

Ephesus -- A Church Dangerously Complacent

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 May 2023

Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 0 0] Well, we have begun a new study in the mornings. Paul Brennan is preaching on the book of Revelation. So we're going to turn there now and we're going to read together from Revelation chapter 2.

We're going to be focusing particularly on the first section, the letter to the church in Ephesus. But we're going to read the whole of chapter 2. And in this next couple of weeks, we'll be looking at the rest of chapter 2 and chapter 3.

The letters to these representative seven churches, the churches of Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. So having been confronted with a vision of the glory of the risen Lord Jesus Christ that we read of last time in chapter 1.

John now hears the words spoken to him of these messages that he's to bring to the church.

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write, The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

[1 : 1 2] 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.

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 of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. And to the angel in the church in Smyrna write, The words of the first and the last who died and came to life.

[2 : 3 0] I know your tribulation and your poverty. But you are rich. And the slander of those who say that they're Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. The devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested. And for ten days you will have tribulation.

Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who is an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum, write the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is.

Yet you hold fast my name, and did not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

[3 : 34] But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols, and practice sexual immorality.

So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon, and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone with a new name written on the stone, and no one knows except the one who receives it.

And to the angel of the church in Thyatira, write the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your works, your love, and faith, and service, and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.

But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman, Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality, and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

[5 : 02] I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her, I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works.

And I will strike her children dead, and all the churches will know that I am He, who searches mind and heart. And I will give to each of you, as your works deserve.

But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden, only hold fast what you have, until I come.

The one who conquers, and keeps my works until the end. To Him I will give authority over nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earth and pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father.

And I will give Him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[6 : 25] Amen. And may God bless to us His Word. Well, good morning folks. Please do have that chapter that was read earlier open in front of you, especially those first few verses.

Chapter 2, Revelation, and verses 1 to 7. And that's going to be our focus this morning. Now, what do you think about the church?

What is your assessment of the church, of our church? How do you go about thinking about it? How do you assess how the church is going?

You might think the buildings are very nice. You will have your views about other folk in the church. You have certainly views on the heating levels. They're important. For instance, you'll have your views about the music and the coffee.

Often our assessments of the church are pretty trivial and superficial. Which isn't to say those things don't matter. They do. The heating does matter. The coffee matters.

[7 : 33] But how often do we think about the deeper issues? How often do we think about serious matters of eternal consequence? A far better question, a question we must ask, is what does Jesus think about the church?

What is Jesus' assessment of our church, of the Tron church? What is his assessment? Well, in these couple of chapters of Revelation, we see Jesus' assessment of his church.

As we saw last week in chapter 1, he walks amongst his churches. He is tending to them, speaking to them. He knows them. He knows what is really true about his church is because he is in the midst of them.

He is tending to them all the time. Jesus knows the church. And in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation here, we have seven letters to seven churches.

And they're addressed to very particular churches, which we now would call Turkey. These are all located in Turkey. And whilst these letters do address real issues in those churches in the first century, they would have been read by all the churches in Asia at the time, not just these seven ones that were named.

[8 : 54] There were many more churches than that. In Asia. And they would have been read at all the churches. And each of them ends with the same refrain.

He who has an ear to hear, lets him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. That is plural, churches. So, these letters were not just for the seven churches then.

They were written more broadly to the churches in existence at the time. And they're also of universal application. The number seven signifies completeness and wholeness.

And so these letters, they are applicable and of great value to the universal church throughout the age that we're currently in. The latter days, which stretches from Christ's ascension to his return.

And what Jesus says to these seven specific churches is of relevance to all churches in every age. They are of enduring relevance.

[10 : 04] Which is not to say that what Jesus says here is true of every single individual church all the time. That's not the case. But what Jesus says in this first letter to Ephesus, it will be true of perhaps many churches today.

It may even be true of our church today. And if not today, then it may be true soon. This might be a very relevant letter in a few years' time, or 10 years' time, or 20 years' time.

Now, we're not going to work through each of these seven letters week by week. Rather, we're going to take something of an overview to get an overview of the issues. And the letters fall into roughly three groups.

The first and the seventh. So that's the letter to Ephesus here and the one to Laodicea, end of chapter three. Those letters are written to churches in very serious danger.

