

Love For God & One Another

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[0 : 00] Our God, would you give us the grace to listen to you as through your word you speak to us. Give us, just open our hearts to your word, and open your word to our hearts.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. The passage that I'd like you to look at is the passage read from Revelation 2, verse 1, which is the letter to the church in Ephesus.

And you will, I hope, know that we have been tracing the story of Ephesus in the New Testament from the first time Paul preached there, and then when Apollos came along, and all the things that happened in the church in Ephesus, when Timothy was made the bishop of the church in Ephesus, and finally, a generation or two later, the last word about Ephesus in the New Testament is this letter to the church in Ephesus, which comes to the Ephesian church about as long after it started as this congregation this morning is, distanced from the congregation that built this church.

So what's happened in the meantime in Ephesus, and what we look at in this letter to the church in Ephesus from Revelation 2 is the last New Testament word about a church in a city which is now a ruins on the shores of the Mediterranean.

There was to start with, let me tell you a little bit about a book reviewed in a newspaper article which I saw some time ago and I've referred to once before, I think, and it's about the French being a very rude nation.

[2 : 18] I have nothing against the French, and so that's not my purpose in reciting it to you. People are often very rude about Canada or about England or about other nations, and the picture I want you to get is that seen as a whole, you can sort of characterize people, even though those people may not see it in themselves.

So if you are a visitor here this morning and know virtually no one, you will be characterizing us as a whole congregation, supposing that you stand over here and the rest of us are over there and that you have that kind of perspective and that you will see things about us which we won't see about ourselves.

But this is somebody, a sociologist kind of a person, who wrote a book called Frankoscopy, 1989. That was his word. And he says about the French that they, he noticed a disease which he called egology, that is egology, you know, and that individual selfishness and disregard for society at large was the main symptom of this disease.

It said further about France in the contemporary world that despite the economic crisis, the French paradoxically tend to work less, not more.

[4 : 10] And according to his calculations, absenteeism, strikes, and coffee breaks amount to a loss of work equivalent to 25% of the turnover of French industry.

We get so many numbers that we don't pay any attention to them anyway, do we? But that's quite a significant number if you do stop and think about it. He says the more important reason that people behave that way is because French don't like work because it obliges them to be sociable and function as a group.

Which is one reason why a lot of people don't like church. Unless it caters to their...

I won't go on. The next thing it says about them is that the self-centered Frenchman is convinced he has every good reason to resent other people.

Now, I'm not sure that can be applied strictly to the French and not to others because the dynamics of our relationship to one another are very interesting indeed as you can observe them from week to week.

[5 : 44] We see each other in very different terms. We have... At Main Island this summer had just... an almost infestation of hummingbirds around the feeder.

Each one of them beautiful, beautiful birds with wonderful agility and they're just magnificent to see. But they despised each other and they fought each other and attacked each other under the slightest provocation.

And that's... maybe a little parable to the way people behave. You know, you can see them as very beautiful on their own but in their relationship to one another something seriously... something is seriously wrong. And that what tends to... what tends to be true for us in society, in groups is that we tend to have anger towards other people, resentment towards other people, and a strong unwillingness to be grouped together with other people.

And we tend to be very exclusive about that. And that's what this sociologist said about French people which isn't very unusual about anybody, I don't suppose.

[7 : 08] Well, I want you just to see that picture and then I want to turn now to Ephesus and the church in Ephesus where Paul preached, Paul planted, Apollos watered, God gave the increase, the silversmiths, the silversmiths, the silversmiths, there was revival, there was renewal, there was imprisonment of St. Paul, there was Timothy, there was a mission to the whole country which was brought under the hearing of the gospel.

It's presumed that the Apostle John was one of the subsequent bishops of the church in Ephesus before he was exiled to the island of Patmos from which he wrote his letter. And you can imagine the church in Ephesus remembering their tearful farewell to Paul when he left them at Miletus on his way to Jerusalem and hearing subsequently of the death of Paul in Rome. And here this congregation has persisted and gone on and now they get this letter. And the letter is, if you look at it, you will see that it is the Spirit speaking to the churches. That's in verse 7. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches, that God was speaking to this congregation. And as we had the children trying to listen to the heart of God as God listens to the heart of us, so as a congregation we need to listen to the Spirit of God as he speaks to us as a congregation this morning within which I hope you will include yourself no matter how far away from here you may live, that God by his Spirit speaks to us. So this is, there's that wonderful picture of who it is that is speaking. The picture that comes in in the first chapter of John when John has the vision of Christ and a terrible and awesome vision it is. You know, in the midst of the lampstand one like a son of man clothed with a long robe with a golden girdle around his breast, his head and his hair were white as wool, white as snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters, and in his hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. Very powerful picture. But such is our risen and ascended Lord, and he graciously speaks to us by his Spirit through his word, and we need to listen. So the Lord addresses the church in Ephesus.

