

Jesus speaks to His Church - "Do not forsake your first love"

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Date: 11 May 2025

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- [0 : 00] Good morning. I just want to talk about a bit of ancient history.! Anyone remember getting letters through the post?
- ! They've obviously sussed that quiet conversation I had with them about Andy needing a bit more attention.
- No. But it doesn't feel that long ago that, you know, you got handwritten letters through the door. And often it was really exciting. You know, what's in this letter?
- What's it going to be about? Right. When Andy and I were first going out, back in the dark ages of the 1980s, we were students and when it got to the holidays and we went our separate ways for a lot of the time, we'd write to each other because phone calls were relatively expensive in those days.
- And my dad, being who he was, had a little box that he had to put money in every time he made a phone call. But anyway, letters were nice and very romantic, weren't they? So we used to write to each other regularly and it was always really exciting to get that letter.
- [1 : 25] Obviously, sometimes letters came and maybe the news wasn't so good. When phones weren't a common thing, you might have to pass on bad news via a letter and that was much harder to receive.
- But we're going to talk about today, start looking at some letters in Revelation. So I wonder what these churches felt like when a letter came round. What's it going to say? Is it going to encourage us and are there going to be things that challenge us?
- And we're going to start with the first of these letters in Revelation. So John talked last week about the beginning of Revelation and introduced us to the series.
- But we're going to start with the first letter, which is in Revelation chapter 2 from verses 1 to 7. And this is the one we're going to focus on today.
- So it should come up on the screen as I read it out. And it's headed to the church in Ephesus. To the angel of the church in Ephesus write.
- [2 : 29] So this is Jesus dictating to John. These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.
- I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men. That you've tested those who claim to be apostles but are not.
- And have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name. And have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you.
- You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen. Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.
- But you have this in your favour. You hate the practices of Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[3 : 38] To him who ever comes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. Amen. Excuse me while I just have a bit of water.

So, as I said, we're focusing on the first letter in Revelation today. It's part of a series called Jesus Speaks to His Church.

And I'd really encourage you as you go through this series, although these letters were written to specific churches, there are truths in here that speak to the church today. So this is not just to a historical church.

This is Jesus speaking to us through this letter. And the theme for today's letter is, do not forsake your first love. So, you can imagine if Andy wrote to me and said, you know, darling, I've decided I don't like you so much anymore.

I'm, you know, just going to call it a day. That would not have been a good letter to get, but he would have been forsaking his love. Or maybe, maybe I would have been the one to jack it in. Clearly we didn't.

[4 : 53] But it's a really important theme here. Do not forsake your first love. So the church in Ephesus. So I managed to find, that's a modern day map.

Sorry, can go back to the map just for a minute, Josh, thanks. I pulled up a map. This is a modern map because actually I felt it might help to relate it to the modern countries that we know. So the little red tag in the middle is where the remains of Ephesus are.

And if you want to, you can book on a tour and go and look around the ruins of Ephesus. And I believe it's very impressive. Not that I've ever been there. But you can see, I'll put that in the middle of the map.

And then you've got Greece to the left as you look at it on the map. You've got Turkey to the right. You can see the boot of Italy. The bit across the bottom is the coast of Africa.

And as the coast of Africa sort of comes up, around the side of the Mediterranean, that's where Israel is. And then you've got Lebanon, Syria and Jordan and Iraq over to the right.

[5 : 55] Okay, so that's where Ephesus was. In Greece, sort of Turkey area. Thanks, Josh. You can go on now. So the church in Ephesus was established by Paul around sort of AD 53, 54 on one of his missionary journeys.

So if you read through Acts, you'll read about Paul's missionary journeys and all the different places that he went to. And one of the places he went to was Ephesus. And he established this church and then actually went back there later on and lived there for between two and three years.

Teaching the church, instructing them, helping them to grow as a church and making sure that they had sound teaching. And you'll know that in the New Testament, we have a letter to the Ephesian church.

A letter of sort of encouragement and just reminding them of some of the truths of our faith. Ephesus was actually a major commercial port in New Testament times.

So it was a great place for a church to be established because there were people always coming in and out to Ephesus. Not just Paul on his missionary journeys, but lots of travelers would be going to and from them.

[7 : 07] So it was a great place for the gospel to spread out from. And lots of people would come in and hear about the gospel and take that away with them. It was not without its difficulties because the temple of Artemis, who was a Greek goddess, was situated there.

That apparently was one of the wonders of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was very impressive. And I think there are ruins of it still in Ephesus today or in the ruins of Ephesus. And again, if you read through Acts and read about what Paul got up to, there's a bit in Acts 19 about actually Paul came up against some of the people who worshipped Artemis.

And particularly a guy called Demetrius, who was a silversmith and making lots of money on the back of selling idols of Artemis. And he stirred up trouble for Paul.

He didn't like the fact that lots of people were turning to Jesus instead of worshipping Artemis. And so Paul was threatened and there was a bit of a riot and Paul got into quite a sticky situation.

So it was not necessarily an easy place to be a follower of Jesus. Despite the fact that it was a good strategic point for the gospel to spread out, it wasn't an easy place to worship Jesus.

[8 : 22] It was because immediately you were setting yourself up against those who thought that Artemis was the one that people should be worshipping. So that's the sort of context for this letter.

