Practicing Faith in Troubling Times

Third in the series: Lessons for Troubling times

# Scripture: Jude 20-25

# Key Idea: In times when many belittle faith in God, it is important for us to intentionally keep our love for God strong.

# Intro:

## An admonition to guard against loss of faith

One of the sad things that happens sometimes in troubling times is that some people seem to lose their faith. They get cynical about the way things are going and drift away from God. In stark contrast to that Jude urges his readers to “keep yourselves in God’s love.”

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

In one sense, it is an odd phrase because as Paul wrote, “Nothing can separate us from the love of God” (Rom. 8:38, 39). But when people drift away, they lose that sense that God loves them. The love of God has not changed but their perception and reception of God’s love has changed immensely. Jude does not want that subjective experience of loss to happen to us so he admonishes “Keep yourselves in the love of God.” The word translated “keep” has the connotation of guarding against loss.

God’s Word Translation renders it as “”Remain in God’s love,” reminding us of the words of Jesus,

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 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 15:9-10

Apparently Jesus was also worried that in the difficulties of life, we would tragically lose touch with the love of God.

So how does Jude counsel us to avoid losing touch with the love of God in our lives?

## Probably not four commands but one with three methods encouraged

One brief note on translations -- NRSV translations use four main verbs to translate these two verses. However, actually there is only one main verb—to keep. The other three –build up, pray, look for-- are participles. NIV tries to capture that. What does this construction tell us? It means that the main point of the verse is to keep ourselves in God’s love.

We cannot help but immediately ask a key question: How do we keep our love for God strong? The other three auxiliary verbs may well be there to guide us as to how we are to accomplish the main task. One of the best ways to take them is as recommended means or methods to the main end. We keep our love for God strong by building ourselves up in the faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, and looking forward to eternal life. Let’s look at each one of those three one by one.

# Build yourselves up in the faith

I’ve been reading a classic book on Christian growth called Spiritual Maturity by J. Oswald Sanders. Chapter 16 is called “The Transforming Power of the Spirit” and it seeks to answer the question, “How may we acquire likeness to Christ?” using two Corinthians 3:18 as its text. Here are some key take-homes from that chapter that will help us immensely in answering also the question implied by Jude as to how we are to build ourselves up in the most holy faith (Jude 20).

## Don’t look inside yourself or at others, look at Jesus!

It is a modern fallacy when we are encouraged to look within ourselves to find divine strength. That is not Christian theology. We may need to look within ourselves to assess our motives, to remember landmarks along the path we have traveled, or to achieve some insights about our personality. But when we are looking for the divine, the place to look is at Jesus.

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. Heb. 3:1 NIV

In the words of Paul,

We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. 2 Cor. 3:18 ESV

This reference uses the experience of Moses as the basis for its analogy. Moses’ face became radiant when he was on the mountain with God (Ex. 34:29). We grow in Christ-likeness and reflect his glory when we are with Jesus in study and devotion.

Commenting on this verse in 2 Corinthians, J. Oswald Sanders says,

“Transformation of character begins not with subjective introspection, but with an object of vision of the glory of the Lord and the Lord of glory….the glory here referred to is, of course, the moral glory of Christ, his excellences of character and conduct, which shine out everywhere in the Scriptures” (J. Oswald Sanders, Spiritual Maturity pp 162-163).

## Building ourselves up in the faith is a process over time so we need to persist in it

“A glance of faith may save, but it is the gaze of faith which sanctifies,” said Robert Murray McCheyne. (Quoted on p. 164 in Spiritual Maturity)

In our culture, we want instant everything, including spiritual growth. But spiritual growth and Christian maturity take time. Just as an athlete takes years to develop the conditioning, muscle reflexes and thinking patterns to excel, so we as Christian people take years to learn and grow into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

“One thing is clear. It is not the purpose of God that our Christian experience should be static. There lie ahead of us endless possibilities of growth into the likeness of Christ. These words clearly show that Christ likeness in all its fullness is not the result merely of some moment of high and holy exultation, but that it is a progressive experience. The inward change produced in us by the Holy Spirit is to be daily transforming us more nearly to the image of our Lord. We are transfigured by the renewing of our minds”
 (J. Oswald Sanders, Spiritual Maturity, p. 165).

