

True Love

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] Give us your Holy Spirit and that great gift of repentance so that we might love you above all things.

We pray for your glory's sake. Amen. Please sit down. If you were to open up your Bibles to Revelation chapter 2 on page 228.

I am going to resist the temptation to tell you any rib jokes. I'm going to give you a break instead. Let's have a look at the Bible, shall we? Now you know that the book of Revelation is written to churches that are in deep anxiety and distress and fear.

Forces beyond their control are making the Christian faith increasingly dangerous. We have a number of eyewitness accounts from this period of history of Christians being attacked physically, tortured, killed, those who would not renounce the name of Jesus Christ.

[1 : 16] Now what do you say to a church that is in fear and anxiety and facing genuine danger? Well what God does in chapter 1 is he gives to his church an overwhelming vision of the risen Jesus Christ.

And the whole of chapter 1 is dominated by the majesty and glory of Jesus himself. And taking symbols from the Old Testament, we are drawn to the fact that Jesus Christ is the center of creation and the center of salvation and the center of everything that God is doing in the world, the center of our life as a church, and that everything we do depends on our relation with him.

Read chapter 1 again. Jesus is the one who has freed us from our sins by his blood. Jesus is the one who is alive, who died and lives forevermore.

Jesus is the one who is coming on the clouds. And that is why I think the central surprise in chapter 1 is in verse 12. If you were here last week, you will probably know that when the apostle turns to see the voice of the risen Jesus in verse 12, he does not see Jesus.

Let's read it. Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like the Son of Man.

[2 : 50] And then down in verse 20 it's explained to us. As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels or messengers of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

In other words, when John turns to see the risen Jesus, before he sees the one whose eyes are flaming fire, whose feet are burnished bronze, whose face is bright as the sun at noon, he sees the church.

The local church. And this tells us two vitally important things that we need to have clear in our minds before we look at the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3.

The first is this. It's the place of Jesus. Jesus is in his church. We may want to separate them. But Jesus and his church always go together.

The place Jesus is best seen is where his church is praying and believing and obeying and serving and listening. It is impossible in New Testament terms to have Jesus in this world apart from his church.

[4 : 05] And that has always been a major liability for the Christian faith. Because if you and I perhaps were going to design the Christian faith from scratch, wouldn't you want to find a way where we could relate to Jesus by ourselves without having to relate to the church?

Or at least a large part of our local church. It's so frustrating having to love one another when Jesus is so lovable and so full of goodness.

A private faith has always been so much safer and convenient. If all we had was Jesus, we wouldn't have to put up with one another's ignorance and arrogance.

And I think that's why some people say, I worship God on the mountaintop or I worship God in the sunset. I don't need to go to church. I think people say that because when you worship God on the mountaintop, it doesn't demand anything from me.

And it enables me to imagine I just have Jesus to myself. And the New Testament says, you can't do it. If we were reading this book, I think we would prefer to jump from the vision of Jesus in chapter 1, straight into the ecstasy of heaven in chapter 4, and miss out dealing with all the disappointments of the local seven churches in between.

[5 : 33] But chapter 1 tells us that Jesus is unashamed to be seen in his church. And the second thing that chapter 1 tells us is the true nature of the church.

You can't define the church, of course, by economics or sociology or education or anthropology or philosophy. But at the heart of the church is the risen Jesus Christ.

Because you see, it's God who makes the church, and he makes the church around the person of Jesus, of people who turn to Jesus and have faith in him.

Church only exists as it relates to Christ, formed by his word, sustained by his word, and by his living presence. That's why in chapter 1, there's such a heavy emphasis on the words of Jesus.

Twice, the apostle John is told to sit down and write what he sees. And he writes what he sees, not because these are human words about God, but because these are God's words to us.

[6 : 39] Because Jesus is in his church, and because the church is defined by Jesus, each one of the seven letters in chapters 2 and 3 begin with the person of Jesus Christ.

He knows exactly what is happening. So let's turn, we're going to look today, at the first letter in chapter 2, verses 1 to 7, to the church at Ephesus. Look how he starts.

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write, this is Jesus speaking, the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

The seven golden lampstands are the local church. In other words, the vision of Jesus isn't just abstract and wonderful. The real Jesus walks in his church, in Ephesus as in every church.

