

Jesus Christ Among His Churches II — Evening Service

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[0 : 00] Good evening, everyone. Great to be with you this evening. You know, I've been on staff, Aaron, for three and a half years, and this is the first time that you've ever asked me to preach at the evening service.

And I think it's just a coincidence that Jordan Center left Vancouver about a month ago, and then you came to me probably the next day and said, Have I got an opportunity for you? Hey, mate. That's what he says, right?

So here we are in Revelation, and it would be very helpful if you have your Bible open to Revelation chapter 2. You know, I've been trying to read through Revelation as we've started this sermon series, and I'm also in a Bible study, so I'm reading it for that as well.

How many of you are in a Bible study that's studying Revelation this fall? Yeah. So how many of you have been reading Revelation with the Bible open in one hand and a really fat, thick academic book open in the other hand, trying to understand it?

Anybody? Or maybe your laptop computer? That's kind of dangerous, actually. But, you know, this book has so far has been really challenging for me and also very encouraging.

[1 : 16] And I would encourage you as you're reading it, and you should be reading it, to feel free to circle and underline and highlight words and repetitions.

Look for lots of things that repeat seven times in the book. As we're working together to try to decode some of the more bizarre symbols. But, you know, it's really not actually an academic study that we're doing.

Because this book is actually really about two things. It's about worship, and it's about witness. First, worship. Because all of Revelation is about worship.

Remember in chapter one, John is worshiping on the Lord's Day in Patmos, and he receives this vision of Jesus Christ. And he falls down in worship before the divine Lord Jesus.

And then he's given a vision of the eternal worship that's taking place around the throne room of God. And if that's not enough, Jesus gives him the unveiled truth about our world from the perspective of the king of history.

[2 : 17] This king who's conquered and won the victory, and he's ruling now from heaven. I'm talking about Jesus. So Revelation is really, it's birthed out of worship. It's showing us true worship, and it's calling us into deeper worship.

But, worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power. And then second, witness. Because already in chapter one, we've heard about John, who's in prison on Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony.

Testimony, the witness of Jesus Christ. But even before John's witness, it's Jesus who's the first and the greatest witness to the truth in Revelation.

It's Jesus who's testifying, witnessing to his heavenly father. And as this book unfolds, you guessed it, seven times we're going to hear about the testimony of Jesus Christ, and how this testimony is God's plan for his church, even you and I, to be a witness to the gospel, so that people in Vancouver and all over the world will hear the good news of new life available in Christ.

Worship and witness. These are the two big themes in Revelation. And it also happens, they're central to Revelation 2 and 3. And so if you have your Bibles open to Revelation 2, tonight we're going to spend all our time just looking at the first seven verses.

[3 : 40] Jesus' message, his words, to the church in Ephesus. And I want to start out by stating in just one sentence what Jesus is saying to this church.

And then we're going to unpack it together. To Ephesus, Jesus says, the best worship, the most orthodox, the most theologically accurate, even the best liturgy and music, will never please me if it does not send you out as witness to the world.

Let's unpack that. Well, let's start with this church in Ephesus. Because Ephesus is a church we actually know a lot about. You know, in the book of Acts, we learn that some people, including Priscilla and Aquila, planted this church.

And then Paul actually came, and he was a pastor there for almost three years. And then after him, Timothy was a pastor there. And then we believe that John, who's now exiled on Patmos, was also a pastor there. So this church has been around for more than 40 years.

You can kind of think of it as like a second or third generation Christians are now growing up in Ephesus. And Ephesus is a lot like Vancouver. It's an urban port. And there's a lot of tourism there. [4 : 56] But unlike Vancouver, they're coming to Ephesus to visit one of the seven wonders of the world, the temple to Artemis or Diana.

And so what's it like to be a Christian in Ephesus? Well, imagine if you lived in Whistler and you hated snowboarding and skiing.

You even hated snow. You know, it would be pretty obnoxious during the winter to live there, but it wouldn't be dangerous to your health, right? You wouldn't be at risk of persecution. But let me tell you, daily public life in Ephesus, it revolved around this worship of not only Artemis, but also of the Roman emperor.

And so being public about your Christianity in Ephesus wasn't going to get you... It wasn't good for upward mobility in the business world, and it wasn't going to get you invited to the best parties. But you know what's interesting? I wonder if you noticed this, that actually the biggest challenge for this church that they're currently facing is not the persecution that's coming, attacking them from outside.

[6 : 04] What is it instead? Instead, it's persecution from within the church. Satan loves to attack the church from within. And it's very dangerous.

So let's have a closer look. We're going to use the structure that Jesus gives, because really it's Jesus who's preaching the sermon tonight. I'm just trying to explain a little bit about what he's saying. Jesus preaches very well.

He's got four points, really. He's going to say... First of all, he's going to commend the Ephesians for their worship. And then Jesus rebukes the Ephesians for their witness, their lack of witness.