In both cases, real warnings are given to the churches. The Lord Jesus warns if they do not repent, He will judge them. The middle three churches, Pergamon, Thyatira, and Sardis, have in the main remained faithful.

[11 : 20] But they're in real danger of compromise with the surrounding culture. Only the second and sick letters have proven themselves faithful, Smyrna, and Philadelphia.

But they're facing real persecution. They're facing tough times. Ephesus is theologically, morally sound, but deficient in love.

Smyrna is vibrant, but fearful. Pergamon is witnessing, but undiscerning. Thyatira is loving, but over-tolerant.

Sardis is impressive on the outside, but dead on the inside. Philadelphia is struggling, but strong. Laodicea is affluent, but apathetic.

So I'm going to take these in roughly three groups. The church complacent, the church committed, and the church compromised. And first this morning, the church complacent.

[12 : 21] And we're focusing particularly on that first letter to Ephesus. And this is Jesus' assessment of the church in Ephesus. And we're going to see three things this morning.

First, Jesus knows that his church toils for true teaching. Jesus knows his church toils for true teaching.

And we see here that no good work goes unnoticed. Jesus sees. So looking at verses one to three particularly, and also verse six.

Jesus knows his church because he's in the midst of it. He sees everything they do. Verse two. I know your works, your toil, your patience. He knows the church.

And that's picking up an aspect from the breathtaking vision of chapter one. Here in the letter to the church in Ephesus, it begins with those words about Jesus walking in the midst of his lampstands.

[13 : 22] Verse one. And as we saw last week, those lampstands represent the churches. Jesus is in the midst. He knows his church.

And because he knows his church, he can say with the utmost authority in verse two, I know your works. I know your toil, your patient endurance. And those words would have been great encouragement to the church there in Ephesus, which was a tough place to be a Christian.

Ephesus was a great and impressive city. It was on several major trade routes. It was prosperous. It was a wealthy city.

But it was also a city that was steeped in pagan religion. It was home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the great temple to Artemis.

It dominated the skyline and it dominated the religious life of the city. That was right there in the center, this huge temple. to be a Christian then in Ephesus would have been very tough.

[14 : 32] Not an easy place to be a Christian. But Jesus knows and he knows they've been faithful. That's clear, isn't it, with these words from the Lord Jesus. They are tender words, full of warmth.

I know your works. I know your toil, your patient endurance, how you cannot bear with those who are evil. He assures them that yes, I have seen your works.

And they're doing it for the sake of Jesus, verse 3. They patiently endure all this for Jesus' sake, verse 3. Look on to verse 6.

We see they hate the works of the Nicolaitans. Not quite sure who they are. Or what they particularly 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. But the church there in Ephesus would not tolerate the untruth the Nicolaitans were peddling.

[15 : 43] Whatever that was, they weren't going with it. They were standing firm. They challenged it. They hated it. They distanced themselves from it. They toiled for the truth.

And that is something that to be commended by the Lord Jesus. He commends them for their stand on truth. They held to the exclusive truth that Jesus is Lord.

There is only one God in heaven. They were willing to say that salvation was not merely through Jesus, but only through Jesus. only in Christ.

We're not going with what the Nicolaitans are saying. We're standing apart from them. We are toiling for the truth. We make a stand on what is right.

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

[16 : 44] The world will not have a problem with that. But claim that Jesus is the only option, the only way, the only truth, and you'll be showing the door, won't you?

You can't say that. You can't say Jesus is the only way. And so those who toil for the truth know that Jesus knows.

He sees. He sees the small stands you take for him. He sees that when you stand firm for him in the office, the staff room, over coffee with a friend, Jesus knows.

And that ought to be a great encouragement for many today, particularly here in Scotland. Many churches, many Christians have taken a bold stand for the truth and it's been costly.

Many have been willing to take a painful stand, a costly stand, but know that Jesus sees. Know that Jesus knows. The church that toils for true teaching will have to pay the price in this world.

[17 : 57] 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 is gone. Privilege is gone. Partnerships gone. Pounds gone. Property gone. But Jesus knows. He sees your willingness to stand for the truth.

He sees your patience, endurance. He sees your refusal to grow weary. He sees your willingness to insert that little word, only. Only in Jesus.

