

On Guard!

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Preacher: Sam Parkinson

[0 : 00] Well, a very warm welcome to all of you today to the Tron. Especially a warm welcome if you're new or if you're visiting. It's great to have you with us.

Service today will be very simple. I'll say a prayer in a moment. We'll read some verses from the Bible. I'll speak about those. We'll close with a prayer and then be able to continue having coffee and sandwiches afterwards.

So let's begin with a prayer. Dear Lord Jesus Christ, we pray that in the next few moments as we take a little time in the middle of our weeks.

That you will calm our hearts and open them to hear what you have to say to us. We pray that you will give us peace in the middle of our busy weeks.

And that you will feed us and encourage us and help us to live for you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Now today and just for three weeks in total, we're going to be looking at the little letter of Jude in the New Testament.

[1 : 13] A letter that's not studied so often, but one you can find on page 1028 in the Bibles in front of you. If you can flick to that, that's page 1028.

The letter of Jude. Sorry, 1027.

Counting is not my speciality. So 1027.

The letter of Jude starting at verse 1. Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James.

To those who are called beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ. May mercy, peace and love be multiplied to you.

[2 : 22] Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

For certain people have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of God, our God, into sensuality, and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Now these first few little verses introduce this letter. And as we read this letter, let's remember that we are in a church country whose church is largely in crisis in Scotland right now.

Now if you're not a Christian particularly, I could very much understand why the state of the church in this country could put you off. You might well think that a church so weak and so divided and parts of itself hemorrhaging members week by week has a message that simply isn't worth much. It's not a message worth listening to or worth hearing. And if you are a Christian, I think there's a temptation for many of us to put the blame for that problem primarily outside the church, to think of the problems in society, of how anti-religious it is, how opposed it is to Christian morality.

[3 : 49] And all that is true, but at the same time is more a symptom of the crisis than it is the cause. Now this little letter, which we're looking at for three weeks, tells us of a crisis in a church in a time that was far more pagan, far more opposed to God in every way, morally and religiously, than our world is at the present time.

And yet there was a deep crisis in the church to which Jude writes. And it was a crisis right inside the church. The church then, you see, was full of people, including teachers, who seemed very much like they were the real thing.

But nonetheless, they were, and Jude says this in no uncertain terms, opponents of Jesus Christ.

And this letter is written, not just to point out that these people exist, and certainly not just so that we can feel unhappy or moan about their existence, but to show us how to contend, to fight in a sense, against this, so that we can recover the reality of real Christian faith in our churches.

And if you are not a Christian, therefore, there is real relevance for you as well. Because if the church in this country is a mess, and it is a mess because it has turned its back on the teachings of Jesus Christ, if it's church largely only in name, then looking at it should not put us off the message of Jesus Christ.

It should make us hunger to hear the real thing, to want to know what the thing that has been lost is, to ask what the church would be like if it held on to that.

[5 : 42] Now, we're going to look at the passage in two sections. It's very short, the bit we read today, as you know. But first, we're going to see how the faith, which Jude says was once for all delivered to the saints, promises truly wonderful things to those who believe and obey it.

That's verses one and two. And then secondly, we see how we are to contend for that faith in verses three and four because of the way that faith is under threat. We'll get to that in a moment. But just to introduce what this letter is and who it's by, it says it was written by Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James. He doesn't say any more.

And the reason for that's very simple. He didn't need to. There's only one Jude in the Bible who's mentioned as being a brother of James. And he's also mentioned twice in the Gospels, in Matthew and in Mark.

And both of them were brothers of Jesus Christ. James became the leading teacher in the church in Jerusalem once many of the apostles had fled to different countries, taking the message of the Gospel to other places.

[6 : 50] And Jude was his brother, probably his little brother, probably one of Jesus' youngest brothers, quite a bit younger than him. And so Jude writes this letter.

He doesn't want to tell us particularly his brother because he doesn't want us to listen to him because of some blood connection or just because he knew Jesus growing up.

He wants us to listen because he's a servant, he says, of Jesus Christ. Someone who comes with the message that he proclaimed. Someone who, like you and me, though he had a unique privilege in his time, has come to serve Jesus and know him as his Lord and his King.

So to start, we're looking at verses 1 and 2, at the rich promise of the one faith that Jude shows us. Jude makes very clear in verses 1 and 2 that the faith he's talking about is no mere opinion.

It's not some ideas about the world or about morality or about philosophy. It's a wonderful gift from God himself. He starts off by calling those he writes to, those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ.