Thirdly, Jesus gives three commands to fix the problem. And finally, Jesus makes a promise to encourage this church. So commends them, rebukes them, offers a solution, and gives a promise. All in seven verses. Let's begin with the commendation. Jesus commends the Ephesians for their worship. So look with me at verse 2 and 3, and then also verse 6.

[7 : 04] Let's read it together. I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance, how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, found them to be false.

I know you're enduring patiently, bearing up for my namesake. You have not grown weary. And then verse 6. And this you have also. You hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. So... Well, this is a church that has been enduring persecution from within, from probably these are two separate groups.

There might be some overlap. It's unclear. There's the Nicolaitans on the one hand, which is kind of like a... what we think is the best description of them is they're like a theological liberal sect in the church that's basically saying, it's too hard for us to live as Christians in this pagan culture.

Here, let's just compromise a little bit. If we compromise a little bit, then it won't be... we won't be persecuted so much. It's going to be easier for us. So there's the Nicolaitans on the one hand, and there's these false apostles.

[8 : 08] We don't know what they were teaching. But we know, interestingly, that the church in Ephesus was discerning about it. It says... Did you notice that? They were tested. You were testing them and determining that they were false apostles.

So they're not just jumping to hasty conclusions. And, you know, as I was thinking about this church in Ephesus, I couldn't help but think about the history of St. John's.

And if you haven't been at St. John's very long, let me just summarize it for you like this. You know, as Anglicans, we're part of a Christian denomination that has seen false teachers emerge from

within the church, preaching a false gospel which rejects the truth of God's word and also rejects the authority of God's scriptures in our lives.

And St. John's, therefore, was among many churches that stood up for the truth of the gospel and we were persecuted as a result. And it's been costly for us as a church family.

It's been costly for many of our Anglican brothers and sisters, too. And so these words to the church in Ephesus, I believe, also have a lot to say to us here tonight at St. John's.

[9:21] But before I continue, I want to point out a danger that lurks for churches whenever they're sporting the battle scars from fighting over orthodoxy. So imagine for a moment, you're so used to your neighbor being a heretic in the pew next to you, right?

Look over at the person next to you. And you're suspicious all the time, right? It's kind of like in the Cold War where every American would look over and you're a commie, right? There's Russians in our midst.

It's kind of like that. You just get paranoid. Heretics are lurking around every corner. And so, Paul Barnett says, you end up as a sort of worshipping, you worship with closed walls as a sort of grim and defensive orthodoxy.

And that's why Jesus, he has something to commend in this church. He wants to commend them for worshipping in truth and in spirit and truth. But he moves quickly to a rebuke of them.

And you see that rebuke in verse 4. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Ouch.

[10:28] Ouch. But what is this love that they've abandoned? Here's what it seems that Jesus is saying. Because there's more than one way to interpret what this love is.

But I think this love is referring to the fact that although the Ephesians were always on guard to maintain the best worship, doctrinally pure, centered on Christ, they were worshipping well inside the church, they had abandoned and turned away from the equally important call to be a witness to their faith outside the church.

They're worshipping well, but their witness has fallen apart. Let me say this another way. Jesus is saying, I know all about your great programs, these great programs that your church has.

You got your catechism classes, you have a fantastic youth group, I hear your young adults ministry is thriving. You've rooted out all the false teachers within, and then you've built up all these walls around you so that none of them can get back in.

But as a result, there's walls between you and the world. You love me in your worship, but you've forgotten how to love me by your witness. Let me stop and ask you this.

[11:44] You know, at the end of the Anglican liturgy, the last thing after the doxology, what is the last thing that Aaron or the service leader will do? They'll offer a blessing, right?

And the blessing, if you've ever wondered what it's for, is a reminder to us that when we gather as God's people for worship, we're actually being built up for the purpose of being sent out into the rest of our week as witnesses to the Lord Jesus whom we love and serve.

So for example, sometimes the blessing will end with something like, go in peace to love and serve the Lord. It sends us out as witnesses after we've been built up by worship.

So Jesus is rebuking Ephesus for giving up their former zealous love for Jesus, which they'd expressed by their zealous witness to him in the world. And I think that's why Jesus twice reminds them of the lampstand.

The lampstand was in chapter 1 and here it is again in verse 1 and verse 7, sort of as bookends. Pardon me, not verse 7, verse 1 and the end of verse 5.

[12:52] So, let's look particularly at the one in verse 5. This is what it says. The second half of the verse. If not, if you don't repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

I'm going to take away your lampstand, Jesus says. What's a lampstand for? What's a lamp for?

You turn it on and it shines light, right? Or you can think about it in Christian terms, this little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine, right?

A lamp's job is to be a witness. One of the kids this morning says that it witnesses to his homework. It allows him to do his homework. He turns on the lamp so he can see the page.

He does his homework. That's a good kid. So it points a spotlight on something and the church's job is to point a spotlight towards Jesus Christ. To witness to Jesus Christ.

And so, Jesus is warning them here that if the Ephesian church does not repent and return to the love it had at first, the former love it had for witnessing to the cross of Christ, Jesus is going to come

and he's going to take away their lampstand because a church that only worships well but does not witness is not a healthy church and it does not please the Lord Jesus.

