

How to Contend for The Faith (without Being Contentious)

LESSON 2

We have been exploring how to fulfill our call to “contend earnestly for the faith” (Jude 3) . . . while seeking how to be Christ-like in the manner with which we do so.

In seeking this, the first question we’ve considered is, “*What do I owe to the person with whom I differ?*” In our first lesson, we answered by affirming that we owe it to that person to love the truth more than we love them. But we also learned that we’re obligated:

1. To sincerely 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). To treat them as we want to be treated meant . . .
 - a. that we make a serious and sincere effort to be quiet and listen to what it is that they are trying to tell us;
 - b. that we overlook clumsy communication and seek-out what was really *intended* by what they said;
 - c. that we never deliberately misrepresent or mock their position; and
 - d. that even when we disagree with their expressed opinion, we seek to understanding the heart-felt feelings and passions that lay behind it.

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This is all very hard work. But it’s necessary work. Today, we explore a second question:

II. What can I learn from the person with whom I differ?

You might consider this an exercise in “godly selfishness”. It’s a matter of being so in love with the truth, and so eager to have possession of it, that we are willing to humble ourselves and be taught the truth from any source that we can get it from—even from someone with whom we may differ in many other major areas.

To do this, we need a great deal of help from the Holy Spirit. We must become humble servants of Christ who recognize that He often uses unexpected sources to guide us into a greater grasp of the truths about Himself. We must sincerely want to gain all the benefits we can from any experience we encounter. When we are willing to learn in this way—and demonstrate gratefulness when we receive the truth—we also demonstrate to the person with whom we differ that we really *are* concerned about the truth. This is a matter of integrity.

What sorts of things should we be prepared to learn from such encounters?

A. **That—let’s face it!—the other person might be right and we might be wrong.**

1. This must be applied carefully when it comes to the fundamental truths of the faith. Certain truths are so crucial that the faith would no longer be “the faith” if we abandoned them. This is what Jude 3 is about. No compromise there!

2. But in areas that are *not* fundamental and definitive to the faith, we must be willing (and have the security of our grasp of the truth) to be corrected when wrong. We may have misunderstood the facts that we are arguing; or we may have misrepresented the position of our opponent. We may have been making something “fundamental” to the faith when, in fact, it is not. There also may be personal faults in us that are revealed; such as an unwillingness to let go of an incorrect position out of pride or an undue concern for our reputation.
3. Here’s a test: Can we say to an unbelieving person when we are rightly corrected, “I was mistaken in what I said; and I’m very glad you corrected me. Your having done so is worth its weight in gold to me; because now, I’m just that much closer to the truth. Thank you.” If we can say that, then we are keeping the spirit of Proverbs 15:32; “He who disdains instruction despises his own soul, but he who heeds rebuke gets understanding.”

B. That our position, while not wrong, has failed to properly handle all the facts.

1. Our own personal expression of theology can sometimes be like a “fun-house mirror” in a carnival—enlarging some aspects of truth too much, and not emphasizing other aspects enough. We can deal with “two-sided coin” truths in such a way as to emphasize one side to the complete exclusion of the other. We may even have developed one aspect of our position so much that we left other necessary aspects “half-cooked”.
2. The person with whom we may differ can serve us greatly by helping us see where our ideas are out-of-balance, incomplete, or poorly thought out. Even the strongest believer with the firmest grasp on the truth is fallible, and needs the objectivity of others. As Proverbs 18:17 says, “The first one to plead his cause seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him.”

C. That we had not sufficiently noticed the potential for our position—even though true—to be misunderstood in the way we state it.

1. Consider this statement from the Westminster Confession on a hotly debated point in the history of the church:

“God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.”

2. Look at the underlined portion. That’s the stated position on the matter of God’s sovereignty. But by itself, it has the potential of being misunderstood. Look at the portion that follow after the words “yet . . .” Those words were designed to ward off misunderstanding. And they didn’t simply spring forth the first time the position was stated. They came from the main point being challenged. Those challenges were wisely responded to; and potential misunderstandings were anticipated and dealt with in advance. The person with whom we differ can help us discover these in our own position. (Note how Paul himself does this in Romans 3:5-8; 6:15-16; 7:7, 13).

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If we are careful to contend for the faith with a humble and teachable spirit that is willing to learn, we will do much to win a hearing for the truth from an unbelieving friend.