

March 3 Lesson 1 (NIV)

Sustaining Our Faith

Devotional Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:1–11

Background Scripture: Jude

Jude 17–25

¹⁷ But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. ¹⁸ They said to you, “In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires.” ¹⁹ These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.

²⁰ But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.

²² Be merciful to those who doubt; ²³ save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

²⁴ To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—²⁵ to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.—Jude 20–21

Examining Our Faith

Unit I: Faithful vs. Faithless

Lessons 1–5

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How to Say It

apostolicap-uh-*stahl*-ick.

doxologydawk-*saw*-leh-jee.

Triune*Tri*-yoon.

Introduction

A. Anxious Times

We live in anxious times. Many believers live with doubt. Many often feel like people are mocking their faith from both inside and outside the church. Historic beliefs are under attack. The gospel itself is under attack. Skeptics deny the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and his ultimate return. Within the church, abuse and immorality are becoming more known. Some leaders have destroyed their congregations through their own ambition and pride. Social media and newspapers are filled with these kinds of stories. The church has lost its moral credibility and its authority to speak truth in the eyes of many people. While the church and its ministers at one time were ranked high in trustworthiness, that ranking has fallen over the past 30 years. These are perilous times for the Christian faith, but it is not the first time.

B. Lesson Context

Jude is a brief letter, and it reflects a perilous time similar to our circumstances. Some ambitious and prideful people have attached themselves to congregations, presented themselves as leaders, and practiced an immoral lifestyle. Jude calls them “ungodly people, who pervert the

grace of our God into a license for immorality” (Jude 4). These intruders exploited their welcome by promoting immorality (v. 4). They mocked the judgment of God and behaved as if God would not hold them accountable for their actions and immoral ethics. They despised authority, spoke evil of others, and sought wealth in their greed (vv. 8, 11). Jude called them “blemishes at your love feasts” who had nothing true or valuable to offer. They were like clouds “without rain” and fruitless trees (v. 12). They followed “their own evil desires,” and though they influenced many, their words were filled with their own ambition (v. 16). This was a dangerous time for the churches, and Jude addresses the situation directly with both warning and hope.

Jude, the author of this letter, was the brother of James, and James was one of the elders and leaders of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 1:19; 2:9). Since James was a brother of Jesus, this means Jude was as well. Though both opposed Jesus during his ministry before his death, both became committed believers after the resurrection of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:7; Jude 1).

What we know as the book of Jude was probably a sermon that circulated among several congregations as an open letter. He addressed a number of congregations at one time, and they were all endangered by ungodly intruders and leaders. Jude clearly stated his main interest. He encouraged believers to “contend for the faith” that had been delivered to them (Jude 3). He identified the troublemakers, warned that their destiny is the same as that of Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 7) and the devil (v. 9), and promised God would execute judgment against the “ungodly” for their “ungodly acts” (v. 15).

But what are believers to do? How do they “contend for the faith”? How do believers live out their faith in such perilous times? Jude ends his letter with a call to persevere in the faith. That call is our lesson text for today.

I. Remembrance (Jude 17–19)

A. Remembering the Apostolic Word (v. 17)

17. But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold.

Remember! That is the main point (compare Jude 5). After describing the characteristics of these false leaders and the judgment that awaits them, Jude reminded his readers that this was not unexpected. *The apostles* warned about the rise of ungodly people who would disturb the church and seek to gain their own followers. For example, the apostle Paul warned the elders of the church at Ephesus that wolves would arise from among their own leadership (Acts 20:29). Consequently, the situation should not have surprised them. The apostles told them it was going to happen.

By reminding them of this apostolic warning, Jude highlighted the importance of the apostolic voice in the early church. The apostolic word or teaching both guides and warns the church. According to Acts 2:42, the disciples of Jesus devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. The church listens to the apostles of *our Lord Jesus Christ*, heeds their direction and warnings, and follows them as they follow Jesus. Their teaching, along with the prophets, is the church’s foundation, with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). Jesus sent the apostles with his authority, and the apostles spoke for Jesus.

In the middle of this perilous time, Jude not only reminds his readers of the apostolic warning but also reminds them who they are. They are *dear friends* (also appropriately translated “beloved”), and Jude called them as such three times (Jude 3, 17, 20). While we need reminders about the dangers of any situation, we also need reminders that we are loved by God and loved by our leaders. Jude, for example, was a leader who wrote forcefully against false teachers but compassionately for those whom those ungodly leaders endangered. Believers have been called by God and kept safe in Jesus Christ (v. 1). Despite the dire circumstances and uncertainties of the times, they are secure in Jesus and loved by God.

