

# "Loveless Orthodoxy"

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning. It's good to see you all. I have to remember not to look at the clock because it stopped.

We could be here for a long time. I've still got 35 minutes according to that. So I'm going to take my watch off so I can see that as well. Alright, good.

But will you pray with me as we go to God's Word? Lord, this morning we come and we ask for you to be with us by your Spirit.

You have revealed yourself to us in your Word. And Lord, we recognize that, Lord, by ourselves, Lord, we would not be able to understand or receive it.

But by your Spirit, Lord, help us this morning. Help us to receive your Word as we ought. And Lord, help us to respond as you call us to.

[ 1 : 06 ] Help me, Lord, as I speak this morning. Give me clarity of thought and of expression. Lord, that together we might sit under your Word. We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. You know, it's a fascinating thing when you drive around New Haven. Because you see buildings that clearly were once thriving congregations, or at least seemingly so, that are now museums, condos, or if you've been around long enough, some of them are now parking lots.

And there is no more church building. The church that was once alive is now dwindled. There are some churches in New Haven as well where they still have a building.

They still have a marquee out front. But if you went inside, you would similarly see there's no church left inside. Whatever they gather for, it could be a social gathering.

But there is no God in the middle. There is no gospel. There is no Bible. How could this happen? What might cause this?

[ 2 : 21 ] Well, there are lots of reasons. We're not going to try to explore all of them this morning. But I want to point to one because it's related to our text. And that is the problem, the issue of loveless orthodoxy.

That is, there are churches that can, while on one hand holding to true doctrine, historic doctrine, lose their love for God in the midst.

And this is what our passage this morning brings us to. If you want to turn with me in your Bibles, we're on page 965. We're in Revelation chapter 2, which is our passage this morning.

As we continue our series in the book of Revelation. And we're going to, as we're thinking about this, just as a reminder, the book of Revelation is a vision that God gave to John, a letter, a message to the church to encourage them.

And the content over all of this vision is to see Christ victorious over all of the opponents and forces that stand up against God and His kingdom.

[ 3 : 36 ] And it is given to strengthen resolve, to encourage faithfulness, to live for Christ even when it was costly, even in the face of persecution.

And as we've talked about, this vision is a beautiful, lovely, but sometimes slightly confusing vision because it uses a language of apocalyptic imagery to communicate.

And so we'll see this morning, this comes into our passage a little bit as we come back and forth.

And so we need to be prepared for that, right? Because we're going to be talking about normal things like endurance and faithfulness, and then suddenly we'll be talking about lampstands.

And you'll be like, what in the world? Well, we'll get there. You'll see what it's about. Our passage is in Revelation chapter 2, verse 1 through 7. And as we're looking at this, we need to remember what John has already seen and said.

What he's seen at the beginning is an introduction where Jesus is speaking to John saying, this is a letter for the churches. And then in verses 9 through 20, he's saying, and the one who is speaking

to you is the exalted Christ.

[ 4 : 51 ] This, again, we see this apocalyptic literature of Christ who is the one who brings life, the one who has all power, the one who will win the victory. And he's bringing to them, in this first section in the book of Revelation, seven messages to seven churches.

And again, we might think, well, you know, did Paul just think, or did Jesus just think these were the churches that he most need to speak to? No, we don't think so. Because there are seven of them, we think he's speaking actually to the whole church, and he's picking seven real churches in real time, but he's taking them and saying, in this, we see the church throughout all ages and throughout all times and in all places.

So he speaks these seven words, these seven letters and seven messages in chapters 2 and 3 to the churches, both at that time and to us today.

And what we want to be asking is, God, what do you have to say to us, our church, today, through this letter? So let's read Revelation chapter 2, starting in verse 1 from 1 to 7.

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

[ 6 : 18 ] 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. 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 the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

This is God's Word. As we look at this, as we look at this passage this morning, I want us to see five things.

[ 7 : 39 ] We're going to just walk through the passage. It's pretty simple, pretty straightforward. We're going to look at five things about what God wants to say to us through this passage. The first is he's going to talk about the context, the cultural pressures that the Ephesians and that the church today faces.

