

Jude 17-25

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[0 : 0 0] This morning we were thinking about the memorable and stirring words of the doxology with which Jude closes his letter. To Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy, to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord before all ages, now and forevermore. Amen.

And as we thought about the words of this doxology, our thoughts were directed to the simple yet powerful truth that our God is able. Our God is able.

As we commented this morning, the president of the most powerful nation on earth can declare, yes, we can, only to discover that the reality is so often, no, we can't. But the maker of heaven and earth, the only God our Savior, of Him it can always be said, but it is always true that He is able. And in the context of the letter that Jude writes to the believers, in the context of a church threatened from the inside by serious error and gross immorality, Jude can grant the assurance that God is able to keep them from falling and that He will keep them until that day when He will present them faultless before His glorious presence. He is able to keep His people. That is what God is able and willing to do. God keeps and we are kept. That's the deal. That's the covenant deal, and it's a pretty good deal. He keeps and we are kept, kept by or in Jesus Christ. But do we then conclude, and we gave a little bit of thought to this this morning, but only very fleetingly, do we then conclude that in the matter of being kept, God is active and we are passive. This is God's work and we're grateful for it.

He is a God who keeps His people. Is our role in the matter simply to be kept, to passively enjoy the keeping of God. One of the things we've been discovering as we've been considering over these past few weeks, a number of different benedictions or blessings that we find in the New Testament. In this case, it's somewhat different in that it's what we would call a doxology. It's very similar but not quite the same as a benediction. But what we've been discovering as we've been looking at the different benedictions is that the blessing of God that the benedictions often speak of and celebrate ordinarily involve or even require the accompanying actions of God's people. Now, this is not to detract in any way from God being the source of the blessing. He is the one who blesses, but simply to recognize that God graciously involves us in the matter of securing and enjoying His blessing. And that is for our good.

It's not that He needs our help. It's not that He's unable to bless us without our involvement, but He chooses to involve us. And the manner in which He chooses to involve us is for our good. We are more richly blessed as we participate in securing the blessing that comes from Him in different ways. And that will be a function of what the blessing is. Well, this general truth is also true in the matter of being kept. Look at what we discover in a verse just a little before the doxology, a verse that sits between the beginning of the letter where we noticed this morning we have this truth emphasized that we are a people kept, kept by Jesus Christ, we're told there in verse 1, and then at the end in the doxology to Him who is able to keep you. So, the beginning at the end, this great truth that God keeps His people. But then we find in verse 21 the same language of being kept, but from a different direction, from a different perspective that at face value might seem to be almost in contradiction to what we've already noticed. What do we read there in verse 21?

[4 : 41] Keep yourselves in God's love. It's these words in particular that I want to think about this evening. In order to do so and in order to understand these words, what we'll be looking at are the two verses, verse 20 and verse 21. These two verses form one sentence in Jude's original.

The punctuation that's been employed in the NIV divides it into two sentences, but it's one sentence, and that's important. In a moment we'll explain why that's important.

Keep yourselves in God's love. Now, the language sounds very appealing. It has the ring of something very important. Keep yourselves in God's love. That surely is something that we ought to do, we must do.

But what does it mean? And I think there are two questions that I think we need to pose and try and answer with regard to this command, this call, this exhortation, keep yourselves in God's love. And I think the two questions are these. First of all, what does it mean? What does that actually mean?

And then secondly, and it's very related but different, what does it involve? So what does it mean? But then having established or sought to establish what it means, what does it involve?

[6 : 04] What do we need to do? This is something we need to do. Well, what do we need to do in order to keep ourselves in God's love? So let's think of the first question. What does this mean? Keep yourselves in God's love. Let's start, first of all, with God's love. Now, you say, well, we don't need to dwell on that. We know what that means, God's love. Surely we know what God's love means. But we need to think a little bit more about what Jude has in mind when he says, keep yourselves in God's love. Jude could have in mind God's love for us, or he could have in mind our love for God, or indeed both. I think it is important to stress that in this instance and on this occasion his principal concern, I am pretty confident in asserting, is God's love for us. He is encouraging us, he is exhorting us to keep ourselves in God's love for us. Now that, as we know, will have a consequence. As we keep ourselves in God's love, then we will respond to respond to that love, and that response will involve us loving him. That is clear. But the principal concern here of Jude, it seems to me, is that we as God's people, as believers, would keep ourselves in God's love, in the love that God bears for us. But then we have the language of keep yourselves in God's love. What does that mean?

We're going to think in a moment about what it involves, but for the moment, it's simply, what does that mean? Given that God's love for his people, and if you're a Christian this evening, I would say directly to you, God's love for you is unchanging. It is eternal, and it's unchangeable. It is a love that will not, in any circumstance, diminish. We can even say that it's a love that will never grow. It can't grow because it is all that it is and has ever been. It's a constant. His love for you is a constant. It can't go up or down.