[8 : 05] There's rather a lot packed into those words, isn't there? To be a real Christian, you see, is to be called by God, chosen, singled out by him. It's to be loved by the Father.

And more than that, actually, it says, beloved in God the Father. People who God loves are taken into the fellowship of God's love. They're embraced and enfolded by his love.

And to be in God's love is in one sense to be in God. And those who are loved this way, this deep way, by God the Father who created the heavens and the earth, are also, he says, kept for Jesus Christ.

One day, as the rest of the Bible tells us, that they will be Jesus' possession forever. They will live with him forever. They're being kept safe so that whatever trials and troubles we go through in this life, we cannot be torn away from him, but will inevitably be his in the final day.

That's a description, a very short little description, of Christianity from God's perspective. It's a reality, a deep, loving relationship. And it is, of course, on offer to anyone who wants to be a real Christian.

[9 : 20] And that, that promise is what is at stake in this letter. Is that the Christianity which we embrace? Is that the Christianity which is taught in our churches? And Jude wants the good things of that relationship to overflow into our lives.

See verse two, may mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Now, to wish people mercy and peace or grace and peace was quite a traditional sort of greeting.

That's not all Jude wants. He adds love and he wants it all to be multiplied to us. In other words, he wants people who are listening to this letter to taste the riches of God's great mercy to them.

To be aware of peace with him. To feel and know that peace. And to know God's love. To have it poured out in their hearts in an assurance of the reality of what it is to know him.

To have a confident knowledge of his love. Jude has a big picture of the richness of the Christian life. Of what it can be.

[10:32] of the goodness of the Christian life. And yet, all these things are at risk. So if you look down at verse 3, Jude says, I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation.

In other words, he's just written some great things about what it is to be a Christian. He wants to write a lot more. And you know, it would be nice to have that letter, wouldn't it? It would be nice to have a letter in which Jude lays out richly and deeply the wonderful things that Christians can know. It would be a very heartwarming letter. But he says instead, I found it necessary to write to you, appealing to you, to contend for the faith. And that word, contend, it's a strong word.

It's a fighting word. Not with physical violence, obviously, but this is something we need to wrestle for. Just to think of an illustration, think of Rolls-Royce during World War II.

They could have continued to spend their time churning out beautiful limousines. And I've no doubt they would have continued to be some of the nicest limousines on offer in the world. But if they had, if they hadn't bothered producing engines for Spitfires and engines for tanks, then London would have been reduced to a smoking crater.

[11:50] And no doubt, quite a lot of the Clyde would have been bombed to rubble as well. They had to go on to a war footing. They could have done what they were best at.

They could have done things that brought pleasure and delight to, well, admittedly, rather few people, but they'd have enjoyed it anyway. They could have done nice things, but instead they had to do what was necessary.

And Judah's saying, that is the situation of the church he's writing to. They had to go on to a war footing. There is no time for luxuries. They have to step up and defend their faith.

They had to contend for it. And the faith they had to contend for is one they knew well. It's the faith once for all delivered to the saints, shared by all Christians from the beginning, the faith given by Jesus through his apostles, kept from then till now.

In other words, the fundamentals of this faith were things they knew. They weren't up for negotiation. There are lots of things in the Christian life we can disagree on, but there are fundamentals right at the core which are absolutely non-negotiable.

[12:58] And without them we cannot have the blessings we've just been reading about because they come from our only Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. Verse 4. The one who saved us and the one who loves us.

Now the crisis he lays out is quite simple. He tells us in verse 4, certain people have crept in unnoticed. There are people inside the church.

He's not worried about the influence of those outside the church. Might be a problem, but nothing compared to those who have crept in without even being noticed. All around with other people unsuspecting.

People, he says, designated for condemnation. That's strong language. These are people who are not Christians at all. Instead, he says, they are ungodly people who neither love or serve or respect God, in other words.

They look Christian on the outside, but he says they have perverted the grace of God into sensuality. They've taken the wonderful forgiveness that God offers in his gospel.

[14:04] The way he promises to wipe sin clean and have a relationship based on grace, favor we don't deserve. and they've made it an opportunity to do anything they felt like to say that it doesn't matter how I live.

I can indulge myself as much as I want in whatever I want and God will forgive it. And as they do that, he says, they deny, as we said, our only master and Lord.

And Jude doesn't even just say, our only Lord, though he is that. Our only master and Lord. This is the one, if we are Christians, who remade us, who gave us everything and to whom we owe everything.

