

Truth and Love

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[0 : 00] Well, in the 1960s, the Righteous Brothers released a hit song which was made famous in the 80s by the movie Top Gun.

See if you recognise, you can even join in on the chorus, actually. Bit more volume. There's no endless like people and nothing to take.

You're trying hard not to show it. But baby, baby, I love it.

You are... Now it was game enough. Yeah, I'm sure you all know. You've lost that loving feeling. Well, as we come to Jesus' letter to the church in Ephesus, it seems that they have lost that loving feeling.

But before I show you from God's Word, let me remind you of the situation. If you look back in your Bibles at chapter 1, verse 9, you can see it on the screen for those online, we read here that John was actually on the island of Patmos because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

[1 : 15] In other words, he was exiled for being a Christian who proclaimed Christ. But notice in the yellow there that he also calls himself your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance.

In other words, it's not just John who is suffering persecution. He's a companion with his readers who are also suffering persecution.

Now, given the cold temperatures at the moment, being exiled to Patmos in Greece sounds rather nice, actually. I think I could handle that kind of suffering for Christ.

But it was no holiday for John, nor was it for the first readers. For them, they were persecuted by the Jewish synagogues and by the Roman government, sometimes even killed for Christ.

And so this book of visions, this revelation, was given during a time when the church was not popular. A time that we are increasingly facing here today, aren't we?

[2 : 25] And so what it says is very much relevant for us. Like we saw last week, the true picture of who Jesus is, which encourages us that he really is reigning and that we really will win on the last day.

Or like these mini letters that Jesus now sends to the seven churches to both encourage and challenge that they might keep persevering with Christ.

And so what follows are letters sent to the seven churches in modern day Turkey. Turkey. And here is a map, which I realise may not be easy to see, actually. I'll get a different one in a moment. But Turkey is the kind of lighter area in the middle.

And you can see the modern day countries around it. Ephesus is on the coast. But here is a map of Western Turkey with the seven churches that form a kind of horseshoe shape.

And each letter to each of these churches follows a similar pattern. It begins with the words, to the angel of the church in dot, dot, dot.

[3 : 32] And then you insert the city name. These are the words of dot, dot, dot. And insert a description of Jesus, mainly from the vision we saw last week. And then he goes on to say, I know what's happening in the church.

And so he offers praise or rebuke or both, plus a command with an encouragement or warning aimed at persevering.

And then what follows is the last bit, which it says, to the one who is victorious. It always ends on a note of encouragement, a promise of reward, which is usually taken from the rest of the book of Revelation.

And then a plea to hear. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Now, sometimes those last two phrases are switched around in the order, which is why I've labelled them both D.

Now, what Jesus says, he says to a particular church and so praises them or rebukes them for a particular thing, whether it's the church in Ephesus, Smyrna, Thyatira, Philadelphia, and so on.

[4 : 39] But does that mean then that it's not relevant for us? Well, of course not. Because you notice the very last line on the screen there. It's a plea to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

And so even though this letter, each individual letter was written to one church, like Ephesus, it ends with a plea for all the churches to hear, including this church here this morning.

God's will is that we would eavesdrop, as it were, on these letters and hear what the Spirit says through the word of Jesus, I might add, so that we might follow their good and avoid their bad.

And so what does the Spirit say through the word of Jesus to this church here today? Well, that is to the church in Ephesus. Well, point one, verse one, it says, to the angel of the church in Ephesus, write, these are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.

Here Jesus reminds them that he walks among them. And if you look back to the last verse before our passage, the end of chapter one, you'll see that the lampstands represent the churches and the stars represent the angels.

[6 : 03] Now, in Revelation, angel usually refers to heavenly angels, though I suspect here in chapters two and three, it refers to those who will read aloud the message or the letter to that church.

Because the word angel in Greek can also mean messenger. And it makes more sense to write to the messenger or elder of the church in Ephesus, the one who will read aloud the message.

But either way, it's not a big deal. Either way, here is a reminder that Jesus walks amongst his people. He is one who walks amongst the lampstands, the churches, which means he knows his people, doesn't it?

He knows us. He knows our struggles. He knows our temptations. He knows our ups and our downs, which is comforting, isn't it? Knowing that he gets how hard life can be and that he is with us to help us persevere.