We cannot expect that one spiritual decision, one high point at a conference, church service or small group prayer time will immediately grow us into Christian maturity. Such spiritual milestones are crucial in our lives. It is important to mark them and remember them as assurances for our faith. But spiritual growth is a day-to-day endeavor and progress is only shown over time as we abide in Christ and spend time in devotion.

Just as perennial plants in the garden grow gradually over many entire summers, gaining in glamourous bloom each year, so our spiritual life grows gradually over our whole lives, gradually reflecting more and more of the likeness of Jesus. It is important to keep nourishing our spiritual growth in all the seasons of our lives. We never get so mature that we can coast. When a tree stops growing, it dies. The new rings of growth that it adds each year are essential to the continuing vitality of the tree. So it is with our spiritual lives.

[I should also add that gifts are not a substitute for spiritual growth and maturity either. A very young and immature Christian may be very gifted. But they still must attend to the matter of spiritual growth in order to be prepared for the challenges that life will bring and be able to maximize the use of their gifts and their influence in the future. Gifts may attract attention, but the person still cannot effectively reflect Jesus unless there is also spiritual maturity present. Gifts in the spiritually immature have a tendency to promote the person. Growing spiritual maturity brings humility and draws the focus over to the image of Christ shining through.]

## Growing in grace will require intentional cooperation with God

On this point let’s listen immediately to what J. Oswald Sanders has to say.

“We needed to see in this transformation our responsibility and the Holy Spirit’s ministry. The change into the likeness of Christ is not automatic. It involves moral endeavor and activity… The spirit exercises both a negative and a positive ministry. First, he reveals to us the things in our life and character which are unlike Christ and which therefore must go. Everything alien to the perfection of Christ must be "put off."… Then the Holy Spirit reveals the graces and blessings which should and could be ours and enables us to appropriate them. One of the tragedies of many Christian lives is the poverty of their experience when contrasted with the vastness of their unclaimed privileges” (J. Oswald Sanders, Spiritual Maturity,pages 166, 167).

# Pray in the Holy Spirit

The second participle phrase that helps us understand how to keep our love for God strong encourages us to be “praying in the Spirit.” Paul gave us an almost identical command.

Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. Eph 6:18

## Why do both Jude and Paul urge us to pray?

One question that arises in our minds is this: Why does God through these apostles encourage us to pray? It’s an elementary question, but we need to be reminded of the answer.

In answer to this question I was reviewing the first chapters of Pastor Jim Cymbala’s first book in which he relates the humble beginnings of his church, “The Brooklyn Tabernacle.” He was not doing church in a nice area. He describes the situation.

“Alcohol and heroin dominated the neighborhood…Prostitutes were working a couple of street corners within three blocks of the church. Urban decay had clearly set in” (p. 22).

“Those early experiences showed me that I didn’t need to play the preacher. Jesus called fishermen, not graduates of rabbinical schools….His disciples had to depend totally upon the Lord and his power” (p. 20).

“What we really needed… was a fresh wind and fresh fire” (p. 22)
Fresh Wind Fresh Fire by Jim Cymbala

That is our first need today too, a fresh Pentecost. And just as the disciples spent time in the upper room, we need to be in prayer in order for God to strengthen us with his Spirit.

The famous devotional writer and pastor, Andrew Murray put it this way,

“Intercession is the link between man’s impotence and God’s omnipotence.”

## What does it mean to pray in the Sprit?

Another question that comes to our minds is this: “What does it mean to “pray in the Spirit?” Of course, it is a reminder that it is possible in the realm of human actions to go through the motions of praying without the Spirit. This might happen when we use words that sound like prayer but our hearts are not in it, or our motivation is actually something other than prayer to God. For example, a person might say words of prayer to impress someone else or to give an appearance of being religious.

So what does it mean to pray in the Spirit?

It means that Christians whose hearts are at prayer and not just their lips, always pray with the Spirit’s help. It is one of the tasks of the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity to help believers in their prayers. Paul instructs us about this.

 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God. Rom. 8:26-27

There are three ways the Holy Spirit helps us:

* The Holy Spirit’s help comes to us in attitude, helping us with reverence, desire and passion to pray.
* The Holy Spirit’s help directs our minds into topics for prayer, helping us to pray about the issues that are of concern to God and to work with God where He is already at work.
* And the Holy Spirit prays directly in the spiritual realm in ways we do not understand, interceding for us and in partnership with us to God.

