were likely Jewish Christians, since their understanding of Jewish literature is assumed. The repetition of “ungodly” indicates that they lived in a Gentile culture (4,8). The repeated use of “dear friends” (3,17,20), which means “beloved,” reveals that Jude had an intimate relationship with them. Jude addresses them in verse 1b: “To those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ.” They had been called by God to be his people according to his sovereign will and grace. This is spoken of in past tense. From the time of their calling to the present moment, God had loved them dearly, not because they deserved it, but because God is love. They became God’s beloved children only by grace. It was not due to their own merit, but only through faith in what Jesus has done. The phrase “kept for Jesus Christ” expresses positive assurance regarding the future. Though the believers were threatened by false teachers, God would preserve them from falling away until the day of Jesus’ coming again by his power (1Pe 1:5).

Jude greeted them in verse 2: “Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.” In Paul’s greetings he usually says, “grace and peace….” But Jude says, “Mercy, peace and love.” Jude emphasized mercy (2,21,22,23). Mercy is one of God’s attributes: God shows kindness and concern for people in need. Without God’s mercy we cannot survive. We also need peace, not worldly peace, but the peace that comes from God. When the peace of God comes, all anxiety disappears and we have assurance that everything will be okay, no matter what the situation is. We also need God’s unconditional love, which nurtures and sustains us. Jude prayed that this mercy, peace and love would be multiplied to God’s holy people. This expresses God’s heart’s desire to bless his people with the best gifts.

After greeting, Jude gets directly to the main issue in verse 3: “Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people.” “Dear friends” tells us that Jude had godly affection for them and cared about them deeply. Originally he wanted to write about the salvation they shared. Salvation is not static, like an airplane ticket to heaven. Salvation is dynamic like a seed that grows and bears fruit. There are many aspects of its development and growth that Jude eagerly wanted to write about. However, he felt compelled to deal with the urgent problem: the rise of false teachers trying to draw them away from salvation. False teaching is so dangerous and destructive, like a wildfire. If it is ignored, it can destroy a church. So it requires the immediate attention of God’s servants. This is why Jude urged them to contend for the faith.

“Contend” comes from a Greek word with the root “to agonize,” as in an athletic contest. It means to fight for something as a matter of first importance until victory is won. We must fight like this for “the faith.” This faith was once for all handed down to God’s holy people. It came from God and is not man-made. “Once for all” means that God gave it in final form through Jesus Christ. Nothing can be added or subtracted. It does not evolve over time and cannot be modified by cultural context. Paul stressed the uniqueness of the gospel, calling it “the gospel,” not “a gospel” (Gal 1:6-9). Here “faith” does not refer to the act of believing but to the truth that is believed. This is the gospel truth about Jesus Christ. This faith is not just doctrinal but profoundly affects one’s behavior; it transforms us to live a godly life. This faith has been entrusted to God’s holy people. Therefore, we have a duty to preserve it, defend it, and proclaim it to others. This is not just for one or two special people, but the duty of all of God’s holy people.

Why is it so important that God’s people contend for the faith? It is because the gospel must be guarded and handed down from generation to generation so that people may believe, be saved and have eternal life. The church is the pillar and foundation of the truth to guard this gospel (1Ti 3:15). Historically, there are so many people who have contended for the faith. Apostle Paul did so at a critical moment when the gospel was spreading to the Gentiles. The circumcision group insisted that keeping the law of Moses was necessary to be saved, not faith in Christ alone. They were so strong that even the Apostle Peter was intimidated by their criticism. But Paul did not give in. He stood on the gospel truth that people are saved only by faith in Jesus Christ. Paul fought for this truth as a matter of life and death. As a result, the gospel spread among the Gentiles to the whole world. Martin Luther also contended for the faith as he confronted the Catholic church which had perverted the gospel truth. Through deep Bible study, he discovered the gospel truth that righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone by God’s grace alone. His motto was: “Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fides,” which means “Scripture alone, Grace alone, Faith alone.” As he stood on the Bible truth, the gospel was preserved, and the Reformation took place which changed the whole world.

Before the Reformation, John Wycliffe exhorted lay people to contend for the faith. He said, “The laity ought to understand the faith, and since the doctrines of our faith are in the Scriptures, believers should have the Scriptures in a language familiar to the people….” For this reason, he translated the Bible into English even though the Roman Catholic Church martyred him for doing so. According to Wycliffe’s teaching, people known as the Lollards continued Bible translation work, read the Bible, and tried to live according to its teachings. They risked their lives to spread the gospel truth. When the Roman Catholic Church prohibited their work by destroying the Bibles they had produced, they decided to memorize the Bible book by book, assigning specific books to specific people. In this way they preserved the gospel truth. All of God’s people should contend for the faith by studying the Bible deeply, living according to its teachings, and sharing it with others.

In verse 4 Jude exposed the false teachers of his day. Certain individuals had secretly slipped in among them. At first they hid their true nature and purpose like wolves in sheep’s clothing. They pretended to be good Bible students. But after earning people’s trust they began to show their true colors. We should not be surprised, for false teachers have been arising among God’s people from the beginning, and they are already under God’s condemnation. Though they claim to be believers, their lifestyle is ungodly. They pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality. There are two enemies of the gospel truth: legalism and licentiousness. Legalism adds keeping some law as a necessary condition for salvation. Licentiousness ignores the law completely and tolerates sin in the name of grace. These are like two ditches along the golden road of salvation. Since we all have a sinful nature, licentiousness appeals to us. But it is a dangerous trap. In truth, we are saved by grace alone. This grace is not cheap; it is costly. This grace also has power to transform us. Titus 2:12 says, “It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age....” Grace gives us true freedom. But if we abuse this grace, we lose our freedom. Moreover, if licentiousness is tolerated in the church, it can spread quickly, infect the entire church, and cause it to collapse. So we should fight against licentiousness very seriously.

Another characteristic of false teachers is that they deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord (4b). They might have accepted many things about Jesus, but they did not accept his sovereignty to justify living by their own sinful desires. Martin Luther said, “They considered not him as their Lord, but themselves as their own lords.”[[1]](#footnote-0) Why is it so important to acknowledge Jesus as the only Sovereign and Lord? It is because that is who he is. In other words he is God incarnate. If he was not God incarnate his atoning sacrifice for our sins would not be sufficient to save all people who believe in him. In a word, without believing that Jesus is God we cannot be saved (Ro 10:9). This is why we must contend for this faith so seriously.

In verses 5-8, Jude reminded them of the destiny of false teachers through historical examples. Though God delivered all the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, those who did not believe were destroyed (5). Angels were created to serve God and his people. But those who abandoned their positions of authority were put in chains and bound for everlasting judgment (6). People living in Sodom and Gomorrah gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. God destroyed them with fire from heaven, making them an example (7). Even though God’s message was so clear, the false teachers ignored it. They trusted their own dreams, polluted their bodies with sin, rejected authority and blasphemed celestial beings (8). They lived just like those whom God had judged.

In verses 9,14-15, Jude quotes apocalyptic Jewish books which are not included in the Biblical canon. These books are “The Assumption of Moses” and “1 Enoch,” which were regarded as personal devotional guides for early Jewish Christians. Jude uses them to give warning examples to the ungodly. In verses 9-10, Jude condemned the slanderous behavior of the false teachers. Even the archangel Michael, who has great authority, refrained from uttering disrespectful words against Satan, despite provocation. Satan claimed that Moses’ body belonged to him because Moses broke the law of God by murdering an Egyptian and expressing anger toward the Israelites. Michael did not argue with the devil because he respected God’s authority, who alone can forgive transgressions of his law. In contrast, the false teachers did not respect any authority, and even denied Jesus Christ as the only Sovereign and Lord. With this attitude, they freely slandered celestial beings like irrational animals. But their destiny was destruction.

After exposing their characteristics, Jude pronounced woe to the false teachers. He compared them to Cain, who was the first murderer, to Balaam, who fell into error due to his greed, and to Korah, who led a rebellion against God’s servant Moses (11; Gen 4:5-8; Num 22:5-7; 31:16; 2Pe 2:15; Num 16:1-3). Cain, Balaam and Korah were all dissatisfied with their positions and became rebels against God’s authority. The false teachers were just like them. Nevertheless, they participated in the Lord’s Supper with no shame over their ungodliness (12a). Though they were called “shepherds,” they fed only themselves. In order to fully expose their hypocritical emptiness, Jude used several diverse metaphors. They were like waterless clouds which were useless to a parched land. They were like fruitless trees which disappointed hungry people. They were “twice dead,” which refers to the second death (Rev 21:8). Having rejected the gospel of Jesus, the only Sovereign and Lord, their eternal condemnation was inevitable. They were like wild waves of the sea, out of control and stirring up chaos. After their wicked deeds were done, their shame would be obvious to everyone. They were like wandering stars that mislead travelers. What is reserved for them is not the wedding supper of the Lamb, but eternal condemnation in the blackest darkness (13).

In verses 14-16, Jude further exposed the false teachers and told of their destiny by again quoting Jewish apocalyptic literature. Enoch prophesied of the Lord’s coming with thousands and thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone and to convict all sinners for their ungodly acts and defiant words. Jude applies this judgment to the false teachers. They are grumblers and fault finders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage.

When we come to know the truth about false teachers, it may surprise us. Jude urges us to remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold: “In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires” (18; 2Pe 3:3). These apostolic warnings exactly applied to these false teachers. They were divisive, carnal, and without the Spirit (19). These days also we can see many scoffers who spread false teaching and discredit gospel truth. We need to be aware of this danger, so that we may contend for the faith effectively in our times.

Second, build yourselves up in the most holy faith (20-25). Thus far, Jude tried to help God’s people to understand the danger of false teachers and not be deceived by them. Now, in verses 20-23, Jude gives some specific positive exhortations: build yourselves up in your most holy faith; pray in the Spirit; keep yourselves in God’s love; be merciful to those who doubt; save others; show mercy, mixed with fear. Most importantly, we need to build ourselves up in our most holy faith. When we build up our bodies through exercise, we can become strong and healthy. Likewise, we need to build up our faith through sincere Bible study applied to our practical lives, constant prayer in the Spirit, and keeping ourselves in God’s love by serving others in the Christian fellowship. Instead of judging the weak who doubt, we should be merciful. We need to save those who are going astray by snatching them from the fire, like a mother going into a burning house for her child. As we practice mercy, we must discern evil and express our hatred of it. All of these exhortations are related to building up the most holy faith. The “most holy faith” is a unique expression which appears only here in the Bible. This faith originates from God. This faith is in Jesus, who is the only way of salvation. This is why Jude calls it “most holy faith.” We who receive this precious gift should do our best to build it up.

Verse 24 begins Jude’s doxology: “To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy….” Usually epistles end with greetings, prayer requests, or a final benediction. But this epistle ends with a doxology. A benediction is a prayer for God’s blessing on others. A doxology is a hymn of praise to God. Jude’s doxology includes two things God is able to do. The first is to keep them from stumbling. The danger of false teachers was very real and powerful. The believers could not overcome them by their own strength and wisdom. But God was able to keep them when they relied on him. The second is to present them before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy. Here “his glorious presence” refers to God’s judgment seat where all people stand to give an account of their lives. At that moment, everything is exposed and laid bare. Who can stand without fault and be joyful? No one. But when we have faith in Jesus, we can stand before him without fault and with great joy. It is not because of our merit, but because he has brought to completion our sanctification. Finally, Jude praised the Lord: “...to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.” God saves us through Jesus Christ our Lord. He was before all ages, is now, and forever will be. Only he is worthy to receive glory, majesty, power and authority.

These days faith in Jesus Christ is under attack in many ways. Many prestigious American universities were established as Christian institutions with a mandate to raise godly spiritual leaders. But most of them have now lost gospel faith and become mere human institutions, even anti-Christian. What is worse, many mainline Christian denominations have lost the gospel spirit. They do not send gospel missionaries, deny the inerrancy of Scripture, reject the exclusive claims of Christ, ordain practicing homosexuals to the ministry, advocate same-sex marriage, and turn a deaf ear to the holocaust of abortion.[[2]](#footnote-1) In this situation, we Christians are called to contend for the faith. As soldiers of Christ, let’s fight against false teaching and defend the faith. Let’s build ourselves up in the most holy faith until Jesus comes again.

1. Lucas, Dick & Green, Christopher, *The message of 2 Peter and Jude* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academics, 1995), p. 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Shaddix, Jim, Akin, Daniel L., *Christ-centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in 2 Peter and Jude* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2018), p. 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)