

Beware Doctrine Without Devotion

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Date: 14 February 2018

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[0 : 0 0] Good afternoon. Please do grab a seat and welcome to our Wednesday lunchtime service here. On a rather cold, wintry day, isn't it? It's not very nice out there, but well done for getting along.

Good, well, we're in the book of Revelation, and it'd be great if you could turn to Revelation chapter 2, and you'll find that on page 1028, if you're using one of the blue Bibles there.

Revelation chapter 2, and we're looking at verses 1 to 7. Now, before I read that, I'm going to pray, and then we'll read that together.

So let's pray, shall we, to our Father. Through the prophet Malachi, the Lord spoke these words to his people.

I have loved you, says the Lord. Father, we praise you for your abundant goodness and grace and mercy and love that you have shown to us, your people.

[1 : 0 7] You abound in steadfast love, and you have demonstrated again and again to a foolish and stubborn people your faithfulness.

How we thank you and praise you for all your grace. And so we ask that this afternoon you would shine the light of your truth on our hearts, on our minds.

He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. So help us now to listen to your word, to respond with glad obedience.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Revelation chapter 2, and we're reading from verse 1. To the angel of the church in Ephesus write, 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.

[2 : 2 4] 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.

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, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

To the one who conquers, I will grant to eat the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. Amen.

This is the Lord's word. Now, what do you think about your church? What is your assessment of it?

[3 : 36] You may think that the building is lovely, really nice people. You have your views on the heating level, don't we all? The music is not quite to your taste, but they do coffee very well.

Now, our assessments are often trivial like that, aren't they? They're superficial. Which is not to say that those things don't matter, that he thinks it's important. But how often do we think deeply about serious issues, issues of eternal consequence about our churches?

And even if we do consider those things, it is often just from our own personal point of view, our own personal preferences. A far better question, a question we must ask, is what does Jesus think about the church, about our church, about your church?

What is his assessment? And that is the question that this passage answers. These couple of chapters in Revelation, chapters two and three, they are Jesus' assessment of his church.

As we saw last week from chapter one, he walks amongst his churches, tending to them, speaking to them. He knows them. He knows what is really true about his churches, because he's in the midst of them.

[4 : 58] He is tending to them all the time. He knows them. And in these chapters two and three, we have seven letters, and each one is addressed to specific churches in what we now call Turkey.

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

Just look down in verse six, sorry, verse seven, and this refrain is repeated. He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Notice that's plural, churches. So all of these letters would have been read by all those churches. And not only were these letters for all the seven churches, they're also of universal application.

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

[6 : 08] So what Jesus says to these specific churches is a relevance to all of the church and in every age. Which is not to say that what Jesus says is true of every individual church all the time.

No. But what Jesus does say in the first letter to the church of Ephesus will be true of some churches today in the world. It may even be true of our church.

And if not, then it may be down the line. Maybe years from now, these words might prove true in our church. So let's look then at this first letter, the letter to the church in Ephesus.

So three things. Firstly, Jesus knows his church toils for true teaching. So that's 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 his church. He sees everything that they do.

[7 : 18] Verse two, I know your works. Jesus knows the truth about his church. And each of these letters begins with an aspect of that breathtaking vision of the Lord Jesus from chapter one.

And here in the letter to the church in Ephesus, it begins with those words about Jesus being in the midst of his lampstands. And so he can say with the utmost authority, I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance.

And wouldn't these words have been such an encouragement to the church there in Ephesus? Great encouragement because they had a hard time of it as Christians there.

Ephesus was a very impressive city. It lay on several major trade routes. It was prosperous. But it was also a city steeped in pagan religion. It was home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the temple of Artemis.

It dominated both the skyline and the religious life of the city. To be a Christian then in Ephesus would have been tough. But look, they have been faithful.

[8 : 35] That is clear, isn't it, with these words from the Lord Jesus. And they are 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, especially false prophets.

And they are doing it for the sake of Jesus. Look at verse 3. They patiently endure all of this for Jesus' sake.