The second thing is the commendation, that Jesus has words of praise, that they have fought for doctrinal purity. And then the third thing is that Jesus has a concern, that they have lost their first love.

The fourth thing, Jesus calls the church to respond by remembering, repenting, and renewing. And then the fifth thing that I want us to see is that Jesus reminds us of a consolation, that is, there is a future goodness, a comfort for those who are faithful in response to it, that we get to partake of life with our eternal God.

So if you're taking notes, there's your five, I even got five C's, did you notice that? A context, commendation, a concern, a call, and a consolation.

So I'm feeling pretty proud about that. I'll be really honest with you. So, okay. So here we go. Let's walk through this passage together. First, the context.

[ 8 : 59 ] To the church in Ephesus. Now, what do we know about Ephesus? Well, Ephesus in the first century was a major city. It was probably one of the top five or six cities in the whole Mediterranean Roman Empire.

It was known for its cult of the emperor. It was also known for one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Temple of Artemis. It was a huge physical structure. And it employed thousands of priests who were, many of them also, temple prostitutes because of the way that worship happened in those areas.

Ephesus was a major city that was full of lots of worship, including a cult. If you go and read Acts 19 and 20, you'll see some of the different stories about what happens as the church is growing up. During that time, Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos seem to have planted the church. Paul spent almost two years ministering to the church here. He caused a ruckus because the gospel started to have such an impact that it was affecting the economics of the city because the idols, the metal idols that were being produced, were no longer such a hot commodity.

And so they created a riot in the city. The metal workers created a riot because the gospel was transforming the city. But what we do know is that for Christians in that day, it also was a hard place to be a believer given all of the other religious practices in the city.

[10:32] The prevailing culture would not have been to support the worship of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. In fact, in Acts 20, when Paul comes back through and he meets with the elders at Ephesus, we'll read this passage later, but he warns them, false teachers will come among you.

There will be people who will come and seek to distract and destroy this church. So be ready and be on guard against these things. Friends, I wonder if you can make the connection that our day is not that different.

Our temples are not particularly religious. They might be financial. They might be cultural. We certainly have some really churchy-looking buildings right over in that university, right over there, that feel a lot like places of worship, don't they?

In different ways. The things that we worship may not be Artemis or other gods of statues, but they might be power, wealth, pleasure, independence.

And they offer, as in the first century, things like security and meaning. This is what our idols do, and we live in a culture just like that.

[11:53] Let us not fall into the misperception that we live in an exceptional age where somehow the church is in a different kind of challenge. It's not.

We are in a characteristic age. And so God speaks to us. Jesus comes, the one who holds the stars, which, again, you go back to chapter 1, the stars are the angels, are the spirit of the church. And as there are seven of them, he's talking to all of the churches, right? And Jesus comes as one who walks among the lampstands. That means that he not only sovereignly oversees them, but he also knows them intimately.

So he comes to us speaking in a context he understands. And he says, I know where you live, and I know what you're facing.

So then to this church, the second point is, he speaks a word of commendation. He says, you have loved truth and resisted false teaching.

[12:54] They have pursued in doing this. There have been those who have come among them who are evil, who claim to be apostles, that is, people sent from God, who are not actually from God, who are not speaking truth, because it's been measured against the teaching of the apostles that has been recorded and laid down and now is preserved for us in the New Testament Scriptures and the Old Testament Scriptures.

And people have come into Ephesus and taught different things, and they've tested and they've tried them, and they've clearly seemingly had conflict with them in the sense that they have said, no, that's untrue.

They've resisted false teaching. They've done a good thing. They've done it in the face of things that the apostle Paul knew would happen.

Here's the words he spoke to the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20. I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. And then later on he wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy chapter 4 verses 3 and 4 a similar warning.

[14:12] The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

And Jesus says to this church, you have done well to resist these men and these false teachers that have come in. They even hated, in verse 6, the Nicolaitans.

And you know what? We don't know much about the Nicolaitans, right? There's a little bit more information. It's referred to in chapter 2 verse 15. We could make some guesses but here's the thing that we most need to know.