But it also means he knows our deeds, both good and bad. How does that make you feel? I guess it depends on our deeds, whether they're good or bad, doesn't it?

[7 : 15] And so verse two, let's see what the deeds are of the Ephesian church. I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people and that you have tested those who claim to be apostles, but are not and have found them false.

You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary. It's all positive here, isn't it?

Verse two, he knows their deeds, their hard work and their perseverance. And it's the perseverance that he particularly praises them for because he repeats that in verse three.

Positively, you have persevered and on the flip side, you have not grown weary, which is the same as saying you've persevered. But how, in what way have they persevered for Jesus's namesake?

How have they been working hard? Well, it seems to be in maintaining the truth of the gospel. Because in between these references to perseverance is that sentence that says, I know you cannot tolerate wicked people, but that you have tested those who claim to be apostles, but are not and have found them false.

[8 : 32] Here, the wicked people are kind of matched with those apostles who teach what is false, those fake apostles. And so what they cannot tolerate is not so much the people themselves, but the teaching that they espouse.

They have tested them and found them to be false. In other words, they have persevered in the truth, even endured hardships for his namesake, the truth of his name, and have not grown weary.

They're persevering in the truth. It's quite high praise, isn't it? Especially when we remember the pressure they were under to bend the truth.

You see, Ephesus was the second biggest city in the Roman Empire. Rome was, of course, the biggest. Ephesus, the second biggest. And it wasn't the capital or the meaning capital of this region of Turkey.

Pergamon was the little capital. Rome was the big capital, of course. But in western Turkey, Pergamon was the little capital. But nonetheless, Ephesus was actually more significant than Pergamon.

[9 : 38] It had a population of 250,000. It came with its own mini-MCG. Here it is. It could hold 25,000 people, which is only a quarter of the MCG, I think.

And it was a very wealthy city. Remember, it sat on the coast, so it had its own port before it silted up, and so became wealthy through trade.

In fact, as you came up from the harbour into the city, you came up this 10.5 metre wide road with columns all the way down.

It would have been so impressive walking up to Ephesus. It was a magnificent city. But it was also a city that came with false religion.

It had temples to the emperors, like this temple to the emperor Hadrian. And so people were encouraged to worship the emperors at these temples.

[10 : 36] But more than that, it was home to the Greek god Artemis, or Diana, whose temple was actually one of the seven ancient wonders of the world.

You can look it up on Google today. Although all that's left of that temple today is one and a half pillars. The half is in the front there, and the one behind it.

But historians have done a model, and this is what they think it would have looked like. It was very, very impressive. And so there would have been huge pressure to participate in false worship.

Not just emperor worship, in case you got in trouble with the government, but Greek god worship, Artemis worship. Even back in Acts chapter 19, when the church first started in this city, there was a riot.

Paul preached the gospel, people became Christians and stopped worshipping Artemis, and the silversmiths who sold trinkets to the worshippers lost money. And so you might remember that they started a riot.

[11 : 39] In Acts 19, when they, that is the silversmiths, heard this, they were furious and began shouting, great is Artemis of the Ephesians. And soon the whole city was in uproar, and they seized Paul's companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, and rushed into that mini MCG, that amphitheater, and were about to kill them until the clerk of the city calmed them down.

And so from the very beginning, there was great pressure on this church to bend the truth of the gospel, to add to it some of the city's beliefs. But they did not.

They persevered in the truth, which is great news, isn't it? And I wonder if in God's kindness, we've got that legacy too.

We've persevered in the truth here at Holy Trinity. Long before I arrived, I'm not taking credit for it, long before I arrived, this church was known as a Bible teaching church, which is a great thing, isn't it?

But we need to keep persevering in the truth. I mean, is there not pressure on us to add to the gospel some beliefs of our city today?

[12 : 54] Whether it's beliefs about marriage or gender or Jesus being only one way to God? And some churches have added to the gospel these things.

our 1030 women's minister, Fiona, and I were at a diocesan conference a couple of weeks ago, and there were some things that were said there which I wouldn't have called the truth.

