

Our most holy faith

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[0 : 00] I want to say, before we turn to the text for the evening, I want to express my sense of privilege and honor in having been invited to minister the word and sacrament here these past days.

As the time goes on, I esteem it more and more a great privilege from God to be allowed to preach. I repeat to myself the words of the Apostle, to me, one less than the least of all saints is this grace given, that I should preach the unsearchable riches of Christ.

And though the grace is of God primarily, it is also a grace that is mediated to me by the ministers who have so kindly invited me.

And I thank them for that. And I thank you all for your patience and kindness in listening. Now let's turn to the scripture we read, to the letter of Jude, and at verse 20.

[1 : 17] Jude chapter 20. But ye, you beloved, building up yourselves in your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.

There's a wise old saying that it's a good thing to keep out of the way of an angry man. And no one can read this letter without getting the impression that as he wrote it, Jude was inflamed with wrath. He appears at times just to blow his top, as we would say nowadays. Four times in a breath, he denounces ungodly people and ungodly procedures and ungodly practices.

But before we run away for a place of concealment, we should ask ourselves, has he got us in his sights as he so rages?

Who's he aiming at with these fearful, condemnatory words? Well, he's aiming at people who are indeed associated with the Christian community, pass themselves off as Christians indeed, but who are in fact and truth enemies of the cross of Christ, infiltrators into the church of Christ.

[2 : 59] Fifth columnists. So, Jude exposes them and condemns them. But if we are not of their number, if we are not among them, but rather among those whom he addresses as his dear friends, we have nothing to fear from Jude's wrath.

Rather, he has something cordial and generous greeting for us. As he wills us, as he wills us, as abundance of God's love.

And he tells us something else in order to allay our alarm. He tells us that he hadn't intended to write in such furious mode.

He had something entirely different. He had something much, much more pleasant in mind when he took up his pen. He was eager to write about the salvation that we share.

A favourite. A favourite. Indeed, it ought to be the favourite conversation of Christian people, this salvation that we share. He wanted to believe.

[4 : 13] He wanted to dilute on the wonder of it. The author of it. The procurer of it. The conveyor of it. The cost of it. And the glorious consummation of it.

Of course, that would be much, much pleasanter, much, much more delightful exercise than the one in which he felt he had to engage.

But then you can only engage in that sort of delightful conversation with people who appreciate the preciousness of grace.

Those who don't savour the doctrines of grace need to hear something else. And so Jude gives them warning of their danger and risk of destruction.

Then, having taken time to warn them, he turns to those he had originally wanted to hold conversation with.

[5 : 18] Those who accept and who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. And he turns to them with words that are wholly kindly and encouraging and full of gracious counsel.

The people to whom he speaks are, as he says, his dear friends. I wonder, I wonder if we can all of us count ourselves among Jude's dear friends.

It's important that we should. It's important that we should keep on examining ourselves whether we be in the faith. This is an exercise not just for the beginning of a communion season or throughout it, but all the time, day by day.

We are to call in question our motivation and our performance. We are to examine ourselves, looking not just at surface opinions, but at our core beliefs.

So that we will demonstrate, we will follow that kind of behaviour that will show the reality and vitality of faith.

[6 : 30] Jude invites us to that kind of critical self-assessment. And then, if we find that we are among his friends, he has words of very good and timely advice for us.

You, beloved, building up yourselves in your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.

We can see three strands in the advice that Jude gives us here. He tells us, first of all, what to do. Keep yourselves in the love of God.

Then he tells us how to do it. Building yourselves up on your most holy faith, and praying in the Holy Ghost.

And having told us what to do and how to do it, he tells us what to expect when we have done it, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring us to eternal life.

[7 : 46] Now, a general comment has to be made before we consider each of these topics. It's this, that when Jude addresses us collectively, he also has us in mind individually.

He thinks of us as individuals within the community and fellowship of the Church of Jesus Christ. Each one of us is told to keep ourselves in the love of God.

But no one is advised to do it in total isolation from everybody else. It's important for us as a private endeavor, but it's equally important that we help one another in the endeavor.

