Revelation 2:1-7 "Heart Check from Jesus"

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[0:00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

! It's great to hear.
That afternoon I heard from another visitor who said, I wanted to let you know what I experienced this morning. During that greeting time that y'all do, I turned and shook my wife's hand next to me, and then we stood there, and no one else talked to us, so we sat down.
Hmm. Hmm. It's good to get both kinds of feedback. There are always things to be grateful for because Jesus is at work in His church, and there are opportunities for growth because we're not perfected yet, right?
But just imagine this morning that I got a message about Southwood, not from a one-time guest, but from Jesus Himself.
[1:31] Remember, He's always here, right? He sees everything. He even knows what's going on in our hearts, not just the stuff everyone else sees.

Wouldn't you be interested to hear what He would have to say? Man, that'd be interesting. Here in the next section of Revelation, Jesus, who is giving John this entire revelation of Himself, this whole book, has personal messages for each of seven churches, messages that deal with them directly and specifically because He knows each of them individually, but also messages that benefit all of His churches.
He tells all of us to read all seven of them. So we're going to do that in the weeks ahead. As we do that these next few weeks, it may feel a little bit like reading someone else's mail, right?
I get that. We don't live in first-century Turkey like these churches. We're in 21st-century America. But if that's difficult for you, I'd encourage us all to listen closely to these words because they're the words of Jesus.
[2:57] And He is still the King of this church. And His universal priorities and His heart for us remain exactly the same.

So listen for both kinds of feedback, for commendations and for critiques, that would apply to you and to us.
As I read from Revelation 2, the first seven verses. To the angel of the church in Ephesus write, the words of Him who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.
I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and you found them to be false.
I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.
[4:04] Remember, therefore, from where 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, unless you repent.

Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
To the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. Let's pray. Father, we do ask for ears to hear.
We want to hear the words of our Savior, our King, that He would speak to our hearts. So help us to hear, and help us to respond as He would have us.
So work by Your Spirit, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. These seven letters from Jesus to the churches follow many similar patterns, you'll notice as we read through them.

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[5:14] First, there's a greeting to the angel, either the human or the heavenly messenger of this church. This time in Ephesus.

Ephesus, like Huntsville today, was a happening city at this time. It was not the formal capital of its region, but kind of the unofficial capital, a prosperous city on the sea and trade highways.
And the worship of the emperor was big. There had a big economic impact on the local town. And Ephesus had these really neat arenas. You can still see many of them if you go, but neat places to gather, highlights of the city, especially one of the wonders of the ancient world, the temple of Artemis.
Artemis you could worship right alongside whoever was the current emperor. And there was also in Ephesus, a church of Jesus, started by the apostle Paul with the help of Priscilla and Aquila, taught by Paul himself for multiple years.
So they've heard some decent preaching there. They've gotten, in fact, a very biblical letter written to them already. We call it Ephesians. But now this message is sent by, who's the sender?
[6:44] It's the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the lampstands. Remember King Jesus that we saw last week?

That he's great beyond imagination. And he's good beyond measure. He's with his churches, right, among the lampstands.
And he's holding them, each of them. That's the reminder for the church in Ephesus. Specifically, Jesus is saying, I'm with you and I'm holding you.
And I know. Every single one of these seven letters starts with the words, I know. It's not a threat. It can kind of sound like that to us. Although there are warnings in most of these letters. It's a word of hope, right? I know.
[7:43] The God that you trust in, the one who conquered death and holds the keys, he sees you. And he knows you. Whatever you're facing that you think no one else sees, no one else understands, he does.

He does. In this case, Jesus, knowing everything, begins with commendations, positive things that he knows about the church.
And I hope that's encouraging to you. Isn't it great to know that Jesus actually delights in the work, the good work being done in his church by the power of his spirit? He's pleased.
He first mentions the works, the toil, that the church is working hard, not being lazy. These words are general words, but they speak to effort being exerted for the sake of the kingdom.
Let's be clear, busyness does not equal godliness. That's not how it works. But perhaps here, work discipling one another in the way of Jesus, right?
[8:49] I picture this being the way Jesus feels at the end of day three of VBS here at Southwood. You've worked hard. You're tired, but it's a good tired.

