

When Jesus writes a letter to his church (part 1)

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[0 : 0 0] So, as I was saying, we're going to hear what Jesus values. He values in biblical churches a commitment both to truth and love. As we get into these letters, let me give you two different images. The first, imagine a letter from the king in the heat of battle. So, up on the screen, you have an image from the Imperial War Museum, and it's of George V, who, during the First World War, was very active in visiting troops, made hundreds of visits to troops all around. This one was to the Somme. And wherever he went, you would see a number of familiar scenes. You would see cheering crowds. You'd see soldiers waving caps. You'd see these hardened soldiers like excited schoolboys as they get to shake hands with their king.

King George understood how important it was in wartime for the king to boost the morale of his troops and to encourage them to endurance. You know, imagine if we were there fighting in the heat of battle and the king made a visit to us. Now, imagine if you're a first-century believer in the Lord Jesus in the Roman Empire. So, you're an absolutely tiny minority. You're hated by some.

You're treated with suspicion by others. You're saying that Caesar isn't Lord, but Jesus is. You're practicing a whole new way of life. And so, you're in a spiritual battle, and you turn up to your house church this particular Sunday morning, and you discover King Jesus has written you a letter via an angel, via the Apostle John, but it comes to you. These letters that we're going to think about for the next three weeks, they're amazing because they do a few things for us. They remind us of who Jesus is. They speak about his identity. And they give this call to persevere with wonderful promises, future promises given. And we also discover what Jesus values as we will hear him diagnosing both strengths and weaknesses within these churches. Now, we're in the book of Revelation. Revelation has lots of numbers that are significant. And when we come across the number seven, the number seven symbolizes completion. So, these are seven letters. So, they are to individual churches, but they are to be given and to be read and to be understood by all churches. So, we had that repeating note, whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says, not just to the church, but to the churches.

So, we're listening in to discover what does King Jesus have to say to us and to me and to you individually as well as He speaks to a local church. So, there's one image, a letter from a king in the heat of battle. I think another image that might help us this morning is the image of a pendulum. You know, a pendulum, simple thing, swings side to side. We're going to meet three churches, and they're all on this pendulum. One, Ephesus has swung to the side of truth, and they're forgetting about love. And we see two, Thyatira and Pergamum, they're swinging to the side of love, and they're neglecting truth.

And as we think about that, even as we see the lights swinging, as Christians and churches, we can always be swinging from one side to the other. And Jesus wants us to know that what He's looking for is biblical churches that are faithful to both love God's Word and to love God's people, to love one another. So, let's dive in. Let's think, first of all, about this letter to the church in Ephesus. Ephesus was a very important city in the Roman Empire. It was a very wealthy harbor city.

[3 : 59] It housed one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. The great temple of Artemis was right there in the middle. There were also three temples set up to various emperors. So, it was a place where there was lots of false worship happening. We also know from Paul in Acts chapter 20 that there was going to be a time when false teachers were going to come in to seek to destroy, to be like wolves among sheep.

And we see that this is happening. So, into that context, how does Jesus describe Himself? Look at verse 1. These are the words of Him who holds the seven stars and walks among the seven golden lampstands.

So, Jesus speaks from the beginning about His authority. These stars, we're told in chapter 1, represent the angels. Jesus is the one who holds and sends the angels with authority into the world.

But He also speaks of His presence and His care. The lampstands represent churches, and Jesus walks among and is with His church. And as Jesus comes to be with His church, with authority, how does He describe the strengths and the weaknesses here in Ephesus? Well, let's think positively first. Verse 2, I know your deeds, your hard work, your perseverance. You cannot tolerate wicked people. So, here is a group who are working hard for the Lord Jesus. They're persevering in the life of faith, even when it means they're being hated for Jesus' sake. They're very alert and active, so when they come across false teaching, they are challenging it and rejecting it. In fact, in verse 6, we're told that they hate what Jesus hates. There's this group, the Nicolaitans, who seem to be encouraging compromise. You can worship Jesus and worship the gods of Rome. You can have this kind of mix-and-match spirituality, and they say, no, no, you can't. And so, they're very positive defenders of truth. And this is a wonderful thing.