Whilst not being busybodies in other people's concerns, we are to be helpfully involved in each other's welfare.

This can mean that, as the writer to the Hebrews tells us, we should consider one another to provoke one another to love and to good works.

[9 : 02] Then the experience of the mature will help the uncertainties of the novice. And the zeal and the enthusiasm of the beginner can inspire and stimulate and sometimes indeed revive the flagging spirits of older Christians.

We are to be helpers of one another's faith. We are to be encouragers of one another's hope. And we are to be sustainers of each other's love.

With these general comments in mind, we look at the three strands in the advice that Jude gives to us. First of all, he tells us what to do.

To keep yourselves in the love of God. This, of course, assumes that we already have the love of God. You can't keep what you don't have.

And if it's something good you don't have, well then the sooner you try to get it, the better. Every effort should be made to get it.

[10 : 14] It's called seeking the Lord while he may be found. It's called putting first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

It's also called agonizing to enter in at the straight gate. Begin at any of these points. Begin at any of these points. And you respond to his cordial welcome.

You enter a region of beauty and gladness where you'll want to stay permanently. A region where the voices are those that encourage you to keep yourselves in the love of God.

Now, we can read the words, the love of God, in two ways. And both are relevant to the endeavor that Jude recommends.

We can read the words as referring to God's love to us. And we can read them as signifying our love to God.

[11 : 16] And the two meanings are not inconsistent or unduly separate because the two loves are inextricably intertwined.

God's love to us is of course foundational and productive of our love to him. We love him because he first loved us.

God's love is not just a discovery that we make. It's not due to the ingenuity of our search. Rather, it is something that is revealed to us.

We may have the excitement of discovery as the man did who found treasure hidden afield. But always the discovery that we make is something that God has revealed to us.

He has shown us his love by word and by deed and in the person of his beloved Son. Would we have dared, would any one of us have dared, to think that God, the Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that he would send his Son to save the like of any one of us?

[12:39] Could we have thought up that for ourselves? Could we have even imagined it as a fable? It is something beyond what we can even imagine.

And God tells us that that's what he has done. And God tells us wonderful things to draw us to himself. It's true to say that God woos and courts his people to win them to himself.

He chooses the time and the place and the circumstances to overcome his people's hesitations, their uncertainties and their sense of personal unworthiness.

Yes, and I'll tell you another wonderful thing. It happens sometimes that the love of God's people to him grows cold and they distance themselves from him.

And what does God do? What does God do? He woos them all over again. Listen to him. As through the prophet Isaiah, he tells how he will win back disloyal Israel.

[13:58] I will allure her. I will allure her and speak comfortably to her and take her into the desert and speak tenderly to her.

The desert, you see, in the relationship between God and Israel, the desert was a place of such intimate and such loving memories.

He speaks through the prophet Jeremiah. He says, I remember the devotion of your youth. I was a bride. You loved me and followed me through the desert. Israel was holy to the Lord.

These are things that remind us that God's love is productive of ours. We contemplate the sacrificing generosity of God's love.

We listen to the endearing words of grace. We look on the beauty of our Savior's face and we're filled with a longing to belong. What else can we say?

[14:57] But my beloved is mine and I am his. So as I said, these two loves become one, inextricably intertwined, the one with the other.

And so it will continue. It's so obvious that it will continue that one is tempted to ask, was it necessary for Jude to tell us to keep ourselves in the love of God?

We know that God's love to us will never fail. This is true of the unchanging nature of God himself. It will endure forever. He so intends and he will so perform it. And when I pledge my love to God, I intend, I intend that I will perform it.

I can't endure the thought that it will not continue. But, ah, that's the rub. When it comes to our resolution, there's always a but.

[16:09] But my original sincerity has not been foolproof against unfaithfulness to God over the years. My love to God is continually under stress.

There are dark powers that think it's misplaced and want to seduce me from it. And to my shame, sometimes I have succumbed to their honeyed words.

Satan's snares beset me. The world's blandishments allure me. And yes, sometimes God's providences hurt me.