Tired toward the right things, toward worthwhile ends. Way to go. He also applauds their defending of the truth, their doctrinal fidelity.
You can't get false teaching past the Ephesians. They are on their guard, right? People pretending to speak for God who teach anything against the Scriptures are exposed.
They guard, as we do, against legalism and against license, against a prosperity theology that says suffering indicates a lack of faith, against specifically mentioned here the works of the Nicolaitans. That's verse six. Hating the same false teaching that Jesus hates. We're not certain about all the teaching of the Nicolaitans.
[9:54] There's more in another letter here coming up. But likely, there was both idolatry and immorality involved under the guise of Christianity coming into the churches.

Some taught that in this culture where to get by economically and professionally, you might be well served to bow down to Caesar when asked.
It could be a good idea for you. Some taught Christians could do that, could go along with that. You know, go to church and worship Jesus but on your way home when you pass by Caesar's temple, bow down outwardly, you know, as long as you don't really mean it in your heart.
It makes people happy. It'll make life easy. It's okay to do that, they said. Perhaps they would say even the same things with Artemis' temple and its prostitutes.
As long as you don't really mean it in your heart and leave your wife or something like that, sexual ethics can be flexible. It's part of the booming Ephesian economy where you live.

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[11:04] You gotta be a part of this to get along in the world. The Ephesians have heard these ideas and they have rejected them as Jesus does, hating them.

Even when other Christians around are compromising, defending the truth is important. Just ask some Reformed Presbyterians if you're not sure. We'll let you know. One more commendation. They're enduring patiently, bearing up under suffering for the name of Jesus, not getting weary. Y'all, that's not easy. That's not an easy thing to do in a culture that scoffs at your narrow-minded one true Savior beliefs.
It's not an easy thing to do when it costs you personally or it limits your church's role in the community. That's not an easy thing to keep doing when you feel you're plowing through concrete with your friends and neighbors and it's easy to get tired of working uphill, right?
But Jesus says keep it up. Southwood, he genuinely delights in our work, in our faith, in our endurance. I mean, who wouldn't want this report card from Jesus?
[12:20] Good work ethic, solid doctrinal fidelity, faithful suffering endurance. What more could Jesus possibly want from any church?

As it turns out, that's a good question. An important one here for the church in Ephesus and I'd suggest an important one for us to consider this morning.
Have you stopped lately to think about the kind of relationship that Jesus has with his church, with his people? It's really important because we get in a lot of kinds of relationships.
It's important to understand that relationship is not a business arrangement where we are needed to help him reach his bottom line and get some stuff done.
The relationship between Jesus and his church is not a political alliance where you don't have to like him as long as you get him the votes and you support his agenda.
[13:23] That's what he needs you for. No. No, we miss it when we forget that, y'all. That's not it. The Bible pictures, our relationship with Jesus is a marriage covenant.

Right? It's very different. A marriage covenant where we live for one another out of love, where Jesus lays down his life because of his great love for us, where we love him because he first loved us.
A marriage. Now, how many of you would be thrilled with a marriage where your spouse says, look, I do lots of stuff to help our family. I'm faithful.
No cheating. I don't even complain when things are really tough. But I don't really feel anything at all toward you.
I don't look forward to spending time with you. I don't love you. Now, don't get me wrong. There are things to be thankful for in that marriage.
[14:34] But you are longing for something more, right? There's just something really missing at the heart of that kind of relationship. Listen to Jesus' words after sincerely and substantially commending the church.

Verse 4, But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. This is his singular but substantial critique.
Leaving your first love. That's really the best translation here. First is an adjective. It means then at least first in terms of priority.
But quite possibly first in terms of chronology as well. Like it sounds when you read the love you had at first, back then. And people debate whether this means their love for Jesus or their love for other people.
There's really no reason that we have to choose, right? All through the Bible, love for God is the foundation of love for neighbor. If you've left your first love of God, you're probably not loving others deeply, sacrificially from the heart all the time.
[15:59] And if you've left your first love of others, you're probably not loving Jesus deeply from the heart either. It's all about you, not Him. So both concerns are vital to any church.