We probably recognize we live in a day when many churches don't stand up for God's truth, give in to the whims of culture. Here is a great example of treasuring God's truth and defending God's truth. Remember what Jesus said, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

[6 : 17] They place a high view on truth. But there's a problem. Negatively, they've forgotten their first love. The temperature of their love has fallen from earlier days. They've forgotten their first works.

Repent and do the things you did at first. There is a need for them to have a change of direction. They need to recover the love that they used to have in days gone by. So, what love is it that they've lost and left behind? Well, it's most likely, and perhaps we recognize this, that in all their fighting for truth, most likely it's left them more suspicious of others, more judgmental towards others within the church, more likely to create dividing lines, less gracious towards other believers.

They've lost love for the church. They're busy doing the good thing of protecting the truth, but they're neglecting the other good thing of loving God's people. So, the pendulum is swung off-center. So, they're full of truth, but lacking love. Now, what might be some danger signs that we as a church or we as individuals have swung too far on that pendulum where we've become big on truth but low on love? I think we'd see it in a critical spirit when we're very judgmental of others, and we're lacking in mercy. When we find it all too easy to point the finger at other churches out there or other Christians in here, where we can function like spiritual bloodhounds. We're always hunting out heresy, and we want to make every issue a huge issue, even when it's not fundamental to the gospel.

When we find ourselves cold and unloving, that's a sign that the pendulum has swung, so busy guarding truth that grace and patience are forgotten.

At its worst, this becomes a Christian or a church that is all talk but with no loving action, a head full of truth, but a heart that is empty of feeling towards others.

[8 : 51] Now, what is Jesus' warning and promise to Ephesus and to Christians and churches? First, the warning, verse 5, consider how far you've fallen, repent, but if you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. Now, this is hugely serious. If they don't change, Jesus says, they will lose their witness in the world, that the light will be snuffed out.

In fact, they'll not be regarded as one of Christ's people and one of Christ's churches. How can that be so? Well, the Bible says that God is love. And Jesus said, the world will know you are my disciples if you love one another. Love is to be the heartbeat of the church. Now, in case you're wondering what happened with Ephesus, the early church is full of the good news that they did change and they did continue to witness. There's also a wonderful promise, verse 7, whoever has ears, let them hear. If they are willing to listen and to obey and to put into practice, what's the promise? I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. Here's a picture of the Garden of Eden. God made everything and it was perfect and they there was God and his people and they were together in this perfect place and God holds out this future promise. If you return to love, then you will share an eternal life. Eternal life with the God who is love, loving God's people. The promise of new creation life to come in God's paradise.

So as Jesus writes this letter, he wants us to learn to keep a firm grip on truth as Christians and as a church. Because remember, Jesus commends them. He says they are doing well to care about what God teaches about himself and about what is the good news and how are the people of God to live.

And so we must contend for truth. Love for God and love for others demands it. But we also remember the importance of recovering a grip on love. And if we feel that we have lost that grip, the answer is always to remember the gospel. To remember that God has loved us and sent his Son.

That Jesus has given himself for us. We did not deserve that. We deserve judgment. Instead, we're given a home with him. We remember the gracious forgiveness and welcome we receive.

[11 : 55] That we would let the power of God's grace shape our heart and lead us into a love for truth and love for one another. So that's the letter to the church in Ephesus and they're swinging the pendulum so they're big on truth and low on love. Let's think about these two churches on the other side of the pendulum where the imbalance is opposite. We're going to move to Pergamum and Thyatira. A couple of things to know about these two cities. First of all, we're told something by Jesus actually here in verse 13.

He says of their city, I know where you live, where Satan has his throne. These are strong words and gives us an indication. How difficult must it have been to be a Christian in this place? Why does he say Satan has his throne here? Well, we know from history that Pergamum was a real center for the cult of the emperor. So the pressure was on to worship Caesar as a god and as lord. We also know that the Jewish synagogues in this place were violently opposed to Jesus and to Christianity. And we also know that there was a brand of false teaching that was emerging from Pergamum. It's a really hard place to be a Christian. Thyatira is a bit different, but one of the things that Thyatira was known for is it had lots of trade guilds. And so every kind of business, every kind of shop, they would have their own guild, and each guild would have its own set of gods. And the belief in Rome was if you want to get ahead, if you want to prosper, you need to make offerings to the gods. And if you don't, you're a bad citizen, and it'll be bad for business, it'll be bad for the city. So again, a lot of pressure, really hard place to be a Christian. Now, how does Jesus describe himself to these two churches?