And in each church, the risen Jesus has very definite opinions about what is going on. As we look through these chapters, you can see that Jesus is Lord of his church, and he encourages, and he rebukes, and he commands.

[8 : 01] It's very moving to read these chapters. I mean, Jesus takes the opposite of a kind of take-it-or-leave-it attitude to his church. He has earnest desires for each local church, that he might be formed in us.

And Ephesus is a terrific place to start. I mean, it's one of the places, if you read through the New Testament, we know more about the church at Ephesus than just about any other church than perhaps Jerusalem.

It was a city of a quarter of a million, twice the size of Corinth, on three trade routes. And it had there one of the seven wonders of the world, the Temple of Diana.

Tremendous place for different religions and magic, sexual immorality. It was a major stadium and a marketplace, and they had a theatre built on the slopes of a hill, which looks down over the harbour, which seated 25,000 people.

This was a major city. And the gospel came there through people like Aquila and Priscilla. So strategic was Ephesus, that the Apostle Paul, on his third missionary journey, went straight there and spent two and a half years, longer than anywhere else.

[9 : 16] It was a remarkable time, and you can read about it in Acts 18, 19, and 20. And when he was imprisoned in Rome, he wrote a letter to the church at Ephesus, which we have as the Ephesians.

And he sent as pastor to Ephesus, young Timothy, and wrote to him, just before he died, the letters of 1 and 2 Timothy. And after Timothy died, we know the Apostle John spent time there himself.

And now Jesus writes to this church in Ephesus, and he tells them fundamentally two things. The first is this, that they are standing high on the truth.

Verses 2 and 3. He says, Here is a really active church.

I mean, this is a church that's working hard, not just going through the motions, taking their leisure time, and caring for one another, and reaching out to one another. And twice Jesus mentions their endurance, which means it had not been easy for them.

[10 : 36] There had been opposition and resistance. Because the whole way that the church had been founded at Ephesus had been a public relations and marketing disaster.

You remember when the Apostle Paul went to Ephesus and preached the Gospel, so many people came to Christ, and when they came to Christ, they abandoned their worship of Diana and gave away their idols and threatened the local idol lobby businesses.

And the idol lobby, I-D-O-L, organized a riot, and they forced the Apostle to leave. And from that day, Christianity was extremely unpopular and out of favor in Ephesus, and it never got any better. Christians in Ephesus made a stand against idolatry and the whole lifestyle that went with it, and they were hated for it. The public perception of Christians in Ephesus was desperately low, very difficult for them to make a public and unpopular stand on these things.

And I think it's always been the temptation for us who follow Jesus to try and make ourselves unnoticed, to flow in the center of the warm stream of cultural acceptance.

[12:02] Christians at Ephesus, they didn't take their faith lightly. They understood it made demands on them, and they knew what it was to be marginalized for it. And Jesus says, I know exactly how difficult you are finding it, and I am walking with you each day.

What made it worse for the Christians was a group of false teachers who had arisen within the Ephesian church calling themselves the Nicolaitans.

In Acts 20, when the Apostle last visits the church at Ephesus, he meets with the elders, and in a very moving speech, knowing he would never see them again, he seeks to strengthen them for the future.

Let me read to you a couple of words that he says. He says, Take heed to yourselves and to the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you elders.

Care for the church which he obtained with the blood of his Son. And then he says, I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock.

[13:13] From among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after them. Therefore, be alert. Now, in the history of the church, when wolves arrive, they don't have a big sign around their necks saying, False teacher, do not listen to me.

Their teaching usually offers a way so that we won't stand out in the culture and be so different. They find a way where we can fit in better with the flow of the things that our society approves and disapproves.

And we meet the Nicolaitans in verse 6 and then again in the letter to Pergamon. Let me just read verse 6. It's a very strong verse. Listen, you have, yet this you have, you hate the work of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Now, the Nicolaitans were trying to relax the word of God. And as we'll see as we come to Pergamon, they taught that Christians need not be so strict on the issue of idolatry or sexual immorality.