Whether we're sure of the struggle in Ephesus or not, both of them are issues. Remember what Paul said to the church in Corinth? If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to move mountains but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, if I deliver up my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing.

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You can do a lot with a faithful work ethic but lack love and you've done nothing. This is a danger for activist churches eager to serve, for doctrinal churches eager to defend the truth.
we can forget the heart that made those very things priorities in the first place. It is a particular danger when you are right about a lot of things to overlook the need to love those who are wrong or hurting.
[17:26] When your church looks pretty good on the surface in a lot of ways to overlook heart problems because you really don't believe there could be anything deeply wrong with yourself.

There's too much good going on. So I want to ask you to do something that could be a little tough. I want you to reflect just on last week if you were here.
If you weren't here, the last time that you read or listened to teaching about Jesus, is it possible that we see Jesus and our attention is not attracted powerfully to Him?
Just be honest about the past few days. When you saw last week the vision of the resurrected Jesus in all of His glory holding the keys of death and hell because He went to the cross in your place and then you saw and heard Him putting His hand on you and saying don't be afraid, fear not, I'm with you.
Did your heart skip a beat? That may be hard to say. Did your attention go back to Him over and over this week as the most worthy thing that you could possibly be spending your time thinking on?
[18:55] did you reconsider a single thing about the way you spend your life or the way you spend your time or how you think about your death? See, if you can read for example Revelation chapter 1 and stay mostly unchanged or unmoved then you ought to wonder if maybe you've lost your first love.

I'm not joking. Jesus wants our attention, our affection, our adoration, our heartfelt obedience, our cheerful giving, our joyful service.
He is gloriously worthy of it all. All. Think back like Derek asked us to do earlier. do you thank Jesus the way you did when you first realized that he died for you?
Do you share of him the way that you did when you first cared more about what everybody thought of Jesus than what they thought of you? Do you spend time listening to him in his word the way you did when you first learned of Jesus but you really didn't know much at all and you just eagerly ate everything that you could?
We need to ask one another those honest questions in our grace groups in our families an honest heart check right? It's good listen you can do it because Jesus is not pressing you on this to beat you up but to build you back up you can tell by what he writes he's offering you a lifeline revelation is a love letter remember he's offering you a way back to your first love don't ignore it listen to what he says in verse five remember therefore from where you have fallen wherever you've seen that you've lost your first love remember what it was like previously at first repent turn back to Jesus from whatever has distracted you from whatever it has turned back to Jesus see
[21:20] I'll just give you some possibilities maybe you've been telling yourself for now that first love is the kids for a season it makes sense my calling is to love them but maybe in so doing you have put them at the center and you've subtly unintentionally taught them that they're central and that they're more important than Jesus repent maybe you've been telling yourself that for now first love is career just for a few years you'll get things established and then you'll get back to living with Jesus friends you'll find that that's a pattern of life that is hard for your heart to break from after just a few years repent now repent back to Jesus maybe maybe the way you think about it is

I've been going to church pretty regularly and I'm still doing lots of good stuff for Jesus I tithe pastor back off right but on the way home from church you're bowing down to these other gods kids or career control busyness pleasure success power comfort self if you see that in your heart bowing down anywhere else even while you're doing lots of good things the call is to repent it's not to go be ashamed go sit in a corner no it's turn back to your first love repent and do the works you did at first a change in your life not just your heart if not I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent do you see him putting the repentance out there for you he speeds back to it again unless you repent do this take this option the lampstand is the one that marks us as a church of
Jesus Jesus is not playing around this is a challenge for us together not just us individually move into that mindset family mindset do we ever let busy programs become more important than hurting people do we ever care more about being right and people being happy than we do loving people and people being discipled toward Jesus do we ever get more focused on meeting budget than on