B. Revisiting the Warning (v. 18)

18. They said to you, “In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires.”

What did the apostles say to the church? A time was coming and had already arrived when *scoffers* would arise within churches, and their only concern would be pursuing their own *ungodly* interests.

When Jude used the language of *the last times* or “last time,” he was not referring to something in the distant future, though it includes that. Rather, he reminded his readers about this warning because it was already happening in their congregations. Often “last days” (Acts 2:17; Hebrews 1:2; 2 Peter 3:3) refers to the last era of God’s redemptive work in the world. This is the final era because after this comes the judgment of God and the salvation of God’s people. It was important to hear the apostolic warning not only applying to some final moment in the world’s history but also to Jude’s readers and the whole history of the church. Mockers and scoffers have always been part of the story of the church, and the warning is for all believers throughout the life span of the church. This is a constant danger rather than a unique one.

What drives these false leaders? They mock God’s judgment and scoff at any notion of personal accountability. They did not believe God’s judgment applied to them, or perhaps that there was any coming judgment at all. Rather, they followed their own desires. They had their own agenda, and they are only interested in indulging their own cravings. Jude emphasized that their motivations were ungodly (see also Jude 4, 15). They are only interested in themselves, whether that greed or ambition was about wealth, power, or sex, among other possible lusts.

The apostles warned that people would come who had no interest in authentic faith. Rather, they would ridicule accountability before God and pursue their interests for their own gain.

C. Recognizing False Teachers (v. 19)

19. These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.

Jude described these ungodly people in three ways. They (1) are divisive, (2) are worldly, and (3) lack *the Spirit* of God. In essence, Jude identified this ungodly presence by their works or their effect on the congregation. They lacked the fruit of the Spirit. There was no evidence of the Spirit in their lives. They created divisions as they separated themselves and created their own

followers. They lived by the seat of their pants. In other words, they lived by their natural urges and impulses rather than by the mind of Christ. Their interests were rooted in their sensuality and the works of the flesh. They were not led by the Spirit but by their sensual compulsions driven by their ungodly agenda.

II. Perseverance (Jude 20–23)

A. Remain in God's Love (vv. 20–21)

20–21. But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.

Jude contrasted his readers with these ungodly mockers. While the ungodly mock the faith, believers build their lives on the faith. While the ungodly lack the Spirit, believers pray in the Spirit. While the ungodly scoff at the judgment that accompanies the coming of the *Lord Jesus Christ*, believers joyfully anticipate the mercy they will receive when Jesus comes again. Jude addressed these believers as *dear friends*, and their identity was rooted in God's love for them. It was not simply Jude's love for his readers but also their relationship with God as people who are beloved of God. God loves them.

In the Greek text, the main verb—and the only imperative or command—is *keep yourselves in God's love* (Jude 21). This was a call to action. Jude thought believers ought to respond to perilous times by persevering in God's love. In other words, as dangers mounted and seemed to overwhelm, believers need to continually ground themselves in God's love. Jude called believers to pursue godly living by remembering that they were beloved.

But what does that look like? Jude gave his readers three cues: (1) by building on the most holy faith, (2) by praying in the Spirit, and (3) by looking forward to the mercy of God. These three cues were means of grace or spiritual practices that could sustain faith during perilous times Jude's readers endured.

First, they can build on the foundation of the *faith*. The faith for which the Christian community was to contend (Jude 3) is also the foundation for remaining in the love of God. The *faith* refers to the work of God in Jesus by the Spirit to redeem and save the world from its ungodly lusts and practices. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Believers build on an authentic foundation secured by the love of God, the grace of Jesus, and the communion of the Holy Spirit rather than one imagined by the mockers who have stirred up trouble among the churches.

Second, they should pray *in the Holy Spirit*. This includes two important points. On the one hand, Jude thought prayer was a necessary response to perilous times. Prayer calls upon God to act and deliver. On the other hand, prayer was not simply wishful thinking but addressing God in the Spirit. To pray in the Spirit is probably a rather broad idea that includes almost anything that could be said about prayer. The full meaning of prayer includes not only the work of the Spirit in hearts but also the function of the Spirit in communicating the prayers. We pray in the Spirit when we pray in accordance with God's agenda, pray out of a heart sanctified by the Spirit, and pray by the power of the Spirit who unites us with God's own heart (compare Romans 8:26; 1 Corinthians 14:15).