Versus. Verse 12, what he says to Pergamum, these are the words of him who has the sharp double-edged sword. Now, this double-edged sword is interesting. It was the symbol of Roman justice. So people had this image of the sword and say, well, that shows that Caesar is in charge of everything.

And what Jesus says, and it's not Caesar, I'm the Lord with authority. My word comes with authority. And then a slightly different image, but related, I think, as he describes himself to Thyatira down in verse 18, these are the words of the Son of God. Caesar isn't the Son of God. Jesus is, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. So the blazing, fiery eyes, the eyes of penetrating wisdom, the ability to judge, and the feet of burnished bronze, this is a warrior image.

This is a king who's in charge, and he's ready to march into action. Now, as he comes to speak to Pergamum about their strengths and weaknesses, again, let's begin as Jesus does positively.

[15 : 04] Secondly, verse 13, despite where they live, you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me. So even when people are being martyred or being killed for being followers of Jesus, they keep on loving Jesus. So their love for Jesus is clearly in view. It's known publicly. They are devoted to him in a context that, honestly, most of us, sitting here in the nice, comfortable West, we can hardly begin to imagine. But they stay faithful in their love for Jesus. But there's a problem. Verse 14, I have a few things against you. And then he introduces Balaam, this Old Testament figure who enticed the Israelites to sin. And verse 15, likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. So they're choosing tolerance over true. That's why Balaam gets introduced. So Balaam in the Old Testament eventually led God's people astray from true worship, pulled them away to follow idols and into sexual immorality. And what he's saying to them is, listen, there are teachers in your church who are doing exactly the same thing among you. So they haven't been dealing with the false teaching. They haven't been dealing with the false teachers. Over in Ephesus, they did that. They're deciding, well, let's just love everybody and let's make no judgments. But what's happening is the church is descending into chaos. The church is being corrupted from the inside because they're not holding to the truth. It's a similar story over in

Thyatira. We find the positive in verse 19. Jesus says, I know your deeds, your love, your faith, your service, your perseverance. And notice at the end, you're now doing more than you did at first.

So remember, Ephesus, their temperature's going down. Not so in Thyatira. They're doing more. They're showing more love. But again, the problem is a tolerance problem. Nevertheless, I have this against you. You tolerate that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophet. So again, Jezebel was an Old Testament wicked queen, turned the nation to follow idols into all kinds of immorality. And Jezebel, I guess nowadays in the English language, becomes something of a label. Here's a truly wicked woman.

She is a Jezebel. And in this church here in Thyatira, they're tolerating a modern-day Jezebel. In fact, they're giving her a platform so she can teach. And as she's teaching this false, terrible message, she's turning people away. In verse 21, we're told that she refuses to repent.

So God's word is coming. God's true messengers are saying, you need to turn from your ways. But she doesn't. And in fact, other people are following in her practices.

[18 : 25] Now, what's going on here? Most likely, this teacher, whoever she was, was saying to the Christians, listen, it's okay to offer sacrifices to these Roman gods. It's no big deal.

Just take part. It'll make life easier. You can make progress in your career. Don't stand out and make life hard for yourself. And so there's become this compromise on the word of God, on the glory and honor of God. And the church isn't rejecting the false teacher and her false teaching.

Big on love, low on truth. What are the warning signs of swinging on that pendulum towards love at the expense of truth? What might that look like for us or for a church today?

Well, to use the language of verse 20, it would look like a wrong kind of tolerance. So we hear a lot about tolerance, don't we? One of the great virtues of the day, we're told, to never challenge anyone's truth, to never challenge another person's ideas, to never claim that there are such things as absolute truths. We must be tolerant. But Jesus says tolerance can be a profoundly negative thing, especially in a church if we tolerate false teaching.

If a Christian or a church decides, well, do you know what we need to do in order for people to listen? We need to change our message to accommodate to our culture. Or maybe what we should do is we should drop, ignore those unacceptable parts of biblical truth. Or we should reject biblical standards norms as being outdated. We have a tolerance problem. It can happen, too, if we tolerate immorality.

