

Contend For The Faith.

Text: Jude 3

Suggested Hymns:

200T265, 423, 260, 352, 195

1) Is A Divine Command And Counsel Of Love

2) Is A Call To Action

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Jude 3, ... *contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The words of our text are not an isolated injunction or command. Through the pages of Scripture runs the picture of the Christian life as an unceasing battle for the truth, and warfare against error and evil.

We meet it, for instance, in Psalm 46: *“God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present Help in trouble. ... The Lord of Hosts is with us.”*

St. Paul describes in detail the complete suit of armour of the Christian warrior.¹ He tells his pupil Timothy to *“Fight the good fight of faith,”*² and as his life approaches its end, he exults *“I have fought the good fight.”*³

We have special need to hold this concept of the Christian life as a constant warfare in these our days, when we and our people are deluged with an avalanche of errors great and small, all endangering the faith once delivered to the saints, and when, on the other hand, the argument of “love” is persistently given as a plea against contending for the faith.

An English cleric summed up that habit of thought, which we see so generally now, in the comment: *“People look at you with amazement if you suggest that there is such a thing as a fixed truth; and they eye you with supreme contempt if you dare hint that the opposite of truth must be a lie.*

A man says that black is white, but I say that it is not so. It is not kind to say, ‘It is not so,’ you should say, ‘Perhaps you are right, dear brother, though I hardly think so.’”

Over against that loud voice of uncertainty and indifference sounds the clear call of God's Word to enter the ranks, to strive earnestly and vigorously, to do battle, and to *contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. We Observe That This Is A Divine Command And Counsel Of Love

The Meaning of True Love for God's Word

Our race of sinners calls a variety of emotions "love." Many of them ought rather be identified as mushy sentiment, lush pathos, sleazy lust, or base passion.

We who by God's grace have been schooled in His Word know that the love it instils has its source in the Triune God revealed in Holy Scripture, springs from acceptance of the Word of Truth and fidelity to it, and finds its direction in that Word.

True love for one another rises from the fear and love of God, as Luther so beautifully pointed out in his explanation of each of the Commandments. This love for God, created by His great love for us, is the true energiser and conditioner of the love for man.

And love for God is inseparably connected with love for His Word of truth. There He has revealed Himself in His infinite majesty and love. There He unfolds the glory of His person and the riches of His grace. There He assures and convinces us that He was able to and did clearly communicate His great and gracious purposes to men.

There He plainly sets forth the depths of man's iniquity and the heavenly heights of His redeeming mercy in Christ. There in clear words He sets before us the certainty of forgiveness in His Son, our Saviour, and the way He wants to have His redeemed children walk.

Therefore Jesus declares in John 14:21-23, ²¹ *He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. ... "If anyone loves Me, he will keep [i.e. watch over, give heed to] My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.*

The church fathers and Luther repeatedly observed that all Scripture is a golden ring, a golden chain. In that perfect truth love rejoices, for it realises that

one departure from truth breaks the ring and severs the chain. Love knows that a single deviation from the inspired truth suffices to make us miss the perfection of the revelation of God our Saviour, and jeopardises the preservation of the whole revelation of redeeming grace.

So Jude under the Holy Spirit's guidance began his letter with the gracious salutation: *"Mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you,"* and continued, in perfect agreement with it, *"contend earnestly for the faith."* He knew that love for souls requires us to keep the whole faithful Word unsullied by human error lest souls be endangered and perhaps destroyed.

Only as the Law is taught in all its damning severity, only as the Gospel of completed redemption and free, sure salvation in Christ Jesus is proclaimed in all its sublime fullness, can people truly realise their appalling need, and our Lord's perfect provision for that need.

Only as the whole counsel of God is faithfully held and taught, is the article of justification by grace through faith alone, the central truth of Christianity, safeguarded, for we know that every error ultimately affects that doctrine.

It is, therefore, true love for souls and concern for their eternal peace that prompts this Christian contending. As Dr. F. Bente pointed out in his historical introduction to the Formula of Concord: *"A holy zeal for the purity and unity of doctrine is not at all incompatible, rather always and of necessity connected with an earnest desire for peace; not, indeed, a peace at any price, but a truly Christian and godly peace, a peace consistent with divine truth."*

We know it to be true, of course, that by a happy inconsistency error and saving faith have many a time lived together in a soul. We also know by sad observation how, as in the progress of Reformed rationalism, an unhappy consistency in the advocacy of error has robbed souls of saving faith.

*"Teach them to observe all things that I have commanded you,"*⁴ is our Lord's directive, and church history through all ages serves to re-emphasise its importance. Potentially *"there is death in the pot"* of every error. True love cannot stand by indifferent and let men eat of it. As we love souls and as we would do them everlasting good, we are constrained to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints.

The Charge of "Lovelessness"

Down the years that course has been assailed, and in days to come it will be slandered as *“lovelessness.”* Our Lord Jesus was charged with being a disturber and perverter of the people when He spoke and applied His Word.

The Apostles were stigmatised as factionists against established religious authority, imprisoned, and martyred. Paul was most bitterly and viciously attacked by his former friends.