And look on to verse 6, where we see that they hate the work of the Nicolaitans. I'm not entirely sure who they were, what they precisely believed, but they perhaps were a group who encouraged a bit of dabbling in the pagan religions, occasional attendance at the Temple of Artemis, and the toleration of the sins of the city.

But the church there in Ephesus would not tolerate the untruth that the Nicolaitans were peddling. They wouldn't stand it. They challenged it. They hated it. They distanced themselves from it.

They toiled for the truth, and that is something to be commended, and the Lord Jesus commands them for it. They held to the exclusive truth that Jesus is Lord.

[9 : 52] There is only one God in heaven. They were willing to say that salvation was not merely through Jesus 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 make the claim that it's the only option, the only way, the only truth. Well, you'll be shown the door, won't you? You see, those who toil for the truth know that Jesus knows.

He sees. And that ought to be a great encouragement to many today, particularly here in Scotland. 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 for that costly stand. But know that Jesus sees that. The church that toils for true teaching will have to pay the price in this world, won't it, sometimes?

[11 : 05] It may cost prestige. It may cost certain privileges. It may cost partnerships. It may cost pounds and property.

And for many, it has cost those very things. Prestige, gone. Privileges, gone. Partnerships, gone.

Pounds, gone. Property, gone. But Jesus knows. 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. Only Jesus.

Only through whom is salvation found. There is only one God. He sees that. And his opinion is the only one that really matters.

[12 : 04] Jesus knows when his church toils for true teaching. He saw it in Ephesus. He commends them. But that is not all.

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

Verses 4 and 5. We see here that no sin is ignored or unseen. Lampstands need a lot of tending, so I'm told.

I've never tended a lampstand, but I think they did a lot of tending, if they are to remain a light. Now that was the priest's job back in the Old Testament days, keeping the lampstands in the temple lit, shining bright.

And constant tending is required for that. And that is what the Lord Jesus is doing as he tends his lampstands, the churches. He does what he needs to do to keep them shining.

[13 : 07] And that means that as he cares for his church, he doesn't merely commend what is good, but he also corrects what is wrong. Look at verse 4.

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love that you had at first. Jesus identifies 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 truth, but it is a church lacking in devotion, in love.

It loves doctrine, but does it love the Lord? And notice where this will lead to if unchecked.

Look at the end of verse 5. 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 the church continues in this way, it will cease to be a church.

[14 : 14] It will die. That is what removal of the lampstand means. So these words here in verse 4 are no mere suggestion. This is not kindly advice.

This is a warning far, far more serious than that. But what could it mean? What does it mean to abandon 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 Christ first and foremost, but also love for others, for people both within the church and outside the church.

Now let's not be too quick either to individualize this rebuke. This is a letter addressed corporately. This is for a church. This is a corporate sin.

The church in Ephesus as a body had abandoned the love it had at first. In its zeal for truth and doctrinal purity, it lost sight of the goal of doctrine, which is namely a right relationship with our Creator.

[15 : 24] with one another as witnesses to those outside. That is what doctrine is for. Truth is not an end in itself. It is rather to lead us to the God of truth.

And it's to lead us to love Him, to serve Him, to serve others. Now Jesus is not, He is not rebuking them for their zeal for truth, not at all.

He's not saying that concern for truth will always lead to us becoming cold and unloving. No, He's not saying that. But that is possible. This must be why the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians warns, if I have prophetic powers and understand all mystery and all knowledge, and if I have faith so far as to remove mountains but have not love, I'm nothing.

Now we can all think, I'm sure, of individuals and churches who are so intent on right doctrine that almost no one meets the theological standards of doctrinal purity.

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

[16 : 50] Now is that true of our church? Of your church? Has concern for truth pushed out real love for the Lord Jesus?

Has love for the lost been trampled by concern for doctrinal correctness? Has the church or an individual retained the outer framework of a living testimony when the heart has died?

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

Yes, the patience is still there, but it's no longer the patience of hope. The Lord Jesus exposed the sin of the church at Ephesus.

And do we dare pray that he would expose ours? No doubt, the church there thought they were going well. We're fighting for the truth.

[17 : 57] 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? Do you love me? That was the question the Lord Jesus put to Simon Peter, wasn't it? After his denial of Jesus. The Lord Jesus puts his finger on the central issue.

