

Beware Doctrine Without Devotion

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Date: 18 February 2018

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[0 : 00] Well, do please turn your Bibles to Revelation and to Revelation chapter 2. If you're using one of the blue visitor Bibles, that's page 1028, Revelation chapter 2.

And last week we were in chapter 1 of Revelation, which, as we read, is a letter. It's a letter to the seven churches in Asia. And in chapters 2 and 3 we have, if you like, letters within the letter. So there are seven letters here in chapters 2 and 3. And tonight we're looking at the first one to Ephesus. So chapter 2 and verses 1 to 7. To the angel of the church in Ephesus writes, The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.

I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

[1 : 31] Remember, therefore, from where you have fallen. Repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Yet this you have. You hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear lets him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

To the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us this evening. Well, please do have Revelation chapter 2 open there in front of you.

And we'll be looking at these opening verses together of this letter to Ephesus. Revelation 2. Now, what do you think about your church?

[2 : 42] What is your assessment of it? You may think that the buildings are lovely, really nice people. You have your views on the heating levels, don't we all?

The music is not quite to your taste, but the coffee is excellent. Now, our assessments of church are often pretty trivial and superficial, aren't they?

Which is not to say that some of those things don't matter. The heating is important. But how often do we really think about serious issues? Issues of eternal consequence?

And even if we do think about those things from time to time, often it's just from our own personal viewpoint, isn't it? A far better question. A question that we must ask is, what does Jesus think about the church?

What does he think about our church, this church? What is his assessment? And that is a question that this passage answers.

[3 : 46] These couple of chapters, as I've said, are Jesus' assessment of his church. As we saw from chapter 1, Jesus walks amongst his churches, tending to them, speaking to them.

He knows them. He knows what is really true about his churches because he is in the midst of them. He's tending to them all the time. He knows them.

And in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, we have these seven letters. And each one is addressed to specific churches in what we now call Turkey. And they're addressed in the way that you might deliver them as you go around from Ephesus right the way around.

And whilst these letters do address real issues in those churches in the first century, they would have been read by all seven churches. And indeed, each of the seven letters ends with the same refrain.

You see it there in verse 7 of our letter this evening. It says, He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[4 : 57] That's plural, churches. So each of these letters was more widely applicable than just the one it was written to. But not only were these letters for all seven churches, they are also of universal application.

The very fact there are seven is significant. Number seven signifies completeness and wholeness. And so these letters are applicable and of great value to the universal church throughout this age that we live in.

What Jesus says to these specific churches is of relevance to all of the church and in every age. And that is not to say that what Jesus says is true of every individual church at all times.

He's not saying that. But what Jesus says in this first letter to the church in Ephesus will be true of some churches in the world today. It may even be true of our church.

And if it's not true today, then it might be five years down the line or ten years down the line. So let's look at this first letter, the letter to the church in Ephesus, where we find Jesus' assessment of it.

[6 : 12] And three points this evening. First, Jesus knows his church toils for true teaching. Second point, Jesus warns his church that doctrine without devotion leads to death.

And thirdly, Jesus tells his church that the remedy is to remember and repent. So first, look in particular verses one to three and verse six.

Jesus knows his church toils for true teaching. And we see here that no good work goes unnoticed. Jesus knows his church because he's in the midst of it.

He sees everything they do, verse two. And that is picking up an aspect from that breathtaking vision of Jesus we saw in chapter one. And here in the letter to the church in Ephesus, it begins with these words about Jesus walking in the midst of the lampstands.

I know your works, says Jesus. Jesus knows the truth about the church. And so he can say with the utmost authority those words we read there in verse two.

[7 : 24] I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance. Now, wouldn't those words have been such a great encouragement to the church there in Ephesus?

Ephesus was a tough place to be a Christian. Ephesus was that great, impressive city. On several major trade routes, it was prosperous.

But it was also a city steeped in pagan religion. And it was home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the great temple of Artemis, which dominated both the skyline and the religious life of the city.

To be a Christian there in Ephesus was tough going. But they have been faithful. That is clear, isn't it, with these words from the Lord.

And they're tender words, aren't they, full of warmth. He assures them that he has seen their works, their toil, their patient endurance, their refusal to tolerate evil, and especially false apostles.

[8 : 33] And they're doing it for the sake of the Lord Jesus. Look at verse three. They patiently endure all this for Jesus' sake. Look on to verse six, where we see that they hate the work of the Nicolaitans.

Not entirely sure who they were or what precisely they believed, but they perhaps were a group who encouraged a bit of dabbling in the pagan religions. Occasional attendance at the temple of Artemis.

A toleration of the sins of the city, perhaps. But the church there in Ephesus would not tolerate the untruth that the Nicolaitans were peddling. They challenged it.

They hated it. They distanced themselves from it. The church in Ephesus toiled for the truth. And that is something to be commended.

And the Lord Jesus commends them for it. You see, they held to the exclusive truth that Jesus is Lord. There is only one God in heaven above.

[9 : 35] And they were willing to say that salvation was not merely through Christ, but to be found only through Christ. How relevant is that?

