

Revelation 2:1-7 - When You're So Right You're Wrong

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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.
- Turn with me, if you will, this morning to Revelation chapter 2. That's right, you heard me. Not Ephesians. Revelation chapter 2. We'll talk about Ephesians some too.
- It's really good to be back this morning. We actually finished our walk through Ephesians a couple of weeks ago. But I think since we've spent much of this calendar year in the book of Ephesians together, that it's well worth a look back for a couple of weeks at what God has taught us, at what He has shown us there, at what He's had for us as a church.
- So we're going to do that this week and next week, call it Ephesians in Review. Particularly next week, we're going to look back at the highlights of Ephesians. Some of the great things in that letter itself.
- But to help us prepare for that, I want us to look this morning at another letter to the same church. We've been studying Ephesians years after that letter from Paul to the church in Ephesus.
- [1 : 17] John records a letter from the risen Jesus to the church in Ephesus. It's in Revelation 2 at verse 1. These are the very words of God.
- Let's give them our attention and our reverence. Revelation 2 at verse 1. 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 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.
- 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.
- [2 : 23] 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.
- The grass withers, the flowers fade, but these words of our God will stand forever. Pray with me. Father, we ask for your help.
- We ask because these are your words. We ask because we are those who see, but don't understand sometimes. We're those who understand, but don't desire to change.
- We're slow to see the weakness in our own hearts. We're slow to know you more. And so, would you show us ourselves?

Would you show us Jesus? Would you make us different because of that? We ask in his name. Amen. As we have studied Ephesians together, one of the key points that Paul has been at pains to make in that epistle is that we must keep our truth and our doctrine, our doctrine, excuse me, and our practice connected.

[3 : 40] The truth that we believe and the way that we live, they have to be connected to each other. How we believe impacts how we behave in every aspect of life.

That's what Paul does in Ephesians, right? He spends the first three chapters telling us these glorious truths of the gospel of God's grace. He tells us what he's done for us and he spends all this time teaching us these things and then in the last three chapters, he says, now I'm gonna tell you what that means in every area of life.

I'm gonna tell you how it changes the way you live here and here and here, the difference that it makes. And next week, I'm so excited to get to look back at some of those great truths, some of those challenging applications and specifically remember those from Ephesians.

But as we prepare to look back, this letter here in Revelation to the church in Ephesus is a reminder of how vital it is for the church to connect truth and life together.

And how easy it is in any church, not just the church in Ephesus, for truth and life to get disconnected, to be torn apart and how devastating that can be.

[4 : 52] To help us understand what's going on in this letter, let me tell you a little bit about myself that some of you may know. I really like being right.

I always have. I grew up in a family that played a lot of games, a lot of sports. We were very competitive. I'm the firstborn in that family and as the firstborn, it's very important that you always be winning and that you always be right.

And so from an early age, that was very important. So what you do is you learn all the rules to the games and to the sports and for two very important reasons. One is it's a great way to get ahead if you know all the rules, right?

You can use them to your advantage. But what you can also do, and I learned this early, that one of the great joys of sports is getting to yell at the umpire or referee who missed it.

And that's really a great joy. So if you know the rules better than he does, you get to yell at him and tell him what he should have done, how he's gotten it wrong. I went to college and I became a copy editor for a newspaper.

[5 : 56] And so when you're a copy editor, you really need to know what's right. You need to know exactly where every comma is supposed to be and not supposed to be. So you learn all the rules for comma placement.

It's very significant. It's like being an engineer with words if you've never done it before. So I'm suspecting there are others in this room who like to have things just right.

Anybody like things like just so, just the way they're supposed to be? Some of y'all, that stresses you out. I understand. But some of us like it just right. In order to humble a guy like me who always wants to be right, God has given me a wife who is right way more than I am.

Christy is smarter than I am, so she's right about lots of stuff. But she's also more intuitive than I am, so she sees a situation and she understands what's going on and what's going to happen next and so she's always right about that and it's these rare moments where I'm right and she misses it.

God uses that. He knew I needed that. But of all the things I love to be right about, I think theology tops the list. I mean, is that a fair thing to be at the top of the list?

[7 : 05] I mean, many of you don't care at all about the rules of sports or the placement of commas. It just doesn't matter to you. But I mean, our doctrine is vitally important, right?

What we believe about God, our theology, I mean, we better get that right. We find out in this passage that it is indeed a really big deal. God is the God of truth.

Satan is the father of lies. So distinguishing between truth and falsehood is of great importance. We might even say above all else. It's why Paul taught the riches of the gospel of grace over and over to the Ephesians in person and then he wrote them a letter about it.