Only through him is salvation found. There is only one God. Only. And Jesus sees that. And his opinion in the end is the only one that matters.

He sees your stand for truth. Jesus knows that his church toils for true teaching. He saw it in Ephesus. He commends them.

[19 : 01] And he sees it today. Wherever the church stands for truth, he sees it. And so Jesus does not tell them to be less of what they are in order to become more of what they are not.

So we'll see in a minute Jesus does rebuke them, but he doesn't say become less standing on the truth. He doesn't say tone that down. He doesn't say that, does he? That's often how it works in our day.

People will look at a conservative church and they'll say the issue is their doctrine. It's their morality. They're standing on this. They're refusing to budge. That's the problem.

That's what's getting in the way of growth and remaining relevant. But Jesus does not say that their stand for the truth is getting in the way. He says, well done, church in Ephesus.

That is exactly what I want to see. I know you're working hard. I know you don't tolerate wickedness. I know you're a discerning people. You're theologically sound. You're ethically sound.

[20 : 07] Keep on with that. He does not chide them for their strengths. He doesn't say that doctrine is the problem. He doesn't say that their morality is the problem. He doesn't say hard work is the problem.

He says, I commend you genuinely. These things are great. I commend you. I see it. However, these exemplary things, Jesus says, are not the only thing that matter in the church.

Yes, you stand for the truth. Yes, you are not associating with those who have wandered away from the truth. You've made a clear stand. That's good. But all is not well in Ephesus.

Verse four, but I have this against you. So Jesus commends the church for their stand, but there's a very real warning.

And our second point is this. Jesus warns his church that doctrine without devotion leads to death. Verses four and five.

[21 : 14] Doctrine without devotion leads to death. Now I've seen this image of Jesus in the midst of his lampstands.

Those lampstands of the church burning brightly. And lampstands, the sort of ones we're talking about here, need a lot of tending if they're to remain alight. The oil needs to be topped up, needs to be looked after.

And that was the priest's job back in the Old Testament. They would keep the lampstands alight in the temple, shining bright, constant tending. And so the Lord Jesus is seen here tending his lamps, tending his churches.

He does what he needs to do in order to keep them shining. 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.

And he has commended the church. He says, well done, you are standing for the truth. Don't stop doing that. But he also corrects what is wrong.

[22 : 17] Look 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.

But it's a church lacking in devotion, in love, love. It loves doctrine, but it doesn't 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's a very real prospect that if this church continues in this way, it will cease to be a church.

It will die. That is what the removal of the lamp means. The lamp will be taken away, the light will go out, the church will be no longer.

[23 : 25] And Jesus is not speaking here about his return at the end of the age. He's not talking about the second coming. But rather he is, I think, talking about his temporal judgment in this age.

Churches that drift from him, churches that depart from him, he will destroy, he will end them. The light will be snuffed out. Sobering, isn't it?

So these words in verse 4, they're not a suggestion. It's not here's something I want to think about, Ephesus. It's much stronger than that. This is not kindly advice. This warning is far more serious than that.

This is a serious warning because the issue is serious. They have abandoned the love they had at first. But what does that mean? What does it mean to abandon the love you had at first?

Well, it must mean, mustn't it, that the church has abandoned its real love for the Lord Jesus first and foremost. But also their love for others, for people, both within the church, but also externally.

[24 : 39] It's witness for a lost world, for a lost people that have been abandoned. It's both those things, isn't it? It's both a vertical and a horizontal love that is amiss.

What is the first and greatest commandment? To love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul. And the second is to love your neighbour. The love they had at first, they've abandoned.

It doesn't specify what that means, but it must be one of those two things, or maybe both. Their love for the Lord and their love for one another. And let's not be too quick to individualise this rebuke.

This is a letter to the corporate gathering of the church in Ephesus. This is a corporate matter, a corporate sin. The church in Ephesus had abandoned the love it had at first.

In its zeal for truth and doctrinal purity, it had lost sight of the goal of doctrine, namely, of right relationship with our creator, with one another, and as witnesses to the lost world.

[25 : 52] Truth is not an end in and of itself, is it? Truth is there to lead us to the God of truth. It is to lead us to love him and serve him and serve others.