But Fiona went to a workshop where the minister who works at the cathedral, so the flagship church of the diocese, was rightly wanting us to think about how we can better connect with Aboriginal people, which is a good thing.

But then he said that he himself worships the koala god of the Aboriginals, for real. And people in the workshop were nodding in agreement.

There is pressure on us at the moment, yes, to rightly care for all people, including the First Nations people, but that doesn't mean we then add their truth to the truth, our truth, the Bible's truth.

[14 : 02] Well, we'll see more of how we're to love all the others in a moment. But here, the idea is to persevere in the truth. Loving people doesn't mean we accept their beliefs or practices like this minister did, no way to persevere in the truth like the Ephesian church did, but without losing love as they did.

Point to verse 4. Jesus says to the Ephesian church, yet I hold this against you, you have forsaken the love you had at first.

This church has lost that love and feeling. It seems their right desire for truth has led them to harden their heart to love.

But love for whom? Is it for Jesus? For fellow Christians, one another? Or for non-Christians, the world?

It's actually hard to tell from the text. It could be all three. For example, it could be they've worked so hard at persevering the truth of Jesus that it's just become automatic.

[15 : 15] They're going through the motions and lost love for Jesus. Perhaps like Israel did in our first reading, where they used to love God but stopped.

And so perhaps for this church in Ephesus, they've persevered in the truth for Jesus' sake but it's an obligation to Jesus rather than out of love for Jesus.

It's become a duty rather than a joy. And we can fall into that same trap too, can't we? It's worth asking ourselves, do we come to church, do we seek to obey Jesus because it's the right thing to do or because you love the one who died for you?

Is it a duty or a joy? Have we lost that loving feeling for Jesus? Or perhaps it's love for one another inside the church that is the focus here.

You know, they've worked so hard at persevering for the truth of Jesus that they've grown critical of one another. You know, they're always testing what each other says, oh, that's not quite right.

[16 : 21] No, no, Barry, you got that wrong, I need to talk you aside. He didn't get anything wrong for the record. But you can imagine how it might happen, can't you? Now, the Bible says, yes, we're meant to test everything to see if it matches the truth in the Bible, which is why I always kind of teach more than preach.

You know, that is, I get you to open the Bibles and follow along for yourselves. And perhaps I should even add a sign that says, don't trust this guy, test what he says.

I'm going to stick this here at the pulpit. But that doesn't mean we stop loving one another when we get it wrong. Even when Timothy, that is, Paul's spiritual son Timothy, was left in Ephesus to look after this church.

We read in 1 Timothy 1, Paul said, look, they're in Ephesus, I'm going to leave you there so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines. They had an issue with the truth in the beginning there.

But notice the next bit, the goal of this command is love. Yeah. Upholding the truth of the gospel is meant to lead us to loving one another just as Jesus has loved us.

[17 : 40] And so do I love that minister who says he worships the koala god? Do you love one another even if we get things wrong?

Or when someone does something wrong to you, have we lost that loving feeling towards one another? Or perhaps thirdly, this church works so hard at persevering for the truth of Jesus that they've actually bunkered down and lost love for the world.

Again, that's easy to imagine, isn't it? You know, they've got all this pressure to worship the emperor or Artemis and so they've just kind of put their heads down to follow Jesus and never lift their heads up to love the world around them.

They've become a Christian ghetto. And I actually suspect it's this last one in particular that's on view here because the description Jesus chooses to use of himself in verse 1 of the lampstands and the warning in verse 5 to take away their lampstand kind of points to this idea of being a light to the world.

That's what lampstands did. That's what Ricky reminded of us the other week from Zechariah. That's what Jesus says in Matthew's gospel, you are the light of the world. And that's what Revelation talks about later on when it describes the church as being two witnesses who will prophesy, share the gospel.

[19 : 08] And notice they are the lampstands or the olive trees. And again, we can fall into this trap, can't we? As our country moves further from God and makes life harder for us, it's easy to develop an attitude of us versus them, sorry, them versus us, and kind of become angry and hateful.

I mean, our current government has already changed laws and are trying to change even more laws so that Christian schools are not allowed to hire Christian teachers only. It's already underway.