It was the mystery he was tasked with telling them, right? It's what Jesus commends the church for in this letter in Revelation. Look at verse 2. What does Jesus say to them?

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 and you found them to be false.

[8 : 06] I know you're enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake and you've not grown weary. You're finding the truth and you're rooting out the falsehood. On top of that, you've found specific false teachers.

The Nicolaitans, you hate their works and I do too. You've honed in on the truth. Jesus praises them for holding fast to the truth they've been taught.

We don't know all the particulars of the false teachers in the beginning or the Nicolaitans in verse 6. We don't know everything it was that they taught but the Ephesians have carefully tested these teachers.

They've heard what they've said and they've found falsehood and they've zealously weeded out those who were misleading them even to the point that they hate some of the teachings and God says, I do too.

Listen, we must never compromise on God's truth, right? God has entrusted the truths of the gospel to us so that we will treasure them so that we will know Him and that by knowing the truth we'll be able to sniff out counterfeits.

[9 : 12] Call them what they are. You know, when there are millions of wrong ways to do something the best way to recognize them is to know the right way, isn't it? You don't have to memorize every wrong way to spell a word, do you?

What do you memorize? You memorize the right way to spell it and all of the wrong ways, all the mistakes you could make become easily identifiable as wrong. It's why when we turn back to the start of Ephesians next week we'll find Paul insisting on reminding us over and over of the great truth of God's grace to us in Jesus Christ, the basis of our hope because he's going to say it's vital that the church never get distracted from that, never get tossed about or led astray as Ephesians says by every wind of doctrine.

He wants our anchor to hold firmly in Christ, right? And so Jesus says here, these are the words of Jesus to the church, he says, well done Ephesians, good job, you've been right, you've sorted out the false and the evil without wearying in your work, you've rejected the wrong in favor of the right, keep up the good work, well done.

But then things turn, don't they? This is where those of you who are like me, who love to be right, start not liking this sermon so much.

And I want you to know I didn't know what was going here when I started studying this letter. I didn't know it was headed this direction and all I can say to you is I don't enjoy it any more than you do.

[10 : 50] That's really encouraging, right? That's what you wanted to know. Listen, I know you don't like the sermon, I don't like it either. That's all I got for you right now. Don't you just love being around people who are always right and know it and love it?

Yeah, people who love being right. You don't? You mean, you mean they're known for being insufferable to be around? You mean they're known for critiquing everybody else for always telling you how you're doing it wrong?

For making umpires and refs feel like dirt? For making friends and co-workers feel incompetent and worthless? You mean you don't need someone to spell check your grocery list?

I always thought that was going to be so helpful. See, the Bible says that truth, that knowing and believing the truth of the gospel should lead to love.

It should lead to love for God, love for neighbors, he says, even love for enemies, especially love for each other in the body of Christ.

[12 : 00] Those things should be connected to each other, but oftentimes we fail to make that connection. We are right, but we're unloving. So right, I would say, that we're wrong.

Look at what Jesus has to say to the Ephesian church that he's just commended for being right. He says, but I have this against you that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

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. He said, you stopped loving.

You have abandoned the love you had at first. Ouch. You quit loving. You missed the big one. Certainly loving Christ, loving those outside the church would be included in this love that they've stopped, but particularly here, what seems to be in mind in this letter is love for each other within the church.

You can see that a little bit from the context. It's not just a feeling of love that we would love God or something like that, but the response is to be repent and do the works you did at first.

[13 : 19] This is active loving. This is demonstrating love, showing love to others. And we know well from the book of Ephesians what is the love that Paul talks about to them regularly.

It's that bond of unity that they have in Christ, isn't it? The love they're supposed to have for each other that he commends them for and now he's saying, you've lost that. You've abandoned that love.

And it's not a light thing. It's not just a little mistake, they took a wrong turn. How serious is it? Jesus says, if you don't repent and do the works you did at first, I'll come and remove your lampstand from its place.

That means you won't be a church. Yikes. Rightness without love is sub-Christian.

Listen, it's true that truth matters. A lot. Love without truth is at best mere sentimentality. At worst, it's false hope.

[14 : 23] But what this passage is highlighting and what we often miss, what we in our circles with a Presbyterian heritage, a Reformed heritage, are much more prone to miss, is that truth without love is at best mere moralism.

And at worst, it's false teaching altogether. That's what Jesus is saying. It's less than Christian. Jesus says, I'll take the lampstand away. Francis Schaeffer once said, I've said this recently, biblical orthodoxy without compassion is surely the ugliest thing in the world.

