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Contending for the Faith

Jude 1.1-4, 17-23

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What's the first thing you think of when you hear the name, **Jude**? Some of you may think of the song *Hey Jude*, by the Beatles, which came out 54 years ago last month and remained on the top 100 for 19 consecutive weeks, longer than any other Beatles hit. Paul McCartney composed the song while driving to visit John Lennon's estranged wife Cynthia and their young five-year-old son Julian. *Hey Jude*, is the best-selling song released between 1959 and 1977. When the Beatles entire song catalogue became available on streaming services on Christmas Eve 2015, *Hey Jude* immediately became one of the top three Beatles songs streamed. It remains the most streamed of all Beatles tracks on Apple Music. It was great to hear Paul McCartney sing it in person at Fenway Park on June 7. Many people are more familiar with *Hey Jude* than the Letter of Jude, the next to last book in the New Testament.

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you were writing a letter, having a conversation, or preparing to make a presentation and then circumstances changed significantly forcing you to change your plans and to rethink what you were going to write or say? That happens to me sometimes in preaching. That's the context of the Letter of Jude. While hoping to write a letter that provided insight and teaching about the **salvation Christians share in Jesus Christ**, Jude felt compelled to shift gears and address a crisis - false teachers and people claiming to be followers of Jesus who were denying Jesus as their Master and Lord, disobeying his teaching, and lacking the Holy Spirit.

Four weeks ago, we heard from the Second Letter of Peter, which some scholars believe may be the last book of the New Testament to be written. Second Peter's use of the letter of Jude tells us Jude was preserved, copied, and circulated among churches. It's kind of ironic that Jude appears in the New Testament *after* the book that refers to his letter. (*Compare 2 Peter 2:1-8 with Jude 4-16*). The letter of Jude was written to warn Christians against persons who cause divisions and tells Christ followers of the critical need and vital importance of **contending for the faith** that was once for all time delivered to the saints. Listen to **Jude 1-4, 17-23**:

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

To those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for **Jesus Christ**: **2 May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance.**

3 Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about **the salvation we share**, I find it necessary **to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints**. 4 For certain intruders have stolen in among you, people who long ago were designated for this condemnation as ungodly, **who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ**.

17 But you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our **Lord Jesus Christ**; 18 for they said to you, *“In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts.”* 19 **It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions.** 20 **But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; 21 keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.** 22 And **have mercy** on some who are wavering; 23 save others by snatching them out of the fire; and **have mercy** on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.”<sup>1o</sup>

**Contending** is an adjective meaning *“striving or struggling in rivalry or battle, such as contending armies or two contending parties or teams.”* In baseball this is the season of the year when teams are contending in the playoffs for a championship. In the world, ideas, religions, political philosophies, corporations, and individuals, are all contending for influence and supremacy.

In Jude, the issue is contending with false Christians inside the church. That can still be an issue in local churches or ministries today. However, there’s also a larger sense of contending for the faith that extends outside the walls of the church into the culture and the world at large. As Christians who are told to contend for the faith, Jude says we’re to do so in a certain way.

Jude says false Christian’s promiscuous, unprincipled way of life and divisiveness show they’re without the Holy Spirit and the love of God that leads to eternal life (verses 19-21). Jude asserts it’s these unspiritual people lacking the Holy

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<sup>1o</sup> Greek *by the flesh*. The Greek text of verses 22-23 is uncertain at several points

Spirit who are causing division in the church. If you want a sign if someone is spiritual Jude says here it is – folks who have the Holy Spirit will be working for unity in the church rather than causing division. If someone thinks he or she is filled with the Holy Spirit, yet causing division by their actions, behavior, or speech, Jude says, you're not full of the spirit – you're more likely full of yourself. One preacher said, *“Some think that contending for the faith means to roll the Bible up into a bludgeon with which to beat people over the head. Such people feel that they need to be very contentious in contending for the faith.”*

Jude says that's not the case. **We don't need to be contentious in contending for the faith** inside or outside the church. This is critically important. Tim Keller, is a pastor and theologian, and the author of many fine books about the Christian faith. He said in a lecture about evangelism that too many evangelicals are guilty of sharing their faith with an attitude of *“I'm right, you're wrong, and I love telling you about it.”* There are some Christians who are so contentious, arrogant, condescending, and judgmental that they strongly repel people from Christ rather than drawing them nearer. This isn't helpful or effective and it turns people off. Jude tells us **how** to contend for the faith: ***“Beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; 21 keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. 22 And have mercy on some who are wavering.”***

Notice **how positive** this is in dealing with other people inside and outside the church. It's a good guide to remember and I like that each member of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit, God and the Lord Jesus Christ is mentioned. Each of the following components is important: **build up your faith, pray in the Spirit, keep in the love of God, look forward with hope to the mercy of Christ** for yourself and **have mercy** on those who are wavering.

**1. Build yourself up in the faith** (Jude 20). We're to keep striving to grow spiritually as long as we live. A big part of spiritual development involves reading and studying God's Word so that we know and understand it so that we can obey it. The inspired Word of God has the power to teach, train, rebuke, and correct us in righteousness so that as God's children we're equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

**2. Pray in the Holy Spirit** – the Holy Spirit is our advocate as well as our power source as Christians. The Spirit is the one who reminds us of Jesus’ teaching, comforts us, and is the one who is still speaking, guiding, and directing us today.