I feel confused and rebuffed to the extent that, like the psalmist, I say my feet are almost gone. With the psalmist, I talk of these perplexing providences.

There are many Christian people who follow through, who know those experiences. Many Christian people bereft of a darling child feel that they have hard questions to ask God.

[17:16] And long ago, the psalmist went through the same sort of dark valley. He asked, has the Lord forgotten to be gracious? Has he shut up his mercy and wrath?

We look to find fault. We want to find fault. And we want to lay the fault on God. But eventually, we realize that the fault must be with ourselves.

Then did I say, says the psalmist, then did I say that, verily, this is my infirmity. And that recognition is the first stepping stone on the way back to the sense of the love of God.

For you can't know the serenity and peace and confidence of his love as long as you're blaming God. He has reason to blame us.

And he knows how to deal with our blameworthiness and restore us to the confidence of fellowship. That's the beauty. That's the solid rock security of the love of God.

[18 : 24] It's in the cleft of that rock that we hide ourselves. When we ought, when we stray from him, that is how we must return to him.

And Jude is recommending something that every Christian wants to do. We all want to keep a lively sense of the love of God for us. We also want to stir up and activate our love to him so that with as much feeling as ever Peter knew when the Lord charged him, we can say, Lord, thou knowest that I love thee.

That's what we have to do. Keep ourselves in the love of God. Now, how to do it? It is, Jude tells us, by building and planting.

Building and praying, rather. And the mere mention of these two activities reminds us of how seriously demanding they are. A picture from Old Testament times comes to mind of Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem under hostile eyes.

His work demanded the utmost in the way of planning and watchfulness and diligence and reliance on God. Our task is no less demanding and even more worthwhile.

[19 : 58] So let's reflect on the dual task, the dual nature of the task which Jude assigns us. We have the ongoing task of building ourselves up in our most holy faith.

And the term our most holy faith is itself amenable to two interpretations. We can think of the grace of faith, the gift of God, and we can think of the doctrine of faith, the teaching, which is according to godliness.

If we think of the grace of faith, we think of what is essentially the essentially differentiating factor between Christian and non-Christian.

Faith binds us to God. Without faith it is impossible to please God. And faith is holy because it separates us from the world that lies in the wicked one and binds us to the God who is the all-holy. And this God-given faith is continually under and subject to fluctuations in strength and vitality and ardor and clarity.

[21 : 19] There are times, there are times when the believer's confession is rather stuttering. He says, I hope so.

Well, I would like to think so. He comes before God with the plea, Lord, increase our faith. But there are other times when there is no trace of a maybe or a perhaps in his confession.

But he says, like the apostle, I know, I know whom I have believed and have persuaded that he is evil to keep that which I have committed to him against that day.

It's the, it's these fluctuations of experience that highlight the necessity of our using every means and every help to encourage faith.

And this is where our integration into the Christian community is so important. But if we wish to know something, if we wish to know something about the dimensions of the love of God to us, the apostle tells us that we'll learn that with all saints.

[22 : 36] It's not a thing you learn in isolation. It's not a thing you learn by yourself. It's a thing you learn with all saints. What is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God.

And it's in that integration into the fellowship of Christian believers that we find our help. I have been through that and all about it.

And we have a helping hand in renewing the vision and vitality of faith. If it is faith that perceives and makes us receptive of the love of God, the apostle tells us to be sure of this that we learn of it in the fellowship of our fellow believers.

Then if we think of faith, if we think of almost holy faith as the doctrine to be believed, the teaching once for all delivered to the saints, we think of an ever-going, an ever-ongoing enterprise of learning and doing.

Not learning only, but putting into practice what we learn. For Jude's brother, James, reminds us that faith without works is dead.

[23 : 56] Intelligently grasping and practically applying the teaching of the faith is a lifelong undertaking. We are building, fitting block to block as we gain a little here and a little there.

We're never in the position where we can claim that we know it all, never where we can say that we have done it all. And if we should have the temerity to say that we have, we are reminded that when we have done all, we are but unprofitable servants.