And Jesus says here, you got your truth right, but you lost love, and so you're in danger of losing Christianity altogether. You got truth right, but you lost love, and you're losing everything.

Reminds me of Jesus' warning in Matthew 24 about these last days that we live in. What he says is that many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. They didn't get the Ephesians, did they?

No, they found the false prophets. What else is going to happen? Because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. They passed the first part of the test with flying colors, but part two, they failed.

- [15 : 42] Reminds me of 1 Corinthians 13, what Paul wrote about love there. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
- If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and have faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I'm nothing. If I give away all I have and deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.
- You can know a lot of right things, but if you don't connect it to loving, you've gained nothing. In fact, if you don't connect your right theology to loving, you'll probably start thinking how much righter you are than others.
- You'll know lots of right things and without love, you'll just become more and more right. And that happens a lot. Sadly, the Ephesian church is not the only church that's happened to.
- They're not the first ones and they won't be the last ones to struggle with it. In the history of the Christian church in America, Presbyterians included some of our best, richest, deepest theologians, people we still read and learn from had great truth, but they were blind to their own racism, their hatred.
- [17 : 02] They failed to love those who were different from them to our great shame. They disconnected right theology from that arena of life. And we're just beginning to get our hands around the gravity of this sin as a church, as a denomination, and see our deep need to repent.
- Because where there was a lot of truth, there was a lack of love. You might ask, how does something like that happen? I mean, really, guys who love Jesus so much, who know God so well, how do you make such seemingly obvious mistakes?
- We might think, how could you ever miss that one? How do the Ephesians fight for truth so well and love each other so poorly? I don't know all of what developed in Ephesus, but at least a couple things I've seen in my own heart and life and in Christ's church that fit with this letter.
- I think we get so focused on being right that we can become obsessed with what we're against rather than what we're for. And so, differences of any type become grounds for critique and conflict rather than cause for celebration.
- instead of focusing on truth and deepening our understanding of God and who He is and knowing Him, we become like heat-seeking missiles except we're difference-seeking missiles.
- [18 : 30] We're looking around where can we find differences and we don't look for differences so that we can celebrate them and say, isn't that beautiful? We do it because we want to critique. We want to find a reason for conflict because if you're wrong then I'm right and I can be better than you.
- So we focus on the differences. It happens with racism in the church, right? Maybe we can understand it better if we think about marriage. Have you ever allowed a difference in how you and your spouse approach something to create distance in your relationship rather than love?
- Has that ever happened? Have you allowed your love to grow cold because she spends money differently or he washes the dishes differently?
- Have you ever seen a distance grow there? And now, I know all of you right people are objecting at this point. Yes, but there are better ways to budget.
- Some ways are better than others and there are some ways that are better to wash the dishes than others and that may be true. That's not the point. The point is have you allowed the difference to create distance in your relationship?
- [19 : 45] Have you begun to think of yourself as better and to let bitterness and contempt grow in your heart over the difference rather than appreciating the difference perhaps?

Or if it does need to be addressed, I mean, you can really wash dishes poorly, addressing it graciously in a way to restore a loving relationship rather than create distance.

the difference is diversity is part of the beauty of the body of Christ but when we are right and not just right but desperate to see ourselves as right, others have to be wrong so that we feel righteous or at least better than you.

I have to be better than the next person and it happens quickly, doesn't it? Disconnect truth from love and we're unloving very quickly.

we lose love immediately. We see it in our homes. We see the distance grow. It happens in our churches too. Happened in Ephesus, in America, in Huntsville.

[20 : 55] Some of you in this room, I've hurt because I love to be right. I said it glibly earlier but it's true and it hurts people.

When conflict comes in a church, a lot of times people become identified with positions and when you have a position or a perspective that's different from mine and I'm desperate to be right, a lot of times rather than listening to you, rather than seeking to understand you, I want to argue against you.

I want to defend myself. I want to be vindicated and so I don't love. I pursue the truth and I forget about love and when you've been to seminary and you've been trained to do so, you can throw at people not just chapter and verse of the Bible but you can throw confessions of faith and books of church order and catechisms that brothers and sisters of yours haven't even read and use them to defend yourself rather than to love someone else, to be right and prove someone else wrong and I may have been right sometimes but I have sometimes failed to love as well and deeply wounded people who are on my team, people God has put in my life for me to care about and love and there are probably others I've hurt and don't even realize it maybe some of you that I'm so concerned with being right that I don't even realize I've hurt you and that's part of my sin, part of what I do and have done in the church.