And of course, in Ephesus, it's the last place where you'd want to make a statement against idolatry and immorality. I mean, that's what Ephesus was there for. And the word Nicolaitan literally means conquer the people.

[14:39] This new teaching was conquering the people, conquering God's people by making idolatry and sexual disobedience acceptable. And I think the seduction was to make Christians feel they could be successful in Ephesus without making a clear stand on the word of God.

And my guess is that the Nicolaitans said they were not changing anything basic to the Christian faith, just improving it. But the Ephesians saw through it and they stood high on the truth.

They saw it was false and they came to hate what God hated. Now, that's very strong language. And I think I just want to make one comment on it and it shows to us that spiritual neutrality is an illusion.

That when it comes to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who is holy, holy, holy, there can be no neutrality. We could wish it would be different. We could wish he would be more convenient or pragmatic.

But I think if the cross of Jesus Christ shows us anything, it shows us that God is utterly committed both to his holiness and to his love. And Jesus commends them.

[16:01] You are standing high on the truth. But he has a second word for them and it is this. They are falling low on love. Look at verse 4.

He says, I have this against you. You have abandoned the love that you had at first. Yes, they were standing for the truth, but their love had cooled.

They had worked for God and rejected false teaching, but the glow of love had died and they had become rigid and merely correct.

Instead of devotion, they had only accuracy. Instead of affection, they had only theological precision. Now, make no mistake, Jesus warmly praises them for rejecting what is false.

But it is a deep sadness to him when his love is unreturned. They had left their first love. In terms of the fire of their devotion, they were coasting and they were cooling and it grieves Jesus.

[17 : 13] It grieves him when other things come between us and him when he is no longer first. They had a grim and determined grasp of orthodoxy, but it wasn't tempered with the sweetness of love.

And a new generation had risen within the church who were true and right and correct, but they had no fire and no zeal and no passion for Christ. And we know what that looks like, don't we?

Without this love, a commitment to serving others can be soul-destroying. Without this love, a commitment to truth just becomes hard, lifeless.

And without this love, suffering itself becomes nothing but bitterness. You see what the letter is saying to us? Working and maintaining the truth is not the same as loving Jesus.

Now let me just pause here a moment and ask you a couple of questions. What do you make of this idea of loving Jesus? You know, and Felix asks the kids if they love Jesus.

[18 : 21] Is there something you'd be happy to put your hand up? I know we don't put hands up in this church, but you know what I mean. Do you know what it is to have a desire to want to do something extravagant and spontaneous for Christ?

You may have been attending a church for more than 30 years. Have you ever felt that you just wanted to say something to Christ to tell him that he is everything to you?

Or have you ever had that moment where your heart joins your lips as you're singing a hymn or praying a prayer? Or have you come to the place where you know you've got to forgive someone because you suddenly realize what it cost Jesus to forgive you?

That's what first love looks like. And of course it's not confined to our relation with him. First love cannot be hidden from how we relate to other believers, nor to those who perhaps have least claim on our love.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying the Christian life has an ongoing equal intensity of devotion. I think there are seasons when all of us will feel a profound sense of disconnection from the person of Jesus.

[19 : 38] And many of us struggle with this vague sense of guilt that things ought to be better than they are between Christ and me and we wait for something to happen and we wait. And the lovely thing about this letter is Christ offers us a way through this vagueness with one command.

Look at verse 5. He says, remember then from what you have fallen, repent, do the works you did at first, if not I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent.

It's remarkable. I mean you might expect Jesus, if he's trying to get people to love him, to come to us and avow his undying love for us 10,000 times over, but he doesn't. Nor does he tell us to have the right feelings.

He simply commands us to repent. That is how we return to our first love. It's by repentance, the change of mind that leads to a change of direction.

It's not waiting till we feel bad. It's taking action to completely turn our back on everything that God calls to be sin. You can't love Christ and sin and embrace sin at the same time.

[20 : 52] In other words, the first step away from lovelessness is to turn to him and ask his forgiveness. And Jesus warns us, if we do not, he will remove our lampstand.

Do you not find that incredible? Jesus would rather have no church at all than a church that will not repent. No church has a secure and permanent place in this world.