That's the church that had been established, been there for a while. They'd had lots of really solid teaching from Paul to help them, encourage them to grow. And at the beginning of this letter, there's the reminder that I think we had in last week's passage about Jesus walking around the seven lampstands, which are the seven churches, and this is one of the churches he's referring to.

And that he holds the seven stars, which were meant to represent the angels or messengers to the churches. So let's look at this letter in a bit more detail.

And you can imagine this letter would be read out to the church. So it wasn't like, oh, we've had this letter from Debbie and Martin. We'll send it out on email to everybody and you can read it through.

People will be sitting there and actually it opens with encouragement. And I think it's great, isn't it? Although Jesus has got some harsh words for this church, he starts from a place of encouragement.

[9 : 31] And I think it's a great reminder, and I really believe that some people need to take this away with them today, that Jesus sees the things that we do for him. He doesn't sort of jump to the, oh, you know, done this wrong.

He sees the things that we do for him, even if nobody else does. You know, there's no social media in those days. You know, no Ephesus all over the internet saying they're doing great things there.

But Jesus saw what they were doing in the midst of this quite tricky place to live. So if you sometimes wonder whether the things you do make any difference in terms of the spiritual world, please be encouraged by this verse.

Jesus knows all that we do for him, even if it's done in secret. So Jesus goes on to commend the Ephesian church.

He says, there's lots of good things about you. I know your deeds, all the good things that you do. I know your hard work, that you've stuck at it, and your perseverance.

[10 : 34] Jesus recognizes that though they've been living with oppression, and probably huge amounts of persecution at times, they have persevered, they've stuck with their faith.

They are still following Jesus, and he commends them for that. They've also tested and rejected false teachers. So they recognize that some of the people who are coming amongst them were giving messages that were maybe a bit dodgy or downright heretical.

And they were testing those messages. So they were mature, they had discernment. And it's a really important reminder to us that when we hear people speak, that we don't just say, because John says it must be true, with great respect to John.

Or this person on the internet says this, it must be true. That we exercise discernment from ourselves, and that we learn to distinguish good from bad, and truth from falsehood.

But the Ephesians had been really diligent in testing and rejecting false teachers. And Jesus said, you've also endured hardships for my name, and you've not grown weary.

[11 : 45] Now, I don't think that meant that they never got tired. I think it meant they haven't grown weary of following him, and of sticking to their Christian faith. And that's a really important thing, because sometimes when we have difficult times, we do get tired and worn out.

But the important thing is that we still look to Jesus. Jesus also says later in this letter, as a commendation, you also hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans.

We haven't got loads of information about this group, but it seems there were people who were believers, or claimed to be believers, but who were compromising their faith in some way, in order to indulge their sensual appetites, or to indulge in idolatry.

So they claimed to know the truth, but they were watering it down. And clearly that's something that we all need to watch out for. Okay, so far, so good.

So you can imagine the Ephesians sitting there, thinking, this is a nice letter, yeah, yeah. We've persevered, Jesus has noticed, good, good, good. But there's also some bad news in this letter. And actually, this is pretty devastating when you think about it.

[12 : 59] It says that the Ephesians have forsaken their first love. If you read it in the Amplified Bible, it adds, you've lost the depth of love that you first had for me.

That's really been challenging me as I've been looking at this passage and preparing to preach. Because there's all this stuff about, you know, you've persevered, you've worked hard, I know your deeds and all this, but, and it's a huge but, you've forsaken your first love, the love you had for me at first.

You've lost that depth of love. And Jesus is devastated by this. And you, well, sorry, you would hope that the Ephesian church, on hearing these words, would be also devastated.

They have this passion, this love for Jesus, and yet somehow it's dissipated. They've lost sight of that first love. There's some debates, depending on which version you read about, whether this is, means their love for Christ, their love for one another, or their love for the wider world.

But I think in one sense, that doesn't really matter because our love for Christ is worked out through our love for others. So whether Jesus meant specifically your love for me, that love would then show itself in the way they loved one another and loved those around them.

[14 : 32] The New Living Translation includes, you've lost your love for me and for each other. So different translations. Word it slightly differently, but the important thing is that they've lost that first love that they had for Jesus.

And it's important, as it talks about each other, we cannot love Jesus in isolation. John in his letters talks about, you know, if you say you love God, who you haven't seen, but you can't love your brother, well, there's a bit of an issue there, to paraphrase.

But we can't love Jesus in isolation. So the Ephesian church appeared on the face of it to be thriving. You know, if you're doing a sort of inventory of what you might look for in a good church, a growing church, they worked hard, yep.

Performed good deeds, yep. Persevered when things got tough, yep. Emphasised sound doctrine, yep. All really good stuff and all signs that we want to see in a healthy church, and yet, one vital ingredient was missing.

That first love that they had for Jesus had disappeared, or been forgotten about, or forsaken, which abandoned, and they'd focus so much on all these good things that they'd lost sight of the best thing, which was their love for Christ.

[15 : 52] 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us of what genuine love looks like.

So if we want to think about the Ephesians and then relate it to ourselves, we can think about those bits in 1 Corinthians 13 that talks about love is kind and so on.

And we'll come back to that a bit later. And while it's unlikely that the Ephesians had read that letter that was sent to the Corinthