

Contend for the Faith

“Consider the kindness and severity of God” (Romans 11:22).

Almost every page of Scripture, whether Old or New Testament, proclaims a warning. Warning, not to unbelievers (although of course that’s implicit), but to those who profess to be God’s people, to those who profess to be in the faith. The short epistle from Jude, for example, although easily read in two minutes, should make us all tremble.

Jude appeals to his readers to “contend for the faith.” That phrase doesn’t mean we’re to hold to correct theology, or to know apologetics, as most evangelicals interpret it. It means to live in a fully godly way. Our *behavior*, not our doctrines, shows if we’re in the faith. Or not. Godlessness is living not according to what God has commanded in Scripture, that is, according to what imitates God’s holy Person and values, but living instead according to however we want to. And that results in being immoral. And it also results in denying Jesus, the Holy One of Israel, who came to make us godly. (See verses 3 and 4.)

God destroyed—or will destroy—those who initially were His own because of rebellious behavior. Jude gives three examples of this in verses 5 to 7. It’s possible to speak, to think, to live in a way that rebels against God’s authority—and so to incur His just wrath. It’s possible for people in the church to be ungodly, for which God’s judgment is upon them.

And what does Jude cite as examples of ungodliness? Grumbling. Complaining. Being critical of others. Boasting of themselves. To us today, these are trivial problems, perhaps even easily overlooked normal behavior. But our lives aren’t overlooked by God. Our speech, our thoughts, our values, how we live in this world shows God if we’re godly or not. And no matter is too trivial.

Jude’s appeal is, **“build yourselves up in your most holy faith.”** That’s *our* responsibility! **“Keep yourselves in God’s love”** means we need to know what holy living is, and then live it. That way God continues to love us. We experience the kindness of God. So, for example, we show mercy to others, as God does; we do evangelism, which is God’s purpose for our being here; and we mortify our sinful desires. In other words, Jude argues, how we live affirms or denies the Lordship of Christ, where the term “lordship” refers to His authority over us, over how we live. We don’t dare suppose that, because we’re under grace, with forgiveness freely available, we’re therefore free from God’s commands and standards. We are not “free” in that sense at all. We’re under the Law of Christ, to live it to His glory.

Jude isn’t about false teachers, as commentaries allege. It’s about people in the church who, by living ungodly lives, are rebelling against God. So we can experience God’s kindness, or His severity, depending on how we respond to the grace extended to us in the Person of Jesus and His gift of the Holy Spirit. And the response that God expects is a radically changed life, a life that expresses His perfections and His will. And that’s our responsibility. But it’s not just Jude that admonishes us to contend for the faith.

Paul’s task in his Letter to the Romans was to argue that something greater is at stake in Christianity than petty issues between Jewish and Gentile believers. What happened was, in 49 AD Emperor Claudius threw all Jews out of Rome, including the Jewish believers there. When they were allowed to return, the Jewish believers found that Gentile believers comprised the Church at Rome. So, conflict ensued. The Letter Paul wrote is to deal with this. That’s why in writing this letter he switches from one group to the other. It’s why he insists on submission to the Roman authorities. It’s why he states near the end, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (15:7).

But a sub-theme weaves throughout the letter, and it climaxes in Chapter 11: **“Be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches [Israel], he will not spare you [Gentiles] either. Consider therefore the kindness and severity of God: severity to those who fell [Israel], but kindness to you [Gentiles], provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you also will be cut off”** (11:20c to 22). This warning applies to us, today. It’s our responsibility to “continue in His kindness.” In Romans 12ff, Paul builds on how we “continue in His kindness.” Paul’s argument here is the same as Jude’s. We’re to be transformed, and thus we live out the will of God, for His glory. God is kind, but He’s also demanding. With great spiritual privileges come great responsibilities. Obedience to God’s will *must* result from faith. Because if not, we may experience God’s severity. Paul was serious when he wrote, “Be afraid.”

Let’s correctly understand Paul’s Letter to the Romans. It’s not about justification, as so many people wrongly assume. Rather, it’s that justification is the starting point from which we go on to a life of obedience, love, and righteous living, enabled by the Holy Spirit. We’re transformed into the image of the Son, and we thus put God’s character on display in this present world. The Gospel is transforming—if we are truly believing it. Peter argues this as well.

Both letters by Peter are warnings to the Church. (Peter probably had the Ananias and Sapphira episode in mind when penning these letters.) In 1 Peter, he writes that our response to Jesus of love and joy, even in spite of suffering persecution, demonstrates a genuine faith (1:7-8). Knowing that God will one future day judge how we lived, what our works were, we need to live in fear of Him (1:17). God holds believers accountable! We’re to live such good lives that even pagans will glorify God (2:12). Peter fills his letter with exhortations and commands. . . Why? Because by obeying all that instruction, we **“set apart Christ as Lord”** (3:15). “Lord” means He has authority over us, and we’re to be submitted to Him, to His teachings, to His will. The goal of our lives is that God may be praised by our loving trust and obedience to Jesus (4:11). Believers will one day be judged (4:17) on the basis of how we pursued life.

We wrongly assume that this 1st letter by Peter is all about suffering. It’s not. It’s about “the true grace of God” (5:12b), with which Peter concludes the letter. It’s grace that gets us into salvation and instructs us how to live this life in the way that pleases God.

In Peter’s 2nd letter, he writes, **“make your calling and election sure”** (1:10). That’s a warning! Our faith has to result in godly qualities; it has to be effective and productive (1:5-8). False prophets and false teachers are in the Church, but we’re not to be deceived by them, because if we are, God’s fierce indignation awaits. Peter writes further, **“He [God] is patient with you [believers!], not wanting anyone [believers!!] to perish, but everyone to come to repentance”** (3:9). This letter is not about false teachers, as most commentaries allege, but it’s a warning to believers. God judges His own! We must go on to maturity in the faith, and not indulge ourselves in worldly lusts and false teachings. This 2nd letter by Peter, like the 1st, is a warning that we must live godly, or else.

“Contending for the faith” involves effort, great effort. The Greek word translated as “contend” has the root of “agonize.” Let me ask this: What would be the opposite of contending for the faith? It would be indifference to Jesus, to sanctification, to God’s will for us. It would be being smug about our spiritual state. It would be apostasy. It would be what Jude wrote to warn against. It would be inviting the severity of God.

Dear Reader: Do not presume upon God’s grace. Do not take His kindness for granted. We have entered into a relationship with a dangerous God. He expects much from us as our response to His kindness, and His demands are all wise and good. The promises he extends to us are precious beyond anyone’s imagination. So, let’s contend for the faith. Let’s be all that we should be and do all that we should do, so that the kind of person we are and the life we lead reveals a glorious God. It’s why we’re here.