It can't grow cold or grow warm. It is what it is. It's unchanging. So given that that's the case, when we are being encouraged to keep ourselves in God's love, what that must mean is that we are being called to be mindful of God's love. His love for us is what it is. It's our understanding of it.

It's our being mindful of it. It's our consciously appreciating and experiencing it in the context of the believers in the chaos that was the church that Jude is writing to, to experience as it offers shelter and protection, to deliberately cultivate our fellowship with him in order that we might more richly know and enjoy his love. Keep yourselves in his love. Really, the command that we have here in the letter is an echo of the tender command of Jesus directed to his disciples that we read earlier in the service in John chapter 15 and verse 9, remain in my love, continue in my love, abide in my love.

And what Jesus said to his disciples is found again in these words of Jude, keep yourselves in God's love. Those who keep themselves in God's love will know protection in the face of error and temptation. The believer who is growingly conscious of God's love for him or her will not do what many were doing to whom Jude was writing. They will not deny Jesus Christ. They will not change the grace of God into a license for immorality as was occurring, as we find there recorded in verse 4 of the letter. Believers are to keep themselves in God's love that these things might not occur. So I think that very briefly gives an answer of sorts to the question, what does it mean? But our principal concern is, having established that, to pose and answer a second question, what does it involve? How can we keep ourselves in God's love? Now, to answer that question, we need to venture into the deep and choppy waters, certainly for me, of grammar. Now, my concern is this having said that, there's this automatic switch off, and you're thinking, oh no, this sounds very dreary and dull.

[10 : 59] Well, just bear with me. It will be for one or two minutes maximum. You can start tapping your feet if I go beyond a couple of minutes and explaining the grammatical point that I want to try and explain.

But it is actually very helpful in order for us to answer the question, what does it involve keeping ourselves in God's love? Notice there in verses 20 and 21, in this occasion it's always helpful, but it'll be particularly helpful if you have your Bible open and you try and follow what I'm saying.

In verses 20 and 21, you can find four verbs that describe duties incumbent on us as Christians. Let's go through and find them together. Verse 20, but you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith. There's the first verb that describes a duty that is placed upon us. Build yourselves up.

Then we continue and we read, and pray in the Holy Spirit. There's a second thing we need to do. We need to build ourselves up. We need to pray in the Holy Spirit. Then in verse 21, keep yourselves in God's love. This is what our thoughts are revolving around, but it's the third duty. Keep yourselves in God's love. And then it says, as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the fourth thing we need to do. We need to wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring us to eternal life.

Four verbs describing four duties. And as we read them in these two verses, they appear to be simply a list of four distinct duties. But, and here's the catch, one of them, one of these four verbs, is different from the others. And the ESV, the English Standard Version, captures this in the translation that it provides for these two verses, one sentence in the original. So, just listen to this alternative translation for these two verses. But you, beloved, building yourselves up, notice that slight change in the form of the verb, rather than just build yourself up, building yourselves up in your most holy faith, and praying in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. So, the four verbs, building, praying, waiting, and keep yourselves. And keep yourselves is different. The form of the verb is different. It is a command.

[13 : 32] It's in the imperative mood of the verb. This is what the believers are being commanded to do, keep yourselves in God's love. The other three are what's called participles. Now, participles are a very painful thing in terms of explaining. It can be very complicated. But in this case, for our purposes, the function of these three verbs that are participles is to accompany or describe or elucidate the meaning of the main verb that is found in the main clause of the sentence, keep yourselves in God's love. So, in summary, what can we draw from that, which I think is helpful?

What we can draw from that is that these three verbs, building yourselves up, praying, and waiting, serve to explain how we are to keep ourselves in God's love. That's what we're wanting to establish.

How do we do that? How do I, as a believer, keep myself in God's love? I can see that's important. I can see it's something I would want to do, and how do I do it? Well, Jude says, this is the way you can do it.

These are the things you need to do. These are the things that accompany or will contribute to you being to obey the command, keep yourselves in God's love. How? By building ourselves up in our most holy faith, by praying in the Holy Spirit, and by waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, that wasn't too painful. Well, it's easy for me to say that. I don't know if you agree, but we finished. We've done that part. We haven't finished completely, but we've finished that part.

[15 : 11] Now what we need to do, if indeed it is our desire to keep ourselves in God's love, and I sincerely hope that is our desire, we need to consider these three facilitating or necessary duties one by one. And as we do, and as we understand what they involve, and very importantly, as we do what is being asked of us, they will together contribute to us being able to keep ourselves in God's love. So the first thing, build yourselves up in your most holy faith. Building yourselves up.