Third, they should trust in *the mercy* of God. The faithful looked forward to the day when the fullness of God's mercy would be poured out on believers, and this would usher them into eternal life with God. The second coming of Christ, though it involves judgment for the ungodly, is mercy for believers who build their lives on the most holy faith and pray in the Spirit.

Importantly, these verses refer to the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. Jude recognized the Triune God by naming the love of God, the mercy of Jesus Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Jude's language is similar to the final benediction of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 13:14).

B. Reflect God's Love (vv. 22–23)

22–23. Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

Jude invited his readers to remain in the love of God, and then Jude turned his attention to how his readers ought to love others with that love. Remaining in the love of God means pouring out that love on others.

We can imagine Jude's readers were angered by the disturbances within their churches. Indeed, ungodly mockers who divide a church for their own selfish gains deserved anger and exclusion, and they received Jude's condemnation. The damage these mockers left in their wake was probably devastating. It affected so many people, and Jude does not forget them. Those who persevered in the love of God needed to love the people who have been damaged by these mockers. How does Jude want believers to love people in anxious times?

First, some were doubting due to the influence of the scoffers. Jude's main concern is the command to show mercy or have compassion. Jude commanded believers to have mercy on those who doubt or are evaluating. They should not be mocked or dismissed. On the contrary, just as the Lord Jesus will show mercy when he returns, so believers ought to show mercy and have compassion for those who are struggling with their faith. The mercy Jesus gives to believers is the same mercy believers ought to show to doubters. Jude used the same word (*mercy* or *compassion*) in both verses 21–22.

Second, some needed rescuing *from the fire* stirred up by the mockers. Jude commanded believers to act in ways that would save others from the destructive mess created by the mockers. Rather than contribute to the fire by stoking it or neglecting those who are endangered by the fire, believers, according to Jude, ought to save them from the fire.

Third, some were so entangled in the ungodly patterns of the mockers that Jude commanded believers to act with mercy but also with fear. Again, the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ is a quality Jude wanted shared with others. At the same time, it ought to be shared in a way that one does not become complicit in evil itself. The love of God means evil is hated. Even as mercy and compassion are given, Jude's language respected the danger of evil. The love of God rescues people from evil rather than joining them in their evil.

Jude commanded believers to keep themselves in the love of God, and Jude also commanded believers to show mercy to those caught up in the agenda of the mockers. The beloved are to love others because God has loved them.

III. Praise God (Jude 24–25)

A. God's Work for Us (v. 24)

24. To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—

Jude concluded his letter with a doxology, a praise to God. The doxology first identified what God is doing for us (Jude 24), and then it attributed to God what rightfully belongs to him (v. 25).

While Jude stressed that believers are responsible for keeping themselves in the love of God, he also made it clear that it is God who empowers our perseverance in that love (Jude 1, 24). God keeps us, while believers are also accountable for their own faith as well. Ultimately, believers do not save themselves, nor do they generate their own assurance. Rather, God acts to keep us and causes us to stand in God's *glorious presence* without blemish. It is God's loving mercy through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit that redeems us and gives us a righteous and holy standing before the Triune God.

B. God's Glory (v. 25)

25. to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

Because of God's gracious mercy, Jude praised God's eternal *glory, majesty, power, and authority*. These characteristics or attributes describe God's relationship to the world and, consequently, God's own capacity both to keep us from falling and present us without blemish.

Since this doxology is offered to *God* through *Jesus Christ*, it constitutes a prayer of praise. As Jude has already told us, believers pray in the Spirit. In effect, then, Jude offered a triune prayer. God is praised through the Son in the Spirit. That is the most holy faith. God poured out mercy through the Son by the gift of the Holy Spirit, and we joyfully return to God the Father our praise through the Son in the Spirit.

Conclusion

A. The Love of God and Loving Others

We live in perilous times, much like the church at the time when Jude was written. So we should recognize and identify the dangers. The church is called to exercise healthy discernment and heed the warnings of the apostles. We ignore them at our own peril. At the same time, the church does not live in fear but in confidence. We root ourselves in God's love for us, and we pour that same love on those who have been damaged by these perilous times. We confidently live within the love of God as God's beloved, and we mercifully show that love to others in our community. Our response to this divine grace is deep joy and gratitude.

While we practice discernment and contend for the faith, we also show God's mercy to others as we minister to those who doubt, those ensnared in the fire, and those who have soiled their garments. Secured in the love of God by the foundation laid down by apostolic teaching, praying

in the Spirit, and looking forward to the mercy of Christ's second coming, we help others and show them the love with which God has loved us.

B. Prayer

God, keep us secure in your love and enable us to show mercy to others in need of your love. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Secure in God's love, we are able to love others.¹