That's the fight that is happening right now. Members of our own state government have actively targeted churches. Last week, some parents of our 1030 congregation were called into a local primary school because their nine-year-old daughter was playing at lunchtime with two other friends.

And I think it was one of the other friends said they were sprinkling leaves or something and they said, oh, this is like sprinkling water at baptism. And the third friend who was a Muslim was offended and went and told the teacher.

Now, they're nine-year-olds. I'm not having a go at that girl. Don't mishear me. But the teacher then called in the parents and said, please don't talk about religion at school. What happened to freedom of speech?

[20 : 32] These are nine-year-old kids. What happened to saying to both parties, let's respect and love one another? Yes, we believe different things. That's their choice. But we can still talk, can't we?

Apparently not. And so those things make us, rightly, I think, angry that our country has gone that far.

And so it would be very easy to develop hate towards the authorities of this world, whether the schools or the government or whatever, wouldn't it? But we're still to love.

We're to hate the sin, but love the sinner, as that old expression goes. Which is why in verse 6, Jesus himself says, you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate, says Jesus.

Notice Jesus doesn't hate the people, the Nicolaitans themselves, but he hates their sinful practices. And no one's exactly sure who this group are.

[21 : 38] They're possibly those who wanted to have their cake and eat it too, so they claim to follow Christ, but they also worshipped at the temple, participated in food sacrifices to idols at the temple, and temple prostitution and the like.

But the point is Jesus doesn't hate them. He hates their practices. And we've got to do the same. We've got to have the mind of Christ, as we'll sing in a little while, that hates the sin, but not the sinner.

We're to persevere in the truth, yes, hate what is false, yes, but we cannot lose that loving feeling towards the world. In fact, Paul writes to the Ephesian church in the letter of Ephesians in the Bible, we're to speak the truth in love, both in a loving manner and out of love for the other.

even the non-Christian outsider who may hate us. It's not always easy to do, is it? To hate the sin but love the sinner, even when they persecute us.

And so to help them and to help us, Jesus gives them this command with a warning, which is point three, more briefly, verse five. He says, consider or literally remember how far you have fallen and repent and do the things you did at first.

[23 : 04] And here's the warning, if you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. The command is twofold, it's to remember and repent.

Remember what you were once like, how you first loved, whether it was Jesus or one another or most likely the non-Christian outsider. Remember how you used to seek to share the gospel with them out of love.

Well, repent of being a Christian ghetto and do the things you did at first, like sharing the gospel. And to motivate them, Jesus warns them, if they don't, then he'll remove their lampstand.

That is, it'll cease to be a church. It will close down and they'll stop being a witness to the world, shining its light, because actually they're not doing it even now.

that's a pretty full-on warning, isn't it? And so do you see how much love matters to Christ? That if they don't love, he'll remove their church?

[24 : 13] I mean, the two great commandments are about love, aren't they? Love God and love your, yeah. Whether that neighbour is the Christian insider or the non-Christian outsider.

I wonder if we take loving our neighbour that seriously. But Jesus always ends on a note of encouragement, point four, verse seven.

He says, whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

The one who is victorious is the one who heeds what the Spirit says, which for the Ephesians, is to remember and repent and to love like they did at first.

And Jesus will give them the right to eat from the tree of life, which of course reminds us of the tree that was in the garden of Eden, the first paradise. And it seems there will be something like it in the second paradise.

[25 : 17] And as the name suggests, the tree of life gives life, doesn't it? life eternal. And so to those who truly trust in Jesus, such that they heed what the Spirit says through Jesus, well, we will enjoy eternal life in the paradise of God, which will be a great reward.

And so what is it for you here this morning that you need to persevere more in? Is it persevering more in the truth because you're tempted to compromise on the truth of God's word?

Or is it to persevere more in love? Because you're finding it hard to love, whether it's Christ, one another, or even the outside world, as it changes and persecutes us.

Whoever has ears to hear, hear this morning, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches, to us, and so persevere in both truth and love.

Let's pray we would. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father, we thank you for the truth of your word, and we thank you for your love towards us in Jesus Christ.

[26 : 33] Please help us, we pray, to persevere in both truth and love, hating what is false, the sin, but loving the sinner.

It's not always easy, so we need your help, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.