And what they're doing is they're throwing aside his commands. They're taking the ethics Jesus taught, things like the Sermon and the Mount, and saying that they're not needed. They want the benefits without the costs.

They want the blessings without the obedience. And that has been common in the church from the first day till now. People who say, it doesn't matter what you think or do about money or sex or drink or any of these obvious things and perhaps sometimes about less obvious things, about hatred or failure to forgive those who have hurt you.

[15 : 26] People who take these things and say, it doesn't matter how you live. As long as you've made a commitment to Jesus Christ, it doesn't matter. Whereas Jude is saying, if you're really a Christian, if you are really someone whose master and Lord is Jesus Christ, yes, you are saved by grace, but you will obey him as well.

And of course, there are many churches in our day that are preaching exactly this message, that are saying that biblical ethics are of little relevance or no relevance to our modern day, that are saying that we've got past that, that what matters in the Bible is understanding the grace and the love and not other parts that we have grown beyond.

And in doing that, it says, they pervert the grace of God. They deny the reality and the power of Jesus Christ himself in twisting his message.

They make it a message through which nobody can know Jesus Christ. So I don't think I need to say that this truth is relevant today.

The Christian church has, just as it had in those days, many teachers as well as members who say exactly what people said in those days, that they can set aside Jesus' commands, that it doesn't matter how they live.

[16 : 52] And Jude tells us that this is a terrible crisis. That these teachings, they are utterly ungodly and deny Jesus Christ. They're not a small thing. They're not a matter to agree or disagree over.

They're not a matter which we can just let live and let live about. We must contend for this faith. It's not an optional thing here, you see. We need to be on a war footing.

It's every hand to the barricades, every Christian to stand up and be counted and willing to fight.

Because if this teaching dominates our churches, then they will die and they will deserve to die.

Christian faith is about the reality of knowing the power of Jesus Christ which comes only when we come to him and submit to him as our Lord, repenting of what we have been so that he can remake us.

if we will not obey him, if we turn our backs on what he said, then we cut ourselves off from the very possibility of that power. And because this crisis is so serious for our churches, then there is no place in this life for being an armchair Christian.

[18 : 09] No place, as one Christian writer put it, for being, for hot tub Christianity. It's very easy to be a spectator in church. And obviously there are times in life when it's hard to do much more when we're ill or struggling, but nonetheless there is a danger for all of us that we become people who come to church to be served, whose main measure of a church is, what does it do for me?

Who think mainly about enjoying the sermon or the fellowship and not about what we can give. And as we will see later in Jude, that is the utter opposite of what we need in a time of crisis like this.

We must all stand up. We must all serve. We must all give. Not all in the same way, not all in the same place, but we must give because it's all of us together who contend for this faith.

This isn't a letter to pastors or ministers or writers. And we'll see as we get on to the end that the way we contend to our faith is open to you if you are locked in your house or a prison cell unable to get out and see anyone.

It's still possible. But we must. So don't be someone who comes to hear sermons just for yourself.

[19 : 31] Don't be someone who's a passive spectator, someone who comes in and hears and goes. And don't become someone whose measure of a good church is what we get out of it. If you're a Christian here today, you have a role, you have a place and we need you because this is a time of crisis and it is a time when we need every hand on deck.

And in the next couple of weeks, we'll see what that looks like, how we are to serve, how we are to fight and how we are to contend. And if you're not a Christian, this message has been largely for Christians.

But again, keep in mind what this is saying. It's saying there is a kind of Christianity out there that is powerless. And if you've been put off the church by a powerless Christianity, then I'm very sorry.

It's far more common than it should be. And even if I or the people here didn't have a part in that directly, maybe we haven't been contending for the faith in the way we should have done.

But there is a real Christianity, a Christianity of power and life-changing grace, a Christianity that keeps us in the love of God forever. And it is worth finding out about that.

[20 : 53] It is worth tasting that. And it is worth knowing that. Let's close with a prayer. Dear Lord God, we want to know what it is to be called, to be beloved in God the Father, to know what it is to

be kept in Jesus Christ.

We want mercy and peace and love to be multiplied to us. And we pray that you will do that with us. I pray you will keep us from being passive, that you will help us to love and serve one another, to contend for this faith, this good faith which you have given to us.

And now, let us close with a blessing. May he who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy.

To the only God, our Saviour, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, be glory and majesty and dominion and authority before all time and now and forever.

And may the blessing of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you now and remain with you always. Amen.