It doesn't matter if we were duly and legally constituted. It doesn't matter if we are 500 years old. It doesn't matter if we have complete unity. Every church must be marked by deep repentance or Christ will come and he will take the lampstand away from us.

And what guarantees our lampstand is not our denominational affiliation, it's not our budgets, it's not our programs, it's not our cultural relevance, it's whether we repent and live in love with Jesus Christ.

And that is why if we tamper with repentance, this church's light will be extinguished. The building may remain, the clergy may remain, I hope they don't, the congregation may remain, but Christ

himself will have left, taking with him the lampstand.

[22 : 12] Verse 7, He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

I wonder what Jesus would say if he came to St. John's. Do you think he would say, I know your works, your endurance, your faithful stand for the truth, but you have abandoned your first love? The Ephesian church was very strong when it came to the head, but not so good when it came to the heart. And the organ that connects the head to the heart are the ears.

For these words are words of God to us this morning because they are what the Spirit says to the churches and not just to one church. They're the words of the living Christ, words which will save us and give us life if we repent and turn to him.

And he calls on us as a congregation and individually to face our sloth and our pride and our greed and our self-righteousness and our immaturity and especially our lack of love.

[23 : 29] And to leave them behind as we turn to him and trust him, the one who freed us from our sins, who has opened the paradise, the gate of paradise for us and promises to take us to himself.

Amen. Let us kneel to pray.

Amen. Let us kneel to pray. Amen. Let us kneel to pray. Amen. Amen. Almighty God, from whom every good prayer comes and who pours out on all who desire it the spirit of grace and supplication, deliver us when we draw near to you from coldness of heart and wanderings of mind, that with steadfast thoughts and kindest affections, we may worship you in spirit and in truth.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Lord, as we come before you this morning, we would ask that you would make us extremely aware of your presence with us.

Help us to realize the love that you have for us in spite of the things that we do that displease you. Help us to realize that you are with us when we have lost awareness of you and of your presence, when we are so consumed with the importance of what we are doing for ourselves that we forget what we should be doing for you.

[25 : 23] Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. prayer. We pray for our civic leaders, locally, provincially, and nationally.

We pray for the Queen in her Jubilee year. We ask that you will give each guidance in the decisions that they have to make and pray that all of our leaders would be aware of your hand in the events of our times.

We ask that your will for our lives will be evident to each of us, even in the differing circumstances that we have. We ask that your will for our church and denomination will be evident to us and to those who have to make decisions concerning our future.

Thank you for your presence at the Vestry meeting on Tuesday evening. and as the leaders of our church move forward, we would ask that they would be aware of their need for guidance and that we would be aware of their need for support and for prayer.

Even when we disagree with the direction that is being taken, help us each to realize the importance of continuing support for our trustees and the pastoral team.

[26 : 53] And we would pray now for them, the pastors, support workers, teachers, trustees, and others who give tirelessly of themselves in ministry to our church family.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray also for the leaders of the Anglican Church worldwide, for the direction of your Holy Spirit in their lives and in their work. Help each of them to be aware of the immense responsibility that is theirs in caring for the spiritual lives of millions of people.

Give them ears to hear what you are saying to your church today. We pray for the Canadian Church as it continues to work through the residential schools issue. We pray for our Bishop Michael as he deals with the issue of same-sex blessings.

We pray for those who have been affected by these happenings and ask that you will make each of us aware of your leading in the decisions that each of us has to make.

[28 : 10] Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. We rejoice with those who are rejoicing. We think this morning of Howard and Esther McElwain who are celebrating their 40th anniversary.

ministry. We pray for comfort for those who are hurting. We pray for encouragement for those who are down in spirit or in circumstance.

We remember those now who are sick and pray for their healing. Specifically, we remember Rowena, Bill, Bobby, Marjorie, Phyllis, Ilo, Penny, and Jerry.

And in silence now we each remember those whose needs and names we know. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We are aware of the meaning of true love as we speak of it and how shallow it is compared with the love that you have shown to us in giving your only son to die for our sins.

[29 : 44] Thank you, Lord, for the gift of eternal life that you have given to us. And as we celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus this morning, help us each to realize the depth of love that you showed in sending your son to die that we might have life.

Help us to remember our first love, to repent, and to return to that love. O Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.

Amen.