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meeting the loss do we ever love preaching the gospel of grace more than we love the God of grace do we ever love defending the truth of the gospel more than we love the God of truth do we ever care more about keeping the world out of the church than we do about getting the church into the world oh
Jesus when we do and when we ever do any of those! when as we confess they are prone to do call us back to repentance to our first love of you to our first works of loving others Jesus is giving us the gift of a heart check he's inviting us back I always find convicting the parable of the life saving station the story goes that on a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks often occur there was once a little life saving station the building was primitive there was just one boat but the members of the life saving station were committed when a ship went down they unselfishly went out day or night to save the lost because so many lives were saved by that station many people wanted to be associated with it to give their time talent and money to support its important work as the membership grew some of the members became unhappy that the building was so primitive and the equipment so outdated they wanted a better place to welcome the survivors pulled from the sea so they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged and newly decorated building now the life saving station became a popular gathering place for its members but fewer members were interested in going to sea on life saving missions so they hired lifeboat crews to do this for them about this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast and the hired staff brought into the life saving station cold wet dirty sick and half drowned people the plush carpets got dirty some of the exquisite furniture got scratched so the property committee immediately had a shower built outside the house where the victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside at the next meeting there was a rift in the membership most of the members wanted to stop the club's life saving activities they were unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal fellowship of the members insisted that life saving was their primary purpose and pointed out they were still called a life saving station but they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all those people who would be shipwrecked they could begin their own life saving station down the coast they did but the pattern continued there and if you visit that seacoast today you will find a number of adequate meeting places with ample parking and plush carpeting shipwrecks are frequent in those waters but most of the people drown what great love they had at first they got drowned in an ocean of selfish priorities how sad when we lose sight of the
Savior who came not to be served but to serve and the mission to seek and to save the lost that he calls us to join him in as we walk with him it's a heart check Southwood how's our heart for Jesus for Huntsville for the world he who has an ear let him hear what the spirit says to the churches not just to Ephesus but if we have ears to us that will be at the end of every one of these letters with a promise as well to those who overcome who conquer it's the word nikao the Greek word for victory you thought you didn't know Greek yes you do Nike victory just do it right except that just do it is not what's being said about victory in
[28:57] Revelation the biblical motto for Nike is just trust him in Revelation Jesus is the ultimate conqueror the victor over all evil and conquering overcoming we'll see throughout the book means for us sticking with him no matter what comes repent of the other loves just trust him come trust Jesus again and the promise here is that as we do Jesus will grant us to eat of the tree of life in the paradise of God we don't even know how wonderful that is what it means is that we will be fed and blessed and provided for forever by the king who even now leads us in green pastures who even now prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies who delights to eat with us now and forever from the greatest tree in the greatest garden highlighted by the greatest savior that that meal with him forever is what we're rehearsing for today as we come to this table to be fed and nourished by that same savior who promises to eat this meal with us in his father's kingdom that's the paradise of god hear his words to his followers on that night that he was betrayed

Matthew records it for us in his gospel that as they were eating Jesus took bread and after blessing it he broke it and gave it to his disciples as I ministering in his name give this bread to you he said take eat this is my body in the same way after supper he took the cup and having given thanks he gave it to them saying drink of it all of you for this is my blood of the covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins and then Jesus said I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my father's kingdom Jesus looked at the cross and then he looked beyond the cross to the eternal meal that he would share with you so certainly as we sit at this table today we look at the cross and then we look beyond the cross to that eternal meal that

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we will share with him so if you rejoice and find your hope in loving
Jesus and being loved by Jesus then Presbyterian Baptist Jesus follower baptized in his name come and eat with us and with him and look forward to eating with him forever!
If that's not your hope if you don't long for Jesus and feel loved by him and desperate for his love we want you to know we're really glad you're here with us today and we welcome you to come to these tables and observe if you would like if you prefer to stay seated right where you are but above all else we want you to see Jesus and his love for you here let me pray and then we'll come and eat together Jesus thank you for the gift of your life and your death and your ongoing life that gives us hope would these common elements be used this morning for something so much beyond what we could imagine in our hearts that you'd call us back to our first love that we would repent and come repenting of things that distract us from you and yet find you again to be the one that fills our souls thanks for meeting with us we ask it in your name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org and to to to to to to away!

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