Of that stalwart defender of the faith Athanasius, his biographer, Dr. Hagenbach, wrote: *“It was his vocation with unflinching boldness to stand up for the Church’s exact and orthodox belief, to resist the course of error, a duty as difficult as it was important. ... He was accused of pride, harshness, stubbornness. ... Certain it is that in that breast of iron, which he always offered to the enemies of truth, he hid a royal measure of love to that flock which he led and to the whole Church of Christ.”*

Luther was named a *“severe, sharp physician,”* *“a bold, rebellious, contentious spirit,”* and *“a wild, drunken swine.”*

Faithful confessors of the Word will be able to endure such reproaches, for they know that the Lord’s judgement is always the crucial consideration.

True, men thought they did God service when they put the Apostles out of the synagogues and killed them for their *“uncharitable, unyielding, rigorous”* testimony, but we know that those martyrs for truth were driven by an overpowering love for Christ and the souls He had bought with His blood. Regardless of the evil report attached to them, love gave them no choice but to contend for the faith.

Evils of Unionistic Love

On the other hand, we observe in a host of instances what evils the practice of the world’s “love” has wrought. The case of Melanchthon is typical.

Sympathetic biographer that he is, Dr. Joseph Stump must yet write of Philip: *“With all his goodness of heart and sincerity of purpose, it is undeniable that by his indecisive conduct and ambiguous phraseology Melanchthon unintentionally gave occasion for many of the distractions which rent the Church after Luther’s death.”*

He meant to do what lay in his power to allay controversy and restore peace. But the very means he used served only to make matters worse.”

The crying of “peace, peace” when there was no peace brought a harvest of untold woe and almost complete disaster to the Church of the Reformation.

Recognising the evil of that sort of “love” which will compromise truth and tolerate error, Luther, addressing Capito, sounded the warning: *“My love is ready to die for you, but whoever touches my faith touches the apple of my eye; impose what you will upon our love, but beware of our faith in all things.”*

Again he wrote in 1538: *“Just as strongly as our opponents insist on unity of loving, do we insist on unity of teaching and of believing. If they will leave us that uninjured, we will praise the unity of love as much as they, but in all cases without detriment to the unity of the faith and spirit.”*

At the end of Article XI of the Formula of Concord the Lutheran confessors, having testified against men erring within the Lutheran Church, declared the historic evangelical position of faithful Christendom: *“We have no intention of yielding [anything] of the eternal, immutable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace, tranquillity, and unity. ... But we entertain heartfelt-pleasure and love for that unity by which God’s glory remains uninjured, nothing of the Holy Gospel is surrendered, no room is given to the least error, poor sinners are brought to true, genuine repentance, raised up by faith, confirmed in new obedience, and thus justified and eternally saved through the merits of Christ alone.”*

That is true love, love that is born from, and lives upon, God’s Word of truth to us.

Jesus says in John 18:37, *for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.*

This means that ¹⁴ *that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting,* ¹⁵ *but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head — Christ.*⁵

As our text says, *“contend for the faith”* is the counsel of divine love designed for the honour of God and the salvation of men.

2. We Note That This Is A Call To Action

Speaking Out for the Truth

There is a spirit at large today that wants to persuade people to be silent and inactive in the face of error, a spirit that advises: *“God will take care of all these problems. He will work it out; leave it to Him.”*

Should we apply such counsel of deadly half-truths to all the Gospel cause? What work, then, have any of us, pastors or laymen, to do in the kingdom? Why talk of any sort of stewardship of life? *“God will take care of it!”*

No, we know better than to take refuge in such an excuse. Our Lord and Saviour has named you and me and every disciple His arm, His deputies, His army. He says, *“You shall be witnesses to Me.”*⁶ And *“Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.”*⁷ In our text the word *“contend”* is used. Our Lord will not have us keep silent when the faith once delivered to the saints is at issue.

An example by contrast illustrates the principle. There was another Martin in Reformation days — Martin of Basel. He, too, came to a knowledge of the truth of free salvation. He inscribed his faith on a parchment sheet: *“O most merciful Christ, I know that I can be saved only by the merit of Thy blood. Holy Jesus, I acknowledge Thy sufferings for me. I love Thee; I love Thee.”*

But then, afraid to make public confession, he hid the sheet behind a stone in the wall of his chamber, where it was discovered by sheer chance a century later. What was his contribution to the restoration of the pure Gospel?

The thanks of untold multitudes rise to the throne of grace not for him, but for that other Martin, Martin Luther, the Friar of Wittenberg who declared: *“My Lord has confessed me before men; I will not shrink from confessing Him before kings.”*

Charles Porterfield Krauth pressed home our responsibility when he wrote: *“A church which contends for nothing either has lost the truth or has ceased to love it. Warfare is painful, but [those] whose errors create the necessity for it are responsible for all its miseries.”*

Luther had sharp words to speak to George Major on the subject: *“A teacher who keeps silent on errors and wishes still to be known as an orthodox teacher is worse than a manifest fanatic, and does more damage with his deceit than a*

heretic and is not to be trusted. He is a wolf and a fox, a hireling and a belly server.”