We must not forget ever that we've been created by a relational God to know him and to love him and to serve him. And we can get so caught up in relatively minor matters that we miss who it's all for.

I use this illustration in the life course, but it's very striking. Imagine that you have a child, a very special kind of child, at school, top of the class, best at languages, science, maths, best athlete.

They lead the school play. As a parent, is this a good child? Of course. This is the kind of child that makes you look very good, isn't it?

After school finishes, the day gets better. They don't drop their bag in the hallway, they hang it up. They prepare dinner for the family. They do their homework, they help their siblings, they serve dinner, they do the washing up, they then take the dog for a walk.

[27 : 09] They go to bed without complaint. The lights are off by nine every night. Is this a good child? Yeah, amazingly good. You ask them about the qualities of a good child, they can tell you.

They know what makes a good child. You ask them what makes a good parent, and they can articulate it all. They know what makes a good child, they discuss the dangers of helicopter parenting and so on.

Doctrinally, they're spot on. They know how it all works. But there's one part of the behavior I've not mentioned. In all their life, through everything they've done, they've never really spoken to you as their parent.

They've never acknowledged you, they don't love you. You congratulate them on their school performance, they ignore you. You thank them for cooking dinner, they walk past you, don't even acknowledge you.

you go to give them a kiss good night and whisper I love you. In response, they just turn over, turn their back to you and go to sleep. Is this a good child?

[28 : 15] Well, no. Why not? Because as a parent, what you want more than anything else is a loving relationship with your child, isn't it?

You'd sacrifice everything else to have that. all the trophies from school, all the good reports are nothing without that loving relationship. And that is perhaps a small picture of how Ephesus was behaving.

Relationally cold. They had the doctrine, they stood for that, but relationally cold. Jesus is not rebuking them, is he, for their zeal for the truth?

No. They very clearly have zeal for the truth. They are willing to stand for and pay the price. And he's not saying that concern for truth will always lead to becoming cold and unloving.

No. 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 all faith so as to remove mountains, but I have not love, I am nothing.

[29 : 26] we can all think, I am sure, of individuals and churches who are so intent on right doctrine that almost no one meets their high theological standards of doctrinal purity.

There is a total lack of love and real humanity. You know it when you see it. And that seems to be something of the issue there in Ephesus. in their fight for the truth, they have become an unloving church.

Is that true of our church? Has concern for truth pushed out love for the Lord Jesus in the throne?

Has a particular articulation of the truth become the thing for us such that we look down on others who don't quite get it? Have we set a high bar of doctrinal orthodoxy such that genuine believers actually fail to pass our test?

Now it is right, isn't it, to have doctrinal standards? We need to know what we stand for, but is that getting in the way? Has that become a distraction to real love?

[30 : 47] We do need to hear this warning, don't we? But let me also encourage you, Tron Church, there are so many examples of love in our midst, of real deep affection and love in our church family, for which I'm thankful and I'm sure you are too.

But just heed the warning. The Lord Jesus exposed the sin of the church in Ephesus, and do we dare pray he would expose ours too?

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, he asked us, do you love me? Do you love me? That was the question he put to Simon Peter, wasn't it, after his denial of Jesus. the Lord Jesus put his finger on the central issue, and asked, do you love me more than these?

And he asks you today, do you love me? Not just individually, but as a church, do we love him? Do we love one another? Jesus sees everything, he sees our hearts, no sin goes unseen or ignored, but Jesus' rebuke here, and it's a very sharp rebuke, his rebuke is not a hopeless one, it is a rebuke to bring about repentance.

[32 : 23] He tends his churches so that they'll keep a light, they'll keep shining forth in the midst of darkness. So this is not a rebuke to crush, it's a rebuke to bring life.

And so our final point, Jesus tells his church that the remedy is to remember and repent. 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. Jesus calling them to something that is doable.

With his help, this is doable. They've done it in the past. Do you notice that? They've had a love which they've abandoned. And so the call is to remember those days and do the works of love you did back then.

Remember why you first loved Christ. It's a call to repent, 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, forgiveness, and then to receive his forgiveness, and then do the works that they did at first.

[33 : 42] It's not an unachievable, unattainable standard that Jesus is calling them to. Perhaps verse 4 has really grabbed you by the scruff of the neck.

