

How to Contend for The Faith (without Being Contentious)

LESSON 1

Our calling is given to us in Jude 3—to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints”. But how can we do this while still remaining consistently Christ-like in the way we do it?

This study will seek to answer that question by exploring (in three different lessons) the answers to three other questions:

- I. What do I owe to the person with whom I differ?*
- II. What can I learn from the person with whom I differ?*
- III. How can I cope with the person with whom I differ?*

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I. What do I owe to the person with whom I differ?

This is a very fundamental question. But many times, we don't even get around to asking it. Often, we jump to question number three, and wonder how we could possibly cope with someone with whom we disagree so strongly. Jumping to the third question first is natural; however, doing so will never help us win a hearing. (We definitely need the Holy Spirit's help in doing this!)

The fact is that we have certain obligations before God with respect to the person with whom we may differ strongly; and defending the faith in a completely 'Christian' way means honoring those obligations. What are those obligations?

A. We are obliged to love the truth *more* than we love them.

This means that, when we contend for the truth of the faith, we must never compromise the truth for the sake of “getting along”. We do not owe anyone agreement, or consent, or toleration, or “peace”—if it means that we must compromise the clear teaching of God's word in order to do so (2 Timothy 4:1-5). To do otherwise is to suppress the truth out of a fear of man (Proverbs 29:25).

B. But we are *also* obliged:

1. To love the person with whom we differ (Matthew 5:43-48).
2. To respect the humanity of the person with whom we differ (Genesis 1:26-27).
3. To treat the person with whom we differ as we ourselves would want to be treated (Matthew 7:12).

How do I want to be treated in a disagreement?

First, I want the other person to take the time to actually hear all of what I have to say. This would mean, then, that I owe it to the person with whom I disagree to not be merely 'reactionary' to them, but to **make a serious and sincere effort to be quiet and listen to what it is that they are trying to tell me.** This is very hard to do, because I usually want to jump in and respond before they're finished having their say. But there's a lot of wisdom in Proverbs 18:13; "He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him."

Then, I want them to show me the courtesy of understanding what I really mean by what I say. When someone gives an opinion about something that's controversial or passionate, they often express themselves in an unclear or clumsy way--saying things in the heat of the moment that don't represent very well what they actually mean or believe. I owe it to that person to overlook the clumsiness, **seek-out what was really meant,** and not become superficially "obsessed with disputes and arguments over words" (1 Timothy 6:3-4).

When they repeat to others what I said, I want them to represent fairly what I meant to say--and not take my words out of context. This would mean that I should **never deliberately misrepresent the position of someone with whom I disagree**--that is, in a mocking manner, or in a belittling or sarcastic way, or in a way that twists their meaning. Ephesians 4:15 teaches that I am to be characterized by "speaking the truth in love". (A helpful rule of thumb might be this: I should do my best to represent that other person's position so accurately and fairly that they could take no offense in the way I put it; and could even say, "That's my position exactly--but I like the way you said it even better.")

Finally, I want them to be sensitive to the real concerns and passions that are behind my expressed position. This means that I owe it to the person with whom I differ to **do the hard work of understanding the heart-felt feelings behind their opinion**--that is, their *real* passions, their *real* motives, and the *real* life-experiences that have led them to the beliefs they hold. I may not agree with someone else's position on something; but I may find that I can often agree with the concerns that are expressed 'disagreeably' in that position. But even if I found that I honestly can't even agree with those deeper concerns, I'd never know it unless I tried first to hear and understand them.

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2 Timothy 2:23 warns us to avoid "foolish and ignorant disputes". But we're not to avoid "contending for the faith". And when we *must* contend for the truth, verses 24-26 give us a good model for doing so in such a way as to genuinely love the one with whom we differ: "And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will."

We should deal with that person in such a way as to show Christ-like care for them as persons created in the image of God, and who are valuable to Him—not merely as opponents against whom we are seeking to win an argument. We go a long way toward doing this when we respect them and give to them what we owe them.