[14:15] Well, we move on into Jesus' third point which is his three commands that he gives. Isn't it great that Jesus offers them a solution to this problem? Remember that he's walking in their midst.

He loves them. And he gives them three R's to bring about change and to fix this problem.

Remember, he says, repent and then redo.

Remember, repent, and redo. And these are all in verse 5. Let's start with remember. I want to illustrate this with a story that comes from Acts chapter 19.

So remember I said that Paul was one of the first pastors in Ephesus. And when Paul went to Ephesus, he lived there for more than two years and he would preach, it says, day by day.

At first he was in the synagogue, he got kicked out of there so he rented kind of a movie theater and he would preach there day by day for I think four hours a day it says, which sounds pretty amazing to me. And after two years, what happened?

[15:13] Well, chapter 19, verse 17. The name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. This word extolled, it has the sense of amplified, it was magnified, it was broadcast far and wide so that Jesus' name was known throughout Ephesus.

Paul witnessed to the Lord Jesus. And what was the result of this? Well, I'm not advocating for book burning, but over 50,000 silver pieces worth of pagan books was burned as people turned from paganism towards Christianity.

And there's this great little section in Acts 19 where the silversmiths, you know those guys, the guys who make idols for this temple of Artemis I was talking about? They get together in their guild and they have a meeting and they're stressed out because the city is being transformed by the gospel and people aren't buying idols the way they used to.

And this is what the silversmiths say to one another. You see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people saying that gods made with hands are not gods.

There's danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence.

[16:30] She whom all Asia and the world worship. Isn't that great? A radical transformation taking place in a city spurred on by the bold witness of Paul in the Ephesian church, a witness that's married the faithful worship with this zealous witness.

And so here's a question for you. Imagine for a moment in Vancouver. What would be the equivalent? What would it look like if churches, St. John's and other churches in Vancouver were so on fire for witnessing to the gospel that a renewal broke out in Vancouver.

Thousands of people joined the church and we saw this kind of transformation. Imagine if all these Christians, their buying habits suddenly transformed overnight.

So an entire industry went into bankruptcy. Now, I'm trying to think of an example here that doesn't put any of you out of a job. So, but imagine for a moment if every Christian in Vancouver put their house up for sale so they could give their money away to the poor.

Imagine what that would do to the mortgage and real estate industry in Vancouver. Imagine if every Christian in Vancouver stopped shopping at Lululemon just because it's a Vancouver company. The fashion industry went bankrupt because we didn't care about body image the way we did before.

[17:55] You can think of your own examples but this kind of radical transformation, this is what Jesus is calling them to remember. Remember the zeal you had at first that brought about witness in the city. So second and third and much quicker, Jesus calls them to repent.

All that needs to be said here is when the Bible talks about repentance, it's very important that you remember that it's always talking about not only a change of mind and a change of heart but a change in direction.

Right? So, so that when Jesus says repent, and he says it twice, he's saying you need to change, you need to stop what you were doing, turn away from it and walk in a new direction with me.

And finally he calls them to redo, to return to the works they were doing at first. And obviously these can't be the works that he commanded them for, right? So these are, these works that they're called back to are the zealous works that they did as witnesses to the gospel, the works that were

described in Acts 19.

Remember, repent and redo. And finally, Jesus promises. Verse 7, Jesus says, to the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.

[19 : 11] This is a beautiful promise. You, you might remember the tree of life was in the garden of Eden and when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, he cast them out of the garden and he put an angel to bar their way to reaching the tree of life.

It was for their own protection. But now we see that through Jesus the way to this tree is open again. But this is very interesting. The word that we get that's translated tree here is actually not tree.

It would be literally the wood of life. And do you know what, you know, elsewhere in the New Testament, do you know what this word is used to describe? Any guesses? The cross.

That's right. Listen to this from 1 Peter 2. He himself, Jesus, bore our sins in his body on the tree, on the wood literally, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

By his wounds you have been healed. So Jesus' promise to Ephesus and to us is the promise to share in the benefits of his atonement, to experience eternal reconciliation with God and restored relationship and intimacy forever in God's presence.

[20 : 16] that's what it means to be in the paradise of God. Wow. And it's the cross, it's the cross of Christ that beautifully brings together, marries our worship and our witness.

Remember in John's gospel when Jesus says, when I'm lifted up on the cross, I will draw all people to myself. And perhaps you know this hymn, lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, till all the world adores his sacred name.

So to conclude, Jesus commends the Ephesian church for their worship. But he rebukes them for their witness.

He calls them back to this witness by offering them three solutions. He says, remember the love you had at first, the zealous love you had for me. Repent and redo, return to those works.

And he offers them the promise to the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life. To Ephesus and to St. John's, Jesus says, the best worship, the most orthodox, the most theologically accurate, even the best liturgy and music will never please me if it does not send you out as a witness to the world.

[21 : 43] So may our worship never be divorced from our witness. And may our witness never stray from true worship. With God's help. Amen.