Now, I want you to sort of think of yourself as being there, as I will think of myself as being there. And this is what the Lord has to say. You have worked, and to which from my heart I reply, have I ever.

We have labored. You don't know how we have labored. You don't know the work we have done, the telephone calls we've made, the visits we've made, the letters we've sent out, the committee meetings we've sat through, all those things we have gone on. We have worked, and you can see the result of the work. I mean, there it is. And it's very tangible. So, Lord, you're right. We have worked. That's what he says.

I know your works. And he says, you have toiled. We can say, yes, Lord, we have toiled. Largely without recognition and without appreciation. But we have toiled. So everybody's in agreement so far.

[11 : 25] And that's nice that the Lord recognizes this work and this toil. And he says, you have endured with patience. Well, yes. I admit that particular congregation to which I belong demands that.

And you can... And that the Lord knows that that's true, and that it's not only true for me regarding you, it's true for each one of you regarding the rest of us, you know. And so, to be a persistent and consistent member of this congregation, to endure with patience is something you have to be able to do. That's all there is to it. And you would like not to have to, but there it is.

And enduring with patience is something you're called to. You have been intolerant of evil doers. Yes, indeed. We've run them out of town.

We just get rid of them. Those who claim to be apostles, that is claiming apostolic authority without having an apostolic message, you have renounced their claim.

Yes, Lord. If orthodoxy is what you want, we've got it. And then the Lord says to the church in Ephesus, what's more, you're still doing it. You are enduring patiently, and you're not growing weary.

[13:04] Yes, Lord, but don't forget it's at some cost. You know, the fact is we don't have as many people as we used to have, and... But we have a much higher quality of people in this congregation now, as you can see. And this has been the result of patient endurance and not growing weary.

I suppose that's all you have to say, Lord. And then the letter goes on. But... sort of a magnificent but, you know, like the story we had of Nathan this morning talking to David, you know, telling him this story.

And David saying, where is the man? He deserves to die. And Nathan's saying, but... you are the man.

So, uh... the Lord says to the church, you have abandoned the love you had at first.

And... you have abandoned the love you had at first. Your love has grown... cold. And with that, the whole spiritual machinery of the congregation has seized up. It doesn't work anymore.

[14:27] It just grinds itself to pieces. Because... you have abandoned the love you had at first. And that is an essential commodity.

People come and ask me lots of questions, you know. Questions like, uh... How can you learn the faith without being a... Without having to be a Sunday school teacher?

And how can you join a church without having to serve on a committee? And, uh... the questions go on and on like that. And, uh... The, uh... The, uh...

The quest... the answer is... That whatever you do, the absolute minimal requirement for whatever you do, whether it's sweep the floor or balance the books, or preach the sermon...

It requires that you are in touch with the love you had at first. Otherwise, it simply doesn't work.

[15:36] And so, uh... He says to the church in Ephesus, you've lost the love you had at first. Love has grown cold as time goes by.

And the reason I read you all about France and that thing at the beginning is that any stranger coming into this congregation could tell.

I don't know whether they could or not, but I suspect they can tell whether there's any love here.

There's an ambiguity about this love. Is it love for God or is it love for one another?

The ambiguity is that it doesn't say, but must certainly include both. A love for God, which inspires you in the beginning, and a love for one another, which is the result of that love for God.

That that is the thing that makes it work. And in the letter, it goes on to say, so the thing you have to do is to remember the love you had at first.

[16:39] Now, this is probably a very poor analogy, but I heard on that nice old-fashioned radio station in Vancouver a lovely song called, Oh, give me land, lots of land under starry skies above.

Don't fence me in. That reminded me of the love I had at first. I mean, that is my first love when I was 16 or something like that.

It brought it all back. You know, there I was. That was a reminder, you know. And that faded quickly.

But our love for God and for one another is to be a continuing and eternal reality. Just as he said, I know that you're still patiently enduring.

I know that you're still not growing weary. But I also know you're still not loving. And loving is the thing that's got to go on and on and on.

[17:47] And without it, the whole exercise is a supreme waste of time. It really is. It burns up so much energy and accomplishes so little.

So he says, remember the love you had at first. Let it come flooding back in upon you. Perhaps as you sing an old and familiar hymn, or read a familiar passage of scripture, or be quiet before the Lord, that you may be reminded of your love for him and his love for you.