Maybe you feel rumbles and shaken by what we've seen. Have I lost my love for the Lord? Well, if that's you, then know you're not in a hopeless position.

Let your grief bring you to repentance. And let it be a godly grief, not a worldly grief. You see, a worldly grief leads to tears and tears alone, but godly grief hears God's call to repentance and knows that he is gracious and kind and that all who call out to him in mercy, he will not turn away.

And so he appeals to the church and Ephesus, to us, to remember, to repent, and then to return. It's wonderful to be down to earth, isn't it, and 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. Rather, it's to do the works you did at first.

[35 : 07] It is to live an obedient life. That is how we love the Lord. That is what he says there in verse five. Repent and do the works you did at first. That is what it will look like for the church in Ephesus to rekindle their love.

It is to do the works they did at first. That's not to say there won't be an emotional response. God is not anti-emotion and nor should we be.

But it's not merely emotion. It's not reduced to that. We primarily love the Lord through our actions, how we live and treat one another, how we treat the Lord.

It's our love for him and his people expressed in our actions. to love those around you in the church, serving them, doing them good, showing genuine concern for their spiritual well-being, showing hospitality.

This sort of love bears out in practical day-to-day things. It's how we treat each other. Take one example of showing love to each other.

[36 : 17] I wonder what sorts of things you talk about with other folk in the church. What do you talk about? After the service. A loving church will be one where those conversations cover deeper matters.

Of course you'll cover the football scores and upcoming holidays, that sort of thing, but if you never ask yourself searching questions, you must wonder if there is a 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 for a few Sundays, if you're never concerned enough to ask how someone's getting on with that difficult situation at work or that difficult relationship or that difficult family matter, if you're never concerned enough to ask how someone's love for the Lord is really going, if you're never concerned to ask those deeper questions, then you need to ask yourself, am I really loving my brothers and sisters in Christ?

Do I actually love them? Am I concerned enough for them to ask and to seek and to ask how they're going? At the end of the 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?

What is it that fills your heart? Is it the precise way in which it was stated? Or is it about the one who it's stating about? Is it about Jesus? And is our love for him? Do you talk about the great programs and plans of the church?

[37 : 56] Or do you talk about the Lord Jesus and the people those plans and programs are seeking to help and reach and grow? Often our words betray our hearts, don't they?

So what are we speaking about? What are we speaking about with each other? Return to the love you had at first, says Jesus. And this return to real love, to practical love for the Lord and each other is what, verse 7, conquering looks like for this particular church.

Look at the end of verse 7, he who has an ear to hear, let 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.

Each of these churches in chapters 2 and 3 is encouraged to conquer, to overcome, and it looks different for each church, but for Ephesus this was the issue, they were to repent and return to the love they had at first, and that would lead to great blessing.

Look at what Jesus promises, he promises, to the one who conquers I will grant it, eat of the tree of life. He wants his church to enjoy eternal life, not death. That is what he wants for his church.

[39 : 25] And so he calls us to simple faith, to obey his commands, to remain faithful and to persevere, to return to a love we've perhaps abandoned, return to it so that you will receive by faith the promise of life eternal.

Jesus knows his church as he knows this church. He walks in our midst, he tends to us all the time, and he does that so that we'll endure and receive the full blessings of being with God for all eternity.

So know that Jesus, as he looks at this church, no good work is unnoticed. He sees our stand for truth, but no sin is unseen, but also no repentance is wasted.

So don't let a love for doctrine push out love for the Lord. Doctrine without devotion leads to death in the life of the church.

So let's ask the Lord to help us, all of us together, to love him as we ought, that he would be the vision of our hearts.

[40 : 44] So let's ask him to help us, shall we? Let's pray, and then we'll sing together. Father God, you are a kind and a good God you care so deep before your church.

church. We thank you that the Lord Jesus is in our midst, he sees us, he knows us. And Lord, please encourage us. Encourage us for when we have taken costly stands for truth.

Encourage us that you see it, you know it. But Lord, let us not grow cold. Lord, warm our hearts, each one of us individually and as a church, would you not let our love for you go cold?

Would we be known as a church that loves, a church that loves you, a church that loves one another, a church that loves this city that is so lost?

So help us this morning together to love you and to stand firm for you. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.