What's the metaphor that Jude is employing here? When I read this, and I was thinking of illustrations, and how to maybe get across important truths about building yourself up, the first picture that came to my mind, and as I thought further, very erroneously, but the first picture that came to my mind was of the bodybuilder. And I was already imagining the way the metaphor could be developed by thinking of the diet of a bodybuilder, always very careful about what they eat, and the hours of dedicated training. You could see how that could be employed as a picture, as an illustration.

And with the end in mind of being built up, the body of the bodybuilder being built up. But that illustration would be to misunderstand in a fundamental way what Jude is saying. And it would in fact betray a very unbiblical individualism, if I can use that word, it's not a very nice word, individualism. The picture, the metaphor that Jude is employing is not of the solitary bodybuilder concerned only for his own body beautiful, but of a building, even a temple, made up of many precious stones that together and only together can become what they are intended to become.

And the fact that this is the picture that Jude has in mind, the picture of a building, the picture of a temple, this also explains why the call of Jude is in the plural, build yourselves up. It could be no other way, given that what is being called for is that the believing community would together build themselves up into this temple, it's got to be directed to everybody.

A solitary believer simply can't do this, even if they really want to. It can't be done alone. This is a building made up of many precious stones, to borrow the language from elsewhere in the New Testament. We can't build ourselves up in the way Jude envisages alone. It's simply not possible.

[17 : 57] This can only happen together with other believers. To try and grow as a believer in deliberate isolation, now if there are believers who find themselves isolated out of no desire on their part, that's quite different. But those who would isolate themselves consciously and deliberately for such, it is impossible that they would build themselves up in the manner that is required. Indeed, the sad thing about that is not only do they impinge or affect their own growth, they also impinge in the growth of others. There's a brick missing on the building site. For the building to be completed, you need all the bricks. And if some bricks choose not to be there, then that impinges on the whole building project, if we can use that idea. But how are believers, given that we have, I think, a better understanding of the metaphor and what Jude has in mind, how are believers gathered in a given congregation to grow corporately? Well, Jude says that this building ourselves up is to be in our most holy faith. Build yourselves up in your most holy faith. And so here the word faith is to be understood not as that which we exercise as we trust in Jesus, but rather the faith, or that body of truth that constitutes the Christian faith. Precisely what Jude began his letter urging his believers to contend for. They had in verse 3, perhaps with the exception of the textology, perhaps the verse that is most familiar to us from this letter, I felt that I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered or entrusted to the saints. This is the faith that we are to build ourselves up in. But one further question. What part does our most holy faith, now identified, play in the task of building ourselves up? Well, it is, mixing a little bit the metaphors, it is both the foundation of the building, but it's also the building material, that which we study and read and meditate on in order to be built up. An early church father who is reputed to have been a disciple of John, so we're talking very early, by the name of Polycarp. He died a martyr's death in the second century when he was an old man. He was the bishop of Smyrna in what today would be Izmir in Turkey. Well, he gives us sound advice in this matter of being built up in the faith. He wrote, if you study the epistles of the blessed apostle Paul, you can be built up in the faith given to you. It's given to you, but you can build yourselves up in it as you study. So as you study the word. So the first task that we need to take seriously if we are to keep ourselves in God's love is the study of the word of God together as a company of God's people. And we can do that Sunday by Sunday, Lord's Day by Lord's Day, but we can also do that as we gather in neighborhood fellowships and have more opportunity to ask questions and discuss the matters before us.

And let me encourage you to do that. The summer break is coming to an end. We'll soon be recommencing the neighborhood fellowships. And I would urge you and encourage you to participate because what Jude is saying here is that if you want to keep yourself in God's love, this is something you must do. You must build yourself up in your most holy faith. And this is one means that God provides for you to do that. But moving on to the second, facilitating or necessary duty if we are to keep ourselves in God's love. What does Jude say? Pray in the Holy Spirit or praying in the Holy Spirit.

What does this mean? Is praying in the Holy Spirit different to just regular praying? Is this some kind of special praying that we must engage in if we are to keep ourselves in God's love? Well, I think in the context of what Jude is saying, we can say with great confidence that there isn't anything here that's intended to be mystical or hyper-spiritual. Jude would simply have us pray. That's all that he is asking of us. I say all. It's a very important thing. But that's what he's asking of us, that we would pray. Why then the need to make specific reference to the Holy Spirit? Why does he choose to use this language of pray in the Holy Spirit? I think maybe there's a couple of reasons. One is the context of the letter. Notice that he's only just mentioned that those who are causing such trouble in the church, even though they're within the church, ultimately the reason for this is that they do not have the Spirit. They're not believers at all. There in verse 19, these are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts, and do not have the Spirit. And he says, but you're different. I'm writing to those who do have the Spirit. And as those who do have the Spirit, well, pray in the Spirit. So that context perhaps explains why Jude thinks it helpful to make specific reference to the Holy Spirit. But then also,

