

General Orders

In the name of him who will be seen coming in the clouds with great power and glory, dear friends in Christ: Concerning that day or that hour, when it will happen, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven – not even the Son himself in his state of humiliation when he had emptied himself of his divine prerogatives and foreknowledge. Having been since exalted to glory, however, he knows *now* when he will return. But *we* still don't. Nor will we until it happens. And so it has been since the time of the Apostles who expected the Lord's imminent return already in their day. It's been that way with every generation of believers since.

We don't know *when*; but Jesus has told us *how* he will come: suddenly. Unexpectedly. Without warning. Life will be going on business as usual and then in the twinkling of an eye this world and everything in it will come to screeching halt. Stop what you're doing. Game over. Put your pencils down. It's Judgment Day.

In view of that, six times in this morning's Gospel Jesus warns us to remain at all times awake and on guard. You don't want that Day to catch you by surprise, unaware and unprepared. The word he uses emphasizes the idea of chasing away sleepiness. And of course he doesn't mean the physical sleep that your body requires; he's talking about spiritual sleepiness and lethargy. It's one of the greatest weapons in our enemy's arsenal: our own tendency to lull ourselves into a false sense of security thinking there's no worry, I've got plenty of time to set things right, I can take care of that later, I'll be more concerned about spiritual matters sometime in the future. Right now I just want to close my eyes and sleep. And many do precisely that. Though once zealous for the truth in Christ that saves through faith, they are currently sound asleep. Don't let it happen to you.

How can you prevent it? By following the general orders. Anyone who has spent any time in the military almost certainly has some experience pulling guard duty. It's monotonous, boring work being the guy who stays up all night while others sleep, watching, waiting, remaining vigilant, ready to defend your post against any threat that may present itself. Soldiers assigned this duty are given three general orders to obey. They are one: I will guard everything within the limits of my post and quit my post only when properly relieved; two: I will obey the special orders and perform all of my duties in a military manner; and three: I will report violations of my special orders, emergencies, and anything not covered in my instructions to the commander of the relief. That's how it works in the military.

In today's Epistle, Jude, our Lord's half-brother, issues the general orders for we who are to be awake and on guard, prepared at all times for our Lord's second coming. There are six of them – twice as many as those given to soldiers on guard duty; but then, we should expect that: the importance of the duty is infinitely higher, and the consequences of being unprepared infinitely more severe. The general orders are:

One: Build yourselves up in your most holy faith. Brace yourselves, because I'm going to say something many don't like to hear, but Jude is saying that your first priority to learn and to understand Christian doctrine. That is, get into God's Word, study it constantly, meditate upon it, and know what you believe and why you believe it. That's how the Holy Spirit builds you up in holy faith. It's also how you learn to recognize and reject false doctrine. This is an ongoing, lifelong process. Sadly, many stop with a barely complete understanding of the Catechism – a

book written to assist parents in teaching their children the basic fundamentals of the faith. For them it's the zenith of their faith building, as good as it ever gets; and then time and forgetfulness wear away that small, unprotected foundation. To stay awake you must keep building, which means that you must keep gladly hearing and learning God's Word.

The second general order is: Pray in the Holy Spirit, that is devote regular time to personal devotions and to prayer. It means to open your heart daily to the Lord and confess your sins, and then gratefully receive and acknowledge his pardon – that for the sake of Christ's innocent suffering and death your sins have been taken away. It also means to pour out your requests to the Lord for yourself and for others, looking to him to provide all good things. And it means to give him heartfelt thanks and praise for the many blessings you have received. To pray in the Holy Spirit means to pray in faith, asking God to give you more of his good Spirit, and to conform your will to his. Many have found that the use of a prayer book helps maintain a steady discipline of prayer, and helps also in leading to a richer prayer life in the variety of things asked of the Lord. On our own, we tend to focus on the same rather narrow things. Another good way to pray in the Spirit is to pray the Psalms since they are prayers inspired by the Holy Spirit himself.

Third general order: Keep yourselves in the love of God. This means to keep yourself where God shows you his love: in the fellowship of the Church and the communion of the saints. This is where we see God's love in action: where we hear his words of absolution and we experience firsthand his Word. It's where we see God's love in the Sacraments: the washing and rebirth of Baptism, and the body and blood of our Savior given under bread and wine for us to eat and drink. That's how the Lord fills us with his love so that it will overflow to others. And filled with his love, we go forth led by his Spirit to serve others in our various vocations.

The fourth general order: Be merciful to those who doubt. Here St. Jude refers to fellow Christians who show signs of having weak or immature faith. There is a tendency for more mature Christians to look down on or think less of those who are struggling, who frequently stumble into sin, or who otherwise show that their faith is not strong. This is a dangerous trap because it only shows that the more mature Christians are not as strong in the Lord as they think they are. Instead of looking down on a weaker brother or sister in Christ, they should be merciful, extending a helping hand, bringing the counsel and wisdom of the Lord that they possess, encouraging, and praying for the one who is weak. We are all in this together, and we do not want to divide the body of Christ into "Super Christians" and "Marginal Christians". We are family in the Lord. And in a family the stronger protect and care for the weak.

Fifth general order: Save others by snatching them out of the fire. This is to be our posture toward those who are not of the family of faith. And there's no mistaking what Jude means here: those who are outside of the fellowship of Christ's Church will be condemned and burn forever in the fires of hell. We are to make it our goal to prevent that if possible. We are to seek opportunities to share the saving truth whenever and however we can. And if the problem is "I don't know what to say", then make it your goal to find out. Or at least bring that person with whom you are trying to share the Gospel to someone who does know what to say. As I said last week, most non-believers come to Christ's saving truth because someone close to them simply invited them to come to church.

And finally, the sixth general order: To others show mercy mixed with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh. This is to be our attitude toward those who are outside the household of faith when there is not a clear opportunity to share the saving Gospel. We are to

show them God's love without compromising God's Law. We are never to create the impression that we condone sinful behavior, or that forgiveness and life are granted by God apart from repentance and faith in the Gospel. We are instead to treat such people with kindness, understanding that they are spiritually blind and so "do not know what they are doing". We do this praying that their eyes may be opened to the truth, all the while modeling Christ-like behavior that when they see, will convict them of their sin by contrast.

Those are our general orders. Taking them all together, and adding to them the specific tasks we've been assigned, we've got plenty to keep us busy until the Lord appears in his glory. If we take these orders seriously, as we should, we will find that there is precious little time available for drifting off into spiritual slumber. For the times we have done so, we ask the Lord's forgiveness. And receiving his grace and pardon, he will strengthen us with the Holy Spirit to keep us wide awake. And so doing, he will keep us from stumbling in order to present us blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy. We eagerly look forward to that Day when there will be to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!