[20 : 39] If we allow people to turn away from God within the church and we turn a blind eye, too, if we try and preserve a kind of unity or a kind of love at the expense of truth, where we don't call out clear sin, where we try and have the basis for Christian unity on anything other than Jesus and His truth, then we have a tolerance problem.

Now, we need to hear the warning and the promise that Jesus gives. The warning we find in verse 16 and verse 23. It's a very similar warning. Let's hear verse 16, repent, otherwise I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. So, remember, Jesus gave these pictures of Himself as being like a warrior. He says, if you don't recover a love for God's truth within the church, then the warrior king will come in judgment. The sword of judgment will fall on false teachers and those who hold to their lies. But there's also a wonderful promise. To those who hear the message, those who honor God's truth, let's hear the promise in verse 17, to the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it. And you may be thinking, what's so wonderful about that? You know what's going on there?

The hidden manna, manna in the Old Testament was this gift that God gave, bread from heaven. So, here is this promise that God will feed His people. And this white stone, unlike today where we have paper tickets or e-tickets, if you wanted to get into a feast, often the ticket was a white stone.

So, here is this promise that if we hold on to the truth about Jesus, we will have our entry ticket into God's feast, into heaven itself. The promise of new creation, feasting with God, sharing life with God, incidentally what we're thinking about this evening, on God's guest list, by God's grace.

And then there's the promise for Thyatira, over there in verse 24, for those who hold on to faith and truth. Two things that Jesus says I will give. First in verse 26, I will give authority over the nations. And then He quotes from Psalm 2. So, Psalm 2, that we understand is being fulfilled in Jesus.

[23 : 13] Jesus is God's King, and He rules over the nations. But here Jesus says, I will share my rule with you. As people, we were made to rule over to care for this world. And Jesus says, in the new creation, all of those who love Him and hold to His truth, they will rule and reign with Him. And one more thing that we're given, I will also give that one the morning star. Which is a lovely image, but maybe you're thinking, what does that refer to? Well, Jesus will tell us towards the end of His letter, Revelation 22, verse 16, Jesus says about Himself, I am the root and the offspring of David and the bright morning star. The best thing that Jesus can give us is Himself. Those who are faithful will receive life with Christ, will rule with Christ, will enjoy Christ now and forever.

Do you know one thing that's amazing to see? As Jesus writes to these churches that are small and struggling and facing opposition, is how does He help them to persevere? What does He do for them?

He takes them again and again back to the future. And so, we're being reminded that if we are to endure, we must live in light of eternity. We must be clear of what Jesus has promised to them.

That's what's going to encourage us to hold on, to encourage faithful believers. And He tells us what we need is love for God's people and a love for God's Word.

Because that's what He says to Pergamum and Thyatira, you need to keep a firm grip on love, keep on showing love and loyalty to King Jesus in the way of worship and in loving His church.

[25 : 03] And again, when you think about this for ourselves, as we recognize it can be hard to be a disciple, how important it is that we love one another as brothers and sisters, helping one another in the journey of faith. But He says, hold on to that love, but recover a grip on the truth.

As Jesus teaches, if you love me, keep my command. We value His words as it reveals truth about our God, God's character, and the gospel as we hear Him say, this is the way, walk in it.

So King Jesus makes clear that what He wants is biblical churches that love the truth and love one another. And these letters come to Christians on the front lines of spiritual battle, Christians like us, reminding us, reminding us that Jesus is present with us. Jesus has got power for us. He makes these wonderful promises to us in order that we too would keep our morale up, that we too would persevere.

But He also writes these letters knowing that one of our constant challenges, as sinners saved by grace, the challenge to keep centered on Christ, to keep centered on truth and love, not swinging from pole to pole, where we're defenders of truth in a loveless way, or we're trying to love everyone and we disregard truth. Jesus wants us to practice both. How do we hold firmly to truth and love as a Christian or as a local church? We need to have Jesus at the center.

He calls His followers to do what He commands, to live in His truth, and He calls us to love one another as He has first loved us, to live in the truth that He gives, the grace He supplies.

[27 : 06] And as the gospel changes our heart, as we understand how extravagant God's love and mercy is, then it begins to create love for others as a necessary result.

And when love for Jesus has gripped our heart, then we'll be ready to gladly obey His truth, to follow His truth, to seek to live in faithfulness to that truth.

For our King, who loves the truth and wants us to love the truth.