And that you might live out of that love. And if you get out of touch with that love, then your wheels start to spin in the sand spiritually.

Second thing he says to do is remember and then repent. Do the work you did at first. Now, the work you did at first had about it the kind of naivety of, in a sense, being an impulsive response to the fact that you loved.

Now, all the work we do is a calculated response to the timetable we have in our diaries, and the business requirements that are made on us, and the plans we have for next year, and on and on it goes.

[19 : 11] And we decide that much as we'd like to, we can't really get around to it till perhaps next year. And that's not what he wants. He wants you to repent and do the thing you did at first, the works you did at first, that kind of loving response to the situation in which you find yourself.

Look at the text again, just so that you will see it. When it says, remember that you then, from what 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. Well, the seven lampstands, as it says at the end of chapter one, are the seven churches.

If the activity of repentance is not going away, the church is not a church. It's removed. That's what it says. I see it. You can look at the text yourself.

But repentance is to be the continuing, persistent, central activity of the church in Ephesus. And perhaps in Vancouver.

[20 : 33] And the thing is that we're so, so blessed, we're so blessed. Because we have so much to repent of. So it shouldn't be hard for us to find a place of repentance in our lives.

You don't have to look very far or be guided by God's Holy Spirit in examining your own life and circumstance to find ample opportunity to repent.

And unless repentance is a kind of throbbing heartbeat of the church, the church, the Lord says that I just remove the lampstand. This, as far as I'm concerned, may be a Sunday morning congregation, but it's not a church.

Because repentance is not happening. He goes on and commends them and says, you hate the work of the Nicolaitans and so do I.

And I think that's because if you love passionately, you hate passionately. You hate the thing that obscures the wonderful reality of the gospel. As it's to be lived out in the lives of people on a day-to-day basis.

[21 : 42] And so you still have the ability to hate passionately, so you must once have loved passionately. Return to that. Then he says, he who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Now, I came across a wonderful illustration of that this week. I read an essay by Aldous Huxley. And Aldous Huxley refers to us having a cerebral reduction valve.

Are you aware of your cerebral reduction valve? Well, that's because our world is so full of color and light and sound and activity.

And there is so much going on that we would just be as it is spaced out if we tried to pay attention to it all. So we put our cerebral reduction valve into place so that it omits everything but the thing we have to deal with right now.

And we're able to carry on. Now, what most of us, and perhaps even Aldous Huxley, and I don't know, used his cerebral reduction valve for, could be the wrong thing.

[23 : 01] That is, he stopped hearing what the Lord was saying to the churches. He stopped hearing the Word of God. He stopped hearing what the Son of Man had to say.

And so he was experimenting in drugs to see if drugs could, in a sense, remove his cerebral reduction valve. And they blew it to pieces but left him without the ability to cope at all, as he records.

So we've got to be very careful that our cerebral reduction valve doesn't lead us to the place where we don't hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

And the passage continues by, ends by saying, To him who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

And you know that Genesis starts around a tree, and that that tree was the means of man's disobedience, and brought sin and death and condemnation.

[24 : 20] And now in the city into which the people of God come, that the source of their life is now a tree, the tree of life, and they eat from that tree.

And in Paul Barnett's book, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, he talks about that tree as being the cross of Christ.

That that is the tree. And that is the tree, the fruit of which we eat and from which our life derives.

That we partake of that tree. We speak of that in the prayer at the end of the communion service, when we talk about our almighty God, who feeds us with the spiritual food of the body and blood of thy Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Of the cross being the benefits of his passion, by which we are nurtured, and by which we are given life. And so the passage ends for the church, having commended its orthodoxy, pointed out its difficulty, I mean the thing that was missing, and then concluding with conquering and sharing in the fruit of the tree of life, which you read about in the end of Revelation as well.

[25 : 59] We share in that food and are nurtured by that in our spiritual lives. So, it's important, isn't it?

I mean, it's such a simple picture of what a congregation is all about. And it's so easy for us to do what this passage says. Fall from the heights.

You know, it says that when it talks about having abandoned your first love. Remember then from what you have fallen. And when we come together, on a Sunday morning, I suppose by scripture, by psalm, by hymns, by prayer, by fellowship one with another, we are to remember from what we have fallen and seek the grace of God to restore us to that place.

And that place is the place where our hearts are overflowing in love for God and in love for one another. And in that place, we are sustained not by any earthly resource, but by sharing in the benefits of his passion, the spiritual food of the body and blood of Christ.

We are kept in that way. And that's what God has called us to. So, hear it again.

[27 : 39] He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to this church and to the churches. Amen.