**3. Keep yourselves in the love of God** – you know what it’s like to be in the ocean, a pond, or a pool, you’re in it for a while and then you get out. Jude says there’s a place you want to keep yourself in always and that’s in the love of God. Keeping in God’s love means living by faith and obedience to God. Jesus told us, ***“If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love”*** (John 15:10). We obey God because God has captivated our hearts and won our allegiance (Romans 6:17). The ultimate expression of our obedience to God is shown through our loving others (1 John 3:11-24, 1 Peter 1:22).

4. The fourth way we contend for the faith, which may sound strange initially, is to look forward with hope to **the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ** – mercy is compassion, grace, forgiveness, leniency, relenting from punishing. That’s how Christ treats us, and Jude says that’s how we’re to treat others; especially those whose faith is wavering for whatever reason – hardship, persecution, illness, grief, doubt – whatever is causing someone’s faith to waver, we’re to be merciful toward them, rather than condemning or judging them. Jude says by having mercy, we may be able to save some people from destruction. Mercy and humility are far more effective means of sharing our faith with others than, *“I’m right, you’re wrong, and I love telling you about it.”* Mercy and humility are also more Christlike.

While Jude was concerned about contending for the faith within a church, in our day we need to contend for the faith in a larger scale in several ways. We need to contend for the faith against forces that seek to either limit the faith or to co-opt or manipulate Christian faith for their own purposes, but we need to contend using the tools Jude describes – not with the weapons of the world.

Whether we realize it or not, all of us are contending for a faith that was preserved and passed on to us by earlier generations. The Christian faith is always a generation away from extinction which makes what we do about it critically important. Responsibility for contending for the faith, preserving, and building up the faith falls to everyone who claims the name of Jesus. Some of our younger people may not have

heard of the Beatles song *Hey Jude*, but they may have seen the 2016 movie *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*. For those of you who haven't seen it, *Rogue One* is set in a time of conflict, and a group of unlikely heroes band together on a mission to steal the plans to the Death Star, the Empire's ultimate weapon of destruction. This key event brings together ordinary people who choose to do extraordinary things, and in doing so, become part of something greater than themselves. In the film, many individuals sacrifice their lives for a larger purpose. If any one of several characters hadn't shown selfless courage and sacrifice, their efforts would have failed. It's only a movie but as a Christian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when I saw that movie I thought, individual Christians need to be as committed to contending for and passing on the Christian faith as Jyn Erso and Cassian Andor were to passing on the plans for the Death Star to the rebellion.

I read a book years ago in a class on spiritual renewal that argued that the world is "*a competition of ideas to gain adherents.*" I believe that's true. We need to contend for the faith of Jesus because there are so many other ideas with competing world views that are seeking to gain adherents; that are trying in every way to win people to their cause. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we're in a struggle of ideas and the stakes are high as we contend for the faith as believers in earlier centuries did. It's important that we are not naïve about what is at stake. Jude describes the necessity of contending for the faith, he writes about the judgment of God that will come on sin and reminds us of how we as Christians are to practice our faith.

Jude ends with a great blessing that gives us hope as we contend for the faith. **"24 Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, 25 to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen."**

*"Now to him who is able to keep you from falling"* indicates the potential in the Christian life. Jude is referring to falling spiritually, not physically tripping over a tree root or a curb. Jude doesn't say "Now to him who *keeps* you from falling," because God does not always keep us from falling. We fall sometimes; some of us can't seem to learn any other way. But even when we do fall, God is able *"to present us without blemish in the presence of his glory."* The word translated "without blemish," (Greek "anomas"),

means *"apart from the law."* God has so completely dealt with us that even our falls have already been handled in Christ. This will be done; Jude says **with rejoicing**. That means you'll have a part in this too. You're involved in the process of contending for the faith and walking the path of discipleship as long as you're living.

The 1954 movie *On The Waterfront* directed by Elia Kazan, won 8 Academy Awards and is a film classic. Dockworker Terry Malloy played by Marlon Brando had been an up-and-coming boxer until powerful local mob boss Johnny Friendly persuaded him to throw a fight which derailed his career. Terry's brother Charley, played by Rod Steiger is the lawyer for the mob boss. In a heartfelt scene in the backseat of a car Charley is trying to talk Terry out of testifying against the mob boss. Terry is lamenting that Charley didn't look out for him more when he was boxing and says with great regret, *"I coulda had class. **I coulda been a contender.** I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am, let's face it."*

At the end of your life, you don't want to stand before the Lord and say, ***"I coulda been a contender for the faith, I coulda been someone for you Jesus, but I didn't give you everything I could have. I know I could have done much more than I did."***

I pray you'll be motivated to be a contender for the faith, that you'll run and strive for a crown of righteousness with all your strength, continuing to build up your faith, praying in the Spirit, keeping yourself in the love of God, and looking forward with hope to the mercy of Christ, and sharing the gift and joy of all of these blessings with others.

**Blessing Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, & authority, before all time & now & forever. Amen."**  
**Jude 24-25**

**Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. Have you ever been writing a letter and then circumstances changed forcing you to alter your plans and to rethink what you were going to write or say? What happened?
2. Why do you think Jude is so concerned about false teachers and those who cause divisions in churches? What damage do they do?
3. How would you summarize the faith (Jude 3) *“that was once for all entrusted to the saints.”* What is the content of that faith?
4. What does it mean to contend for something? What sort of images come to mind when think of contending or striving for something? What does contending require of a person?
5. If the world is *“a competition of ideas to gain adherents”* what can you do to help share the Christian faith in that “competition.”
6. Re-read Jude 24-25. What do you find encouraging in these verses? What does it mean to know and worship a God who keeps you from falling?