I think that most Christians nearing life's end reflect sadly on how little they have achieved. Their testimony seems to major in not as though we had already attained.

And however thankful we may be, we still strive to know and to understand and to perform this is part of what it means to be building ourselves up on our most holy faith.

When I say that Jude recommends a second way of keeping ourselves in the love of God, I don't mean that he's telling us of two things that are literally separate.

[25 : 20] They are separately distinguishable, more, but they are indissolubly connected, the one with the other. As we build ourselves up in our most holy faith, so we do so by praying in the Holy Spirit.

And praying in the Holy Spirit is the primary expression of faith. If there is such a thing as an introductive and therefore a dead faith, it's because prayer has been stifled.

For prayer is the recognition of our dependence upon and our recognition too that all our worthwhile effort must be directed by God.

While prayer recognizes the totality of our dependence upon God, it doesn't amount to a transferring of our responsibility to God.

If God is working in us, He is working in us the willing and the doing, but the willing and the doing is still ours.

[26 : 38] Because of our continuing in the love of God ultimately depends on God, we're not excused from making every endeavor to keep ourselves in His love.

Jude indeed reminds us very forcibly of this within a moment when he commits us to the care of Him who is able to keep us from falling and to present us before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy.

Praying in the Holy Spirit is praying in dependence upon the Holy Spirit. The more we learn of the doctrine of faith, the more we learn of what accords with the mind of the Spirit and are saved from the futility of asking for things that are not agreeable to His will.

The Apostle Paul tells us of how willingly and effectively the Holy Spirit deals with our ignorance and confusion and sense of inability to pray. He searches our hearts and Himself makes intercession for us with unutterable groanings.

This does not mean that it is difficult for the Spirit to pray in us and for us but that it is often hard for us to identify and articulate what is our direst need and our highest hope.

[28 : 10] So, directed by the Spirit of God, energized by Him, exercising a living faith, we build ourselves up in the love of God.

Now, finally, Jude tells us what to expect when we have done that. It's an exciting and ever enriching experience to be kept in the love of God.

For no matter how much we come to know and to experience God's goodness, there's always more and more and more and more to follow. And often, too, it can be said that the more and more that follow is the unfolding and developing of what we already have.

New, yes, new and surprising. But perhaps we shouldn't be so surprised. We should expect it. It's in the logic of what we have already been given. It's the full flowering of the plants that are already rooted in our garden. That's very clearly, that's very clearly highlighted here.

[29 : 34] We already know the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ. Every one of us who knows the Saviour, we already know the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's this mercy that set us on the Christian way. Our first ever prayer, no doubt, was a plea for mercy. And that mercy has continued to bless us and we have been enriched with new facets of it from time to time.

We know too that in the mercy of Christ we have been already given eternal life. That is real life. Life that is inviolable.

Life that is immune even to death itself. And yet, we have a conviction of incompleteness.

Something is unfinished. And the apostle tells us that the very fabric of the universe is groaning after this completion.

[30 : 41] And the completion will see the mortal put on immortality and the corruptible put on incorruptible. We live in hope and patient expectation of the realisation of all that has been promised us in Christ.

And it's summed up in those terms of the mercy of Christ bringing us to eternal life. And it's expanded in closing doxology in terms of our presentation before the throne of God without fault.

And to him that is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy. glory with glory with glory with glory and majesty, dominion and power both now and forever.

That glory is the expectation of all who are in Christ. For glory, glory dwelleth in Emmanuel's land.

Let us pray. Lord, how glorious thou art, O Lord, and in all the earth how excellent is thy name.

[31 : 56] How passing glorious is the salvation which thou hast procured for thy people. And how ought we to abound in love and in obedience and in sacrifice and in all that bespeaks thanksgiving.

Thanks be to the God and Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of his Son from the dead, to an inheritance that is incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away and is kept for us in heaven, kept for us who are kept as in a fortress by the power of God, through faith unto salvation.

Lord, bless us all and grant us thy continuing mercy in Jesus' name. Amen.