Jesus hated whatever the Nicolaitans were and whatever they were selling. And the church stood with Jesus in doing so. And so Christ commends them for their right belief.

Recognizing again in the cultural context that holding to this message, this message of Jesus Christ, the God-man who lived and died and rose again for the forgiveness of sins, this would have made them outcasts.

[ 15 : 24 ] This would have made them outsiders in the world that they lived. It would have exposed them to persecution. Friends, does this sound familiar to you?

It can be hard in our day as well, can't it? To hold to faithful, biblical Christianity. We live in a world in the West here where once there was a lot more resonance between at least a Judeo-Christian worldview and ethic, but not so much.

And things that might have been assumed in generations past can no longer be assumed. And we live among a culture that has different values, different gods.

And not only is the Christian faith regarded perhaps as optional or unimportant, but we're coming to the point where it may be viewed as evil or destructive.

We're extending forgiveness to someone who has wronged you, is seen as evil. We're sacrificing personal advancement or success to serve others is seen as foolishness.

[ 16 : 41 ] The exclusivity of the gospel rankles our pluralistic world. We are viewed as offensive, arrogant, even colonial or oppressive to say Jesus is the only way that we can know the God of the universe.

And you know, here's the thing. It's not just in the culture out there. The problem that, as Paul warned, the problem is in the church too.

The church in the cultural milieu of the day is struggling to know what is true. We can think of people like Rob Bell who loves the love of God so much that he excluded other parts of clear God's, clear ways that God has revealed himself.

And he's abandoned biblical Christianity. We can think of someone like Bart Ehrman who denies the deity of Christ and the authenticity of the scriptures. And this is not to say anything about how in the last 10 years there's been a whole movement within even our tribe of biblical Christianity or evangelical Christianity, not the political kind, but the spiritual kind, even in that where there's been a movement to abandon clear biblical teaching on gender and sexuality.

And look, we don't need to be fighting the culture wars, but we do need to hold to the truth. And when we do that, we too will feel like outsiders.

[ 18 : 14 ] And we may face ridicule and ostracization or even anger and scorn. And I know you feel the pressure.

I know I feel the pressure. And so Jesus commends the church in Ephesus, you have held fast to this. Will Jesus do that with us?

What would Jesus say to you, to me? How are we holding fast to truth? Have we become afraid of doctrine because it's felt too divisive?

Have we become so enamored with religious experience that truth doesn't matter anymore?

Friends, let us hear this commendation and let us be encouraged to pursue truth and to defend it the way the early church did in Ephesus.

But not all is well. Not all is well in Ephesus. Though this is true and this is good, they have held to a kind of orthodoxy. He says, this I have against you.

[ 19 : 26 ] This is the concern, point three, that Jesus has. That though they maintain truth, they have lost their first love. That is, they have lost the love that they had at first.

Believers, do you remember what it was like when you first understood the gospel? Some of you may have grown up in church and you don't remember a time when you didn't know it.

But that's not my story and I know it's not a lot of your story. Do you remember how amazing it was when you realized that the God of the universe cared about you and he loved you and that the problem that you felt in your heart was actually the problem of sin because you were alienated from God and from others and from yourself because of your sin.

And God had come to reconcile you to himself by sending his son. Do you remember how wonderful that message is?

This is the first love. This is the first love that Jesus is reminding them about.

[ 20 : 41 ] And listen, that first love may have many aspects because it has an object. We love God and because we love God, we love his people and we love the world in his name.

So our first love has this characteristic of being loving people. Loved first and foremost for God and then from him to others.

And it is a wholehearted love. It's not a when I get around to it kind of love. Paul says, do you remember this?

You've forsaken it. It's so easy to do, isn't it? Why do we forsake our first love? A couple of thoughts pastorally for us.

I think we often get distracted. We lose sight of God in the midst of the busyness of our everyday lives. Sometimes it's because our lives are full of pleasure, friends and family and hobby or even our work, things that we love to do, but it draws us away and we love these things more than we love God.

[ 21 : 53 ] Sometimes it's urgent needs when we're facing health crisis or care for children or different things where we just get distracted from our devotion to God.