We can pray in the Spirit without speaking a word. We can pray in the Spirit in our native tongue or in another language we know. Charismatic Christians sometimes pray in what is called unknown tongues using a spiritual gift. In some such circles, the phrase “pray in the Spirit” might be used to refer only to praying in tongues, but the Bible does restrict it in that way.

So praying in the Spirit is simply praying while we are deliberately and consciously in tune with our heavenly Father as much as we possibly can be. It is while we are in this posture of spirit that the words of Jesus are fulfilled,

He [The Holy Spirit] will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. John 16:14 NRSV

Certainly that kind of process will continually increase our love for God and our confidence in his love for us. Our relationship with God will grow and we will become more Chris-like from the prayer contact.

# Look forward to the future tense of eternal life

## Understanding the three tenses of salvation

The sense of the third supporting phrase of our text is well captured by the TEV version. This phrase gives us a third assist, a third method, a third motivation in our effort to keep our love for God strong and vital.

Keep yourselves in the love of God, as you wait for our Lord Jesus Christ in his mercy to give you eternal life. Jude 21 TEV

Remember that God’s work of salvation in our lives has three tenses.

1. In the past tense, Jesus died for us providing atonement for our sins, the potential for our forgiveness, and making it possible for us to come before God in prayer without the Old Testament system of priests and sacrifices. The hard work of obtaining our salvation had been completed by the time the temple veil was torn on Good Friday, and the tomb was empty on Resurrection morning.

“He that believes has everlasting life” (John 6:47)

The gift of eternal life has been purchase for us. The work is done. When we have believed, all that potential is already ours.

1. The present tense of our eternal life is what God is doing for us in our lives by his Holy Spirit today. He frees us from our sense of guilt. He puts his Holy Spirit within us to strengthen us and teach us. He gives us the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit. He gives us power to have victory over temptation and sin in our lives. He directs our minds into his paths for our lives. Helps us in our prayers and helps us to love and serve others. All this is part of the present work of salvation in our lives transforming us into the image of Christ.

Perhaps this is what Paul had in mind when he admonished Timothy,

 Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. 1 Tim 6:12

1. But there is a future tense of salvation that is yet to be. This is the part we are to look forward to and have yet in our minds eye. It is even greater than the present tense. Paul spoke of all three tenses of salvation in Titus chapter 2.

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. 12 It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, Titus 2:11-13 NIV

The apostle John gives us a little glimpse of the kinds of things that might be in store in the future tense of our salvation.

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. 1 John 3:2 NIV

In Revelation we have glimpses as well.

Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”
 I answered, “Sir, you know.”
And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore,

“they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. ‘Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,’ nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; ‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’” Rev 7:13-17 NIV

## What difference does this perspective make?

Why does it matter that we keep the future end in view?

### First, I think it is important to us simply because the apostles did so.

It is wise to allow their example to guide us.

I have already given examples from the writings of Paul and John showing how each of them kept the end in view. I could give more. But here is a text from another apostle, from Peter.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

 Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. 2 Peter 3:10-12

So all three of the key teaching apostles, Peter, John and Paul often referred to the future tense of our salvation as motivation for our present Christian living. This should be reason enough for us to help us keep that same perspective as well.

Second, why did they do so? Because keeping the end in view helps us live in ways consistent with where we want to end up.

The reason they did so is a simple principle of human living. The goal determines the path. Now if I want to go for a pleasant drive in the country, most any country road will do. But I won’t really know where I will end up. But if my goal is to go to Hartford, then not just any road will do, the goal of my journey will limit the roads that I can take. I need to choose roads that will help me get closer to my goal.

So it is in our lives. If our biggest goal is to please ourselves, our pleasure, sexual fulfillment, making money, --you fill in the blank--- from one day to the next, then we really don’t know where that will end up. Our mind is only on the day to day. But if our goal is much bigger, to be ready for the day when Jesus calls us home -- to press toward the mark of our high calling in Jesus as Paul put it (Phil. 3:12), to be prepared for the return of the Master, as Jesus described it (Matt. 24:45, 46) —then we have the true end in mind and we will modify our choices accordingly.

John describes how it should affect our choices.

Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, 1 John 3:3 NIV

And Peter does as well.

But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. 2 Peter 3:13-14

So we need to be asking ourselves, “Am I living and making decisions with a view to my future eternal life?” Is the course of my life such that it is leading in the right direction? What choices that I am making will I be ashamed of when Jesus appears? What choices aren’t exactly wrong, but they are just meandering, they are not getting the job done in my spiritual growth? O Lord, help us!