He asked, do you love me more than these? And so he asks you today, do you love me? Do you love me?

He sees everything. No sin goes unseen or ignored. But Jesus' rebuke is not a hopeless rebuke.

It is a rebuke to bring about repentance. He tends his churches so that they'll keep a light, keep shining forth in the midst of darkness. And so our final point, we see that Jesus tells his church that the remedy is to remember and repent.

[19 : 09] We see here that no repentance is wasted. Look down at me at verse 5. Jesus says to his church, remember therefore from where you've fallen. Repent and do the works you did at first.

You see, 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 now abandoned.

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

Now, perhaps to you, that was a long time ago. Remember. Remember the love you first had for him. But it's also a call to repent as well as remember.

It's a call to repent, that is, to acknowledge. To see ourselves what we really are, to acknowledge a sinful lack of love and to confess it before the Lord, to seek his forgiveness and then to receive that forgiveness and then do the works they did at first.

[20 : 19] So it's not an unachievable, unattainable standard that Jesus is calling the church to. He appeals to them to remember, to repent and to return.

Cause them to return. That's wonderfully down to earth, isn't it? Some pragmatic. The key to rekindling the love that's been lost is not to whip up some sort of emotional response or vague, ethereal, lovey feeling.

No. Rather, it's to do the work she did at first. It's to live an obedient life. That is how we love the Lord, to love those around you in the church, serving them, doing them good, showing genuine concern for their spiritual well-being, showing hospitality.

That is what it means to love the Lord. It means to hear his word, to obey it, to love him, to love those around you. Take one example of showing love to one another.

I wonder what sort of words you speak to one another after a service. You can show love in how you do that. So a loving church would be one where those conversations cover deeper matters.

[21 : 34] Of course, you'll talk about rugby or the upcoming holidays and all that, but if you never ask each other searching questions, you must wonder if there's a real love issue at the root.

If you're never concerned enough to ask how someone's marriage is really going. If you're never concerned enough to ask why someone's been absent from church from a few Wednesdays or a few Sundays, if you're never concerned enough to ask how someone's getting on with their difficult situation at work, if you're never concerned to ask someone how their love for the Lord is, if you're never concerned to ask those deeper questions, then you'll need to ask yourself, am I really loving my brothers and sisters in the church?

Have I abandoned my love from it first? Do you talk about the wonderful doctrinally correct teaching from the pulpit? Or, do you talk about the Lord Jesus whose doctrine it is?

Do you talk about the great programs and plans of the church? Or do you talk about the Lord Jesus for who it's all for? You see, our words often betray our hearts.

What words do you use? Return to the love you had at first. Return. And this return to real love for the Lord and for one another is what, in verse 7, conquering looks like for this particular church.

[23 : 14] It will look different for each of the next six churches in these chapters, but for the church in Ephesus, this was the issue. And for them to tackle it, for us to tackle it if it's the case for us, that is the path to great blessing.

Look at what Jesus says, what he promises. 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, believers must obey Jesus' commands. They must remain faithful and persevere if they are to receive the promise of eternal life.

Jesus knows his churches. He walks in their midst. He tends to them so that they'll endure and receive the full blessings of being with God for all eternity.

That is why Jesus spoke these words to that church. He wanted them to return, to love him. So know that Jesus sees and knows his church.

[24 : 27] No good work is unnoticed. He won't fail to see your love and concern for the truth. But also know that no sin is unseen. He sees right into our hearts.

But no repentance is wasted. Don't let 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 to help you.

All of us ask him to help us to love him as we ought. He will answer that prayer as we cry out to him be thou my vision O Lord of my heart.

So let's ask for his help now shall we and pray. Our Father you see to the very heart of your church.

[25 : 41] You see to the heart of each one of us here. And Lord help us to respond to your word to us this afternoon. Help us to be encouraged when we've taken a stand for the truth.

But Lord help us also to repent if you have put your finger on a lack of love. A love abandoned. A love that we had at first. And so help us if that's the case to turn again.

And please help us to love you. To love you and to love one another. For we ask it for your sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.