Sometimes it's when we let good things in our life become ultimate things. So our desire for success or desire for a family or our desire to be a certain kind of person in the world, these things get exalted above our devotion to God.

So I think distraction is one of the reasons we do this. The second thing is that there are times we lose our first love because maintaining it is costly. It costs us to pursue truthfulness in our workplace when it runs against the prevailing ethic.

It costs us to value corporate worship on Sundays over fun. Now you guys are here. I'm preaching in the choir.

I get it. But let's recognize that. It costs us to prioritize gathering with the saints. It costs us to forgive one who's wronged us rather than harbor bitterness.

[ 23 : 17 ] It costs us when we are persecuted for our faith, when we feel the scorn of our peers, our fellow students, when we are overlooked at work, when we are excluded from social circles in our high schools.

It costs us when we love God first. So we might be distracted. We might find that the cost is high. The third thing that can cause us, I think, to lose our first love is suffering. Because when you've walked a road of loss and trial, we just get overwhelmed and we lose sight of Jesus.

Some of you who are facing chronic pain, how easy it is for that pain to just fill the screen and you can't see anything, including God. Sometimes the relational pain of a broken relationship can do the same thing with our emotional life and we are no longer able to love God.

We lose sight of Him. Friends, how easy it is for us to lose our first love. This Jesus warns.

[ 24 : 35 ] This is His concern about the church in Ephesus and is a church for a warning for us as well. But Jesus does not leave us there.

Having expressed His concern for us, He then, point four, He calls us. He calls us to respond. And He says two things in this. This is in verse five.

Look with me if you want to. We can look at it together. Remember, therefore, from where you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. So these are the two commands to respond, right? Remember, like children, little children, we often lack object permanence, right? With a little baby, you can show them something and then take it away and they're like, where did it go?

They have no idea that it actually is just behind your back, right? So we do that with God, spiritually. We are like little children in that way. And that's why the Bible tells us over and over again.

[ 25 : 36 ] Remember, remember God's work and His faithfulness. Remember God's faithfulness in your story. Can you remember seeing the fingerprints of God's hand in your life?

Can you recount the stories of the ways you've seen God intervene, the way He's taught you, the way He's molded you, the way He has shaped you, the way He has helped you?

Do you remember those things? And then the Bible says, don't simply remember those things, but remember what God has done in history. Go back to the creation of the world where He laid the foundations of the earth and separated the water and the sea and put the lights in the sky so that we might have life, right?

Remember the Exodus when God with a mighty hand delivered His people from slavery to Egypt, the greatest power in the world at that time. How He overcame their army, how He parted a Red Sea, how He provided for them with water and manna in the wilderness and cared for them and brought them into a land, a promised land.

Remember Jesus Christ who humbled Himself took on human form, became a human like us, walked this earth, lived a sinless life for us, and then went to the cross to die for our sins.

[ 27 : 10 ] And yet He did not stay dead, but He rose from the grave to conquer sin and death and to accomplish a redemption that is His great victory over all the forces of evil in the world, His great redemption that He is now working out now.

And one day, as Revelation will tell us in just a minute, one day we'll remake the whole world in a glorious beauty that's beyond our imagination.

Remember these things. We should be those who build Ebenezer piles. You know what Ebenezers are? Thus far the Lord has helped us.

That's what it means, Ebenezer. Ebenezer. It's a stone of remembering. And if you remember, when God brought Israel across the Jordan River in Joshua 4, He stopped the river so that they could walk across on dry land.

And then He said, before I'm going to bring the water back, go into the middle of the river, pull out 12 stones to represent the fullness of God's people, and make a cairn on the side of the river so that when your children come and ask you, what do these stones mean, you can say, the Lord has been faithful to deliver His people.

[ 28 : 31 ] And so Jesus says to us, remember. Remember Jesus and all that He has done for you.

And then He says, on top of that, repent. Now, repentance is just turning away, right?

The phrase, biblically, is the idea of, I'm looking in this direction and I'm turning and looking in a different direction. I'm going in this direction and I turn and I go in a different... There are four parts of repentance.