You don't have to be a pastor though. You don't have to have a degree in theological rightness to fail to love others. You just have to be desperate to be right than someone else.

to treat a brother or sister as an obstacle or an enemy because what you want is right. To ignore the pain someone else is experiencing because the feeling of being right is such a high to you that no one or nothing else really matters.

[23 : 16] Happens here too, doesn't it? Do you feel it in your own heart? Do you know the reality of wanting desperately to be right?

Does your heart right now protest like mine does? But I was right! That vindicates me! I was right!

About the dishes. About the doctrine. About the decision. We've all at times individually and corporately disconnected truth from love.

What we believe from how we behave and we've hurt others and practically speaking not in what we've said but in how we've acted denied the reality of the gospel.

That's pretty serious. That's pretty bleak, isn't it? Just shut me down, Jesus. Shut us down. We've blown it. Isn't that what you'd feel if you got a letter like this?

[24 : 20] Is that what you feel when you realize that's true of you? You've been right and unloving? What does Jesus say to his church?

Jesus says, repent. Look at verse 5 again. 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. Repent. Do what you did at first. Repent. Repent.

Love the way you used to love. Repent. Repenting means turning from sin. It means a change of direction. Turning away from our sin and turning back to Jesus.

I just want to make one observation about the repentance in this passage. Who is told to repent? The false, evil apostles.

[25 : 22] No. The heretical Nicolaitans. No. The right ones. The right ones are told to repent.

They're the ones who need to start. That's not the way we would write it, is it? Listen, I'll do repentance and forgiveness, reconciliation as long as they start, as long as they come and apologize to me.

Then I'll repent. As long as they start, the repentance will be good. Jesus says, you repent. Parent who's seen a child go off and lose his way and felt, I told you so, while the relationship has grown distant, you repent first.

How has your rightness contributed to the love growing cold between you? boss who's belittled an employee for failing miserably? You repent first.

How are you so right that you were wrong? Church member who has allowed distance to grow in a previously tight, loving friendship with a brother or sister who treated you or your church wrongly?

[26 : 54] You repent first. Have you been so right that you were wrong toward them? You know the beautiful thing about repenting?

When we finally get to the point of saying, I'm not the right one. I'm actually willing to admit that I'm wrong to turn from that. To say even, I was so right that I was wrong.

When we turn from that in repentance, who do we turn back to? It's Jesus. It's Jesus' rightness, righteousness that we turn back to when we repent.

That's the hope of the gospel, right? That's where we turn. For those of us who are stuck in our self-righteousness, so intent on being right and proving ourselves right and having it all so that we can be right enough, the call is not get away from me, from our Savior.

That's not what he says, is it? That's not what he says to the Ephesian church. The call is, turn back to me. See me, see the vision of him. You know how this letter starts?

[28 : 05] Jesus gives the vision of himself that goes back to Revelation chapter 1, the one John has just seen in a vision. Jesus says, verse 1, 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.

That's this vision of Jesus just a couple verses before who's standing there and John sees Jesus and says, he's righteous, he's holy, he's magnificent, he's powerful and you get this detailed description of Jesus and he's holding his church in his hand.

What's he saying to his people? Is he saying get away from me? No, he's walking among the seven golden lampstands. He's with them, isn't he? He's holding them in his powerful right hand.

When you, who are so convinced that you've got to be right, finally are willing to admit you're wrong, you look back and find Jesus standing there, not sending you away but saying, turn back to me.

If you've disconnected your theology from love, if you've so wanted to be right yourself that you've become wrong, repent and look back at your Savior.

[29 : 21] See him in his pure righteousness and holiness. John says, shining as the sun at full strength and when you fall as though dead before him in your guilt and your shame, listen to what he says to you.

He says, fear not. Fear not the one who blew it, the one who was so caught up with being right that he failed to love.

Fear not, my rightness is for you. You are forever pure in my robes and safe in my hand. Forever. I've got you and now in that security with no more need to prove yourself right because you've got my rightness given to you, now in that security, go, turn, repent to others.

Go love again like you did at first that your church would shine the glory of his name as you love the truth and love each other too.

[30 : 29] Let's pray. Jesus, might we see you that way this morning. Might we see your rightness as so much more beautiful than any rightness we could defend for ourselves?

Might we truly receive it and know that it is ours by faith and then might we be free in that to repent? To say we've forgotten to love.

We've neglected to love. we've intentionally been unloving, hurtful, hateful, spiteful. Father, thank you that there's hope for us.

Thank you that there's forgiveness for us and forgiveness to extend to others. Might you make us a church where the truth is never compromised and where it is always connected to love?

Might we love the way you have loved us? We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.