Jude recognizes, no doubt, that all true prayer is spiritual and requires the work and activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Indeed, the Holy Spirit has a varied ministry in helping us pray. And so much could be said on this. I'm just going to very fleetingly comment on this reality of the Holy Spirit's activity in helping us pray. The Holy Spirit, the Bible assures us, is the one who, in turn, assures us of our identity as those able to pray. We think of what Paul said as he wrote to the Galatians in chapter 4, and because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father. Our very confidence that we can approach God as sons and daughters to pray is a confidence that is granted to us by the presence of the Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin in ourselves. It makes us sensitive to sin in the church, which in turn drives us to prayer, as we would seek forgiveness for ourselves, as we would intercede for others. The Holy Spirit is the one who prompts us to pray, when we might, of our own accord, be very slow to do so. I think we all know what that is like. John Calvin comments on this verse in this matter of the Holy Spirit prompting us.

He writes, Such is the coolness of our makeup that none can succeed in praying as we ought without the prompting of the Spirit. So it is necessary for us that the Spirit would be prompting us to pray.

[25 : 15] The Holy Spirit guides us in prayer. Indeed, such is His loving condescension that He even intercedes for us when we find ourselves unable to express the words. Again, we think of Paul as he writes to the Romans, Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

So this then is the second duty we must perform if we are to keep ourselves in God's love, praying in the Holy Spirit. But there is finally a third duty that Jude identifies. There in verse 21, following on from the main clause, the command, keep yourselves in God's love as you wait or waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you eternal life. Now, when we think of what we said thus far, I don't think there's been any big surprises. What I mean by that is that we might have expected the study of God's Word and prayer to be at the heart of keeping ourselves in God's love.

They are the bread and butter of Christian discipleship. They are the manner in which God speaks to us, and we fellowship with God. And so it's entirely reasonable, and we might even say predictable that Jude would say if you want to keep yourselves in God's love, then these are things you must do. You must build yourself up in your most holy faith. You must study the Word. You must pray.

But then there is this third matter that he also mentions or includes as this accompanying duty that will enable us to keep ourselves in God's love, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What can we say about this third aspect or element? I think we can maybe just take a step back and say something very simple and yet very fundamental. The Christian faith is about believing God's promises.

[27 : 22] That is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian, to believe God's promises. It's about trusting in God, in believing that He is reliable and trustworthy. And so when He promises to forgive us, well, He will forgive us. When He promises to keep us, then He will do that. We believe Him. We trust in Him.

To wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ is to trust in God's promise that the work He has begun in us, He will bring to completion. That the mercy that we have already experienced is a foretaste of the mercy extended when we shall be brought in to our full experience of eternal life as we are, in the words that follow in the dexology we were thinking of this morning, presented faultless before His glorious presence. We know that eternal life begins now, but there is this sense in which our full experience of eternal life is yet future. But we believe that it will happen because we wait, we trust in the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. He's promised that this is our inheritance and that is what we will indeed experience. And so in the midst of trials and troubles, this faith-filled looking forward to all that yet awaits us as sons and daughters of God will serve to further help us keep ourselves in

God's love. Even considering and meditating and all that awaits us and having the confidence that this will all be our experience buttresses and reminds us of God's love and helps to keep us in God's love.

God keeps us. He will keep us from falling. But the same God who promises to keep us also invites, indeed commands us to keep ourselves in His love. Something that we're able to do in the measure that we are building ourselves up in our most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit and waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring us to eternal life. And so I would encourage you and urge you and commend you to do these things. Keep yourselves in God's love and you will do so in the measure that you listen to what Jude has to say about how we can do that. Let's bow our heads and pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you are a God who does indeed graciously involve us in experiencing and enjoying your blessings. We thank you that you are the God who has promised to keep us. You are the God who does keep us. You are the God who will continue to keep us and will keep us from falling until that final day when we are presented without fault before your glorious presence. But we thank you that as we live our lives in the here and now, we are given this opportunity. We are commanded indeed to keep ourselves in your love. And we thank you that this is not something that we need to puzzle over as to, well, what does that mean? Or how can I do that? You give us an answer to that question. Jude, in his letter, making it very clear for us. And so we pray that we would be wise, that we would be sensible in listening to what you say to us. When we think of these duties, very familiar duties, not ones that we're unaware of, and yet ones that we confess we're often very careless about. And so we pray that you would convict us of our carelessness, that you would help us to, if indeed this is our great need, help us to take seriously that which perhaps we have not been taking seriously. That you would help us to be those who seek opportunities to build ourselves up together with others in our most holy faith. That we would be men and women who pray in the Holy Spirit.

[31 : 29] That we would be those who wait with confidence and trust in the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, that will bring to us in due course a full experience of the eternal life that has been secured for us by Jesus. And all of these things we pray in his name. Amen.