One is to agree that the direction I'm going right now is not good. If we have lost our first love, we must recognize this is not a good thing. This is the warning He gives at the end of verse 5.

The lampstand will be removed from us. If we don't restore ourselves to a relationship with God, we in the end will be lost. We will not be one of those...

[ 29 : 29 ] We will not be His people. We will be an empty, dead church. We will be an empty, dead person if we do not see this renewal happen.

So agree that where we're going now is bad and it needs to be changed. Turn away from it. Say, that's not what I want to pursue. I want to pursue something else.

Forsake our allegiance and our loyalty to whatever is so capturing our hearts over here and then turn. Turn towards, back towards our first love.

Turn back towards Jesus and His redemptive work in our life. Turn towards this. This is the hope that Jesus gives us is that we can do this.

If you've placed your faith in Christ, you've already done it once. Because when you came to faith in Christ, you said, I'm a sinner. I can do nothing to make myself right before God.

[ 30 : 27 ] But Jesus has done everything for me so that I can, by faith, receive His acceptance, His forgiveness, new spiritual life. All we're doing is remembering and re-walking down that path again.

Not for a new salvation, but a re-engagement with the salvation that we have. So repent and return to God who loves you.

And Jesus finishes His word with a word of consolation. This is what verse 7 is. It's a part of a form. We'll talk about this form as we go along. All of these seven letters to seven churches have seven parts that have a form that goes to it.

And there's this form that says, to him who has ears, let him hear. Kind of like what Jesus said about parables. Listen to what I'm saying and as you receive it, let it do the work that I want it to do in you.

And He says, here's the consolation. Here's the prize. Here's the hope. To those who overcome, to those who continue in faith, who don't lose their first love permanently, but who turn back, I will give them the ability to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.

[ 31 : 47 ] Friends, this is drawing on, obviously there's no tree that Jesus is talking about that we can find over on the green and pluck a fruit from, right? We're moving back into imagery here.

But the image is such a rich one because you remember in the Garden of Eden, there actually was a tree of life as well as a tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

and Adam and Eve had only to obey God and they could eat from this tree of life. But they didn't. And so they lost it and they were barred from the tree of life, from life with God, their creator, for eternity.

And we have lived in that ever since. But Revelation is going to tell us that there's going to be a day when we can go back.

Revelation 22, the visions of the new heavens and the new earth after Jesus remakes the world, the angel showed me a river of the water of life bright as crystal flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb in the middle of the street of the city.

[ 32 : 56 ] Also on either side of the river, the tree of life with its 12 kinds of fruit, yielding fruit each month. month. Now this is apocalyptic imagery.

I don't think that there's going to be a river with 12 trees planted beside it. I think there's going to be a new creation and a new world. But what there will be is a reality that we will eat of that is spiritually take hold of the life that God has given us.

And we will have fellowship with an eternal God forever. And it's not just life meaning we're not dead, but life meaning we have the fullness of life in fellowship with our creator God.

What an amazing thing it is. And you know, friends, there's one more tree. There's one more tree in scripture.

It's actually referred to a number of times in the book of Acts. But 1 Peter probably says it the most clearly. And this is where I want to end because for us to take hold of this, for us to respond in repentance and remembering and returning to God, the picture, how do we do this?

[ 34 : 15 ] How can we renew ourselves? We can't do it on our own. We will stumble and fall. But if we would simply remember Jesus, he who, these are the words of 1 Peter, he who committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.

that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds, you have been healed. You were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.

You see, my friends, Jesus went and ate from the tree of death by hanging on the cross so that we could eat from the tree of life forever with him.

Do not forsake your first love. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we confess to you how easily our hearts grow dim.

[ 35 : 51 ] We confess to you how easily our hearts grow cold. Lord, how easily we are distracted. How easily, Lord, we lose heart.

how quickly we count the cost and find you not worthy of all of our hearts. Lord, help us today.

By your Spirit, show us the things that we must repent of. Show us the path of remembering and returning to you. Renew our vision of Jesus, the one who died so that we might live, that we might love him as we first did.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.