The disciples of Christ are not to keep silent like men who are *“always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.”*⁸

Action Called For

Nor does this divine counsel instruct us only to speak for the truth, to think that our duty is done when we have engaged in great debates. We are called to act, to contend. And ultimately we have no choice, when church admonition proves fruitless, but to dissociate ourselves from those who persist in their error and iniquity, for our Lord’s Apostle has spoken in Romans 16:17, *“Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.”*

Indeed Eli failed to rebuke his evil sons and there the matter rested. The result: God’s judgement on Eli’s house because *“he did not restrain them.”*⁹

A Lutheran theologian wrote a scholarly defence of Scripture in which he attacked the doctrinal pronouncements of one of his brethren in a spirited fashion. Yet through the years he continued in fellowship with the errorist he condemned. The result: The sword was blunted; the testimony written was nullified practically by the course of inaction pursued.

Individual Responsibility

We cannot transfer our duty in these affairs to others. The Lord of the Church is speaking to every member of it when He commands through His Apostle: *“Contend for the faith.”*

Because he was acutely aware of that fact, Luther met the urging pleas of other people that he await the decisions of *“recognised teachers and councils”* on doctrines in controversy with the reply: *“For many who know that our doctrine is right and cannot say anything against it, that is a strong persuasive argument still to stand there like a stalled horse and to say: The holy Christian Church has not yet decided and given its approval in the matter.”*

Both the simple and the bigwigs are taken in by such talk. ... They say that they want to wait until matters are decided by the Christian Church. Let the devil

wait for this! I need not wait so long. For the Christian Church has already decided everything. No convention is necessary for this."

Paul, a comparative newcomer, had to rise against great Peter for the truth's sake and ***"withstood him to his face."***¹⁰ Our spiritual forebears, common pastors, common people, had no choice but to stand against the high dignitaries of the corrupt church in Prussia.

These instances, and a host more in the history of the Church, enforce the fact that the pure teaching of the Word must be guarded and defended not merely by some select group of church scholars or dignitaries, but by every member of the royal priesthood, "the common layman," "the ordinary pastor." Our Lord has committed to each of us the responsibility to stand for and insist upon complete fidelity to His Word.

That responsibility involves positive, constant declaration of the truth, refutation and removal of error and causes of offence, and the avoidance of those who persist in championing and supporting error.

Surely Christ's disciples were tempted to grow weary of such evangelical contending, to think of retiring from the midst of the fray. Then we need to recall Luther's exhortation: *"If you want to be saved, you must be so sure in your own mind of the Word of grace, that if all men should speak otherwise and all angels should say Nay, you will stand alone and declare: Still I know that this Word is the truth."*

Holy Writ supplies a lively and encouraging comparison in the messages addressed to two of the Asia Minor churches. To Laodicea the Lord spoke: ***"because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth."***¹¹

But to Philadelphia were sent the words of divine comfort and strengthening: ***"Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth."***¹²

Penitent Self-Examination and Divine Encouragement

We have, it is plain, the duty to always examine ourselves whether we are properly active as watchmen on the towers of Zion, ready and willing to sound

the signal whenever the bulwarks of truth are threatened. For the sake of God's truth we will *"endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ,"*¹³ and we will rejoice that we are *"counted worthy to suffer shame for His name."*¹⁴

If we are remiss in staunch advocacy and defence of the Word of truth — and who is not? — this day we shall again speak our penitent confession and plead for divine mercy and strengthening.

Again the Gospel of free and full forgiveness comes to us by Word and Sacrament and supplies new strength to *"testify to the gospel of the grace of God"*¹⁵ to souls, that by that truth they may in God's grace be drawn into and kept with us in the company of saints.

When the flesh grows faint and fearful in that work, let us recall that our Lord offers us the same might which armoured young David against giant Goliath, *"I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts."*¹⁶

We will remember that Paul's sad comment from his prison cell written in 2 Timothy 4:16–17, *¹⁶ At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. ... ¹⁷ But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and that all the Gentiles might hear.*

As we stand staunchly for His truth, there stands with us the divine Contender, Jesus who conquered sin and death and hell that we poor sinners might be made kings and priests unto God.

May His Spirit lead us to seek and find in His Word wisdom, faithfulness, and zeal always to *"contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."*

Let us close with these words of Scripture, Jude 24–25, *²⁴ Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, ²⁵ To God our Savior, Who alone is wise, Be glory and majesty, Dominion and power, Both now and forever.* Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Ephesians 6:13-18

² 1 Tim. 6:12

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- ³ 2 Tim. 4:7
 - ⁴ Matthew 28:20
 - ⁵ Ephesians 4:14–15
 - ⁶ Acts 1:8
 - ⁷ Ephesians 6:17
 - ⁸ 2 Tim. 3:7
 - ⁹ 1 Samuel 3:13
 - ¹⁰ Galatians 2:11
 - ¹¹ Rev. 3:16
 - ¹² Rev. 3:10
 - ¹³ 2 Timothy 2:3
 - ¹⁴ Acts 5:41
 - ¹⁵ Acts 20:24
 - ¹⁶ 1 Samuel 17:45