The liberal media won't mind you talking about Christianity and Jesus, so long as it's presented as an option, as a way, as a truth.

But claim that it's the only option, as the only way, the only truth, well, you'll be showing the door, won't you? You see, those who toil for the truth know that Jesus knows.

He sees. He sees those small stands for truth as you take, as an individual, perhaps, in the office, or in the staff room, or over coffee with a friend.

Jesus knows. He sees your willingness to toil for the truth. And that ought to be a great encouragement for many today, shouldn't it? Particularly here in Scotland.

[10:41] Many churches, many Christians, have taken a bold stand against a national church that has departed from the truth. Many have been willing to take a painful stand, a costly stand.

But know that Jesus sees that. The church that toils for true teaching will have to pay the price in this world. It may cost prestige.

It may cost certain privileges. It may cost partnerships. It may cost pounds. It may cost property. And for many, it has cost those very things.

Prestige, gone. Privileges, gone. Partnerships, gone. Pounds, gone. Property, gone. But Jesus knows.

Jesus sees. He sees your willingness to stand for the truth. He sees your patient endurance. He sees your refusal to grow weary. He sees your willingness to insert that little word, only.

[11:48] Only through Jesus is salvation found. There is only one God. He sees that. And his opinion is the only one that matters, isn't it?

The one who will judge all things at the end of history. His opinion then, that's the only one we'll care about. His opinion is the only one that matters.

Jesus knows his church when it toils for true teaching. He sees that in Ephesus. He commends them. But that is not all, is it?

There is a very serious and sober warning. And this is our second point. Jesus warns his church that doctrine without devotion, it leads to death.

That's verses four and five. We see here that no sin goes unseen or ignored. Lampstands need a lot of tending and care if they're to remain a light.

[12:56] I don't know for personal experience, but I think that's the case. If you want a lampstand to shine brightly or even your fire at home, you must tend it. And that was the priest's job back in the Old Testament days, keeping the lampstands lit in the temple, shining bright.

And constant attendance was needed to do that. And the Lord Jesus likewise, as we've seen, tends his lampstands, his churches. He does what he needs to do to keep them shining bright.

And that means, as he cares for his church, he doesn't merely commend what is good, but he also corrects what is wrong. Just look down again at verse four.

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

Jesus puts his finger on the issue. Yes, this is a church that loves doctrine. It's been willing to stand for the truth, to endure hardship for the sake of the truth.

[14:01] But it is a church lacking in devotion, in love. It loves doctrine. But does it love the Lord? And notice where it will lead to, if unchecked.

Look at the end of verse five. A failure to repent will lead to Jesus coming and removing the lampstand from its place. In other words, there is a very real prospect that if this church continues in this way, it will cease to be a church.

It will end. It will die. That is what the removal of the lampstand means. Jesus is not speaking here about his return at the end of the age. He's not talking about a second coming, but he is rather talking about his temporal judgment in this age.

Churches that drift from him, he will end. The light will be snuffed out. They will cease to be.

So these words are no mere suggestion. They're not kindly advice. The warning is far, far stronger than that, isn't it? Far more serious. But what could that mean?

[15:18] What does it mean to have abandoned the love that you had at first? Well, it must mean, mustn't it, that the church had abandoned its real love for the Lord Jesus, first and foremost, but also for others, for people, both internally within the church and also externally.

Their love had cooled first towards the Lord, but also on the horizontal plane. unless, unless we think about this, not be too quick to individualize this rebuke, this is a letter addressed corporately. This is a corporate sin there in the life of the church in Ephesus. The church, together, had abandoned the love it had at first.

In its zeal for truth and doctrinal purity, it lost sight of the goal of doctrine, namely, of right relationship with our creator, with one another, and to the watching world, to those who do not know him.

Truth is not an end in itself. It is rather to lead us to the God of truth. It is to lead us to love him and serve him and serve others.

[16:34] Now, Jesus is not, he's not rebuking them for their zeal for truth, not at all. He's not saying that concern for truth will always lead to becoming cold and unloving, no.

But that is certainly a possibility. It must be why the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians warns this way. He says, if I have prophetic powers and understand all mystery and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to move mountains, but have not love, I'm nothing.

Paul saw the danger. There can be a love of doctrine that actually excludes a love for the Lord. And we can all think, I'm sure, of individuals and churches who are so intent on right doctrine that almost no one meets their high theological standards of doctrinal purity.

It's a total lack of real humanity and love. And you know it when you see it. And that seems to be the situation here in Ephesus. In their fight for truth, they've become an unloving church.

Now, is that true of our church, we must ask? Has concern for truth pushed out real love for the Lord? Has a particular articulation of the truth become the thing for us such that we look down on those who don't quite get it?

[18:05] They're not really Christians. They don't quite get where I'm at here. Have we set such a high bar of doctrinal orthodoxy that genuine believers fail to pass the test?

They don't quite articulate their faith in quite the right way that we deem sound and satisfactory. They don't use the right evangelical jargon. Do we subconsciously have our bar of entry into the church higher than that of the Lord Jesus?

You see, it's not about using the right evangelical language or using the right formulas. Plenty of religious Pharisees had that, didn't they? But they hated Jesus.

They hated him. But blind beggars got up and followed, wanted to be with him, loved him, wanted to be amongst his people. That's what matters.

That's real faith. Has love for the lost been trampled by concern for doctrinal correctness?

[19:09] Has the church or an individual retained the outer framework of a living testimony when in fact the heart of it has died?

Yes, the work goes on, but it's no longer a work of faith. The labor goes on tirelessly, but it's no longer a labor of love.

The Lord Jesus exposed the sins of the church at Ephesus. And do we dare pray that he would expose ours?

No doubt they thought they were going well. We're fighting for the truth. We're patiently enduring. But Jesus saw more then and he sees more today.

He asked them and us, do you love me? Do you love me? That was the question the Lord Jesus put to Simon Peter, wasn't it?

[20:10] After his denial. The Lord Jesus put his finger on the issue and asked, do you love me more than these? And so he asks you today, all of us, do you love me?

He sees everything. No sin goes unseen or ignored. And it's a strong rebuke, isn't it? But his rebuke is not a hopeless rebuke.

It is a rebuke to bring about repentance. Remember that Jesus tends his churches so that they'll keep a light, keep shining forth in the midst of darkness.

and so our final point. Jesus tells his church that the remedy is to remember and repent. Verses 5 and 7.

Look down at verse 5. Jesus says to his church, remember therefore from where you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first.

[21:20] Jesus is calling them to something that is doable. They've done it in the past. Did you notice that? They had a love which they've abandoned.

And so the call is to remember those days. Do the works of love you did back then. Remember why you first loved Christ. to call to repent.

That is to acknowledge to see themselves for what they really are. To acknowledge their sinful lack of love. To confess it before the Lord. To seek his forgiveness.

And so receive his forgiveness. And then do the works they did at first. So it's not an unachievable unattainable standard that Jesus is calling the church to.

No, it's not. And perhaps as we read verse four it really grabbed you by the scruff of the neck.

[22:18] Perhaps you found yourself really worried and shaken up by that verse. Well know that if that's you you are not in a hopeless position.

Let your grief bring you to repentance. Let it be a godly grief and not a worldly one. A worldly grief leads to tears and tears alone. But godly grief well it hears God's call to repentance and knows that he's gracious and that all who call out for mercy he will not turn away.

so the lord lord lord lord lord lord Jesus appeals to them to you to remember to repent and to return he calls them to return and this is wonderfully down to earth and pragmatic isn't it that that is one way we show love for the lord how we love each other take one example of showing love to one another

I wonder what sorts of things you talk about with one another after the service a loving church will be one where those conversations cover deeper matters of course you might well talk about the rugby or upcoming holidays but if you never ask each other searching questions you must wonder if there is a love issue at root if you are never concerned enough to ask someone how their marriage is really going if you are never concerned to ask why someone has been absent for a few weeks from church if you are never concerned to ask how someone is getting on in that difficult situation at work if you are never concerned enough to ask how someone love for the Lord is if you are never concerned enough to ask those deeper questions then you need to ask yourself at the end of service do you talk about the wonderfully doctrinally correct teaching from the pulpit or do you talk about the

Lord Jesus whose doctrine it is do you talk about the great plans and programs of the church or do you talk about the Lord Jesus and your love for him you see our words so often betray our hearts don't they return to the love you had at first that is Jesus call in this letter and this return to real love for the Lord for one another is what in verse seven conquering looks like for this particular church that is the constant appeal in all these seven letters he appeals them to conquer to overcome and that will look different in each of the next six churches that we consider as we go on conquering doesn't always look the same but for this church the church in Ephesus this was the issue and for them to tackle it for us to tackle it is the path to great blessing look at what

[26 : 31] Jesus says what he promises there in verse seven to the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God Jesus wants his church to enjoy eternal life not death that is what he wants for his church and so he calls us to simple faith to obey his commands to remain faithful and persevere to return to a love we perhaps abandoned return so that we will receive by faith the promise of life eternal Jesus knows his church he knew the church in Ephesus he knows every church in the world today he knows this church he walks in their midst he tends them so that they will endure and receive the full blessings of being with God for all eternity no good work goes unnoticed no toiling for the truth goes unnoticed but no sin is unseen but no repentance will be wasted don't let a love for doctrine push out love for the

Lord doctrine without devotion will lead to death in the life of the church so ask the Lord Jesus to help you all of us to love him as we ought that is a prayer he will answer we ask him to help us to love him be thou my vision oh Lord of my heart that is our prayer isn't it maybe our prayer as a church and each of yours individually so let's ask Chris help now let's pray our father god you know your church you know your people you see right into our hearts you see into the heart of this church you see into my hearts every one of our hearts and

Lord where we are to be encouraged in our stands for the truth would you encourage our hearts but Lord where perhaps we've cooled in our love for you Lord help us to love you help us to return to the love we had at first that we might love you with all of our hearts and serve you with great joy and gladness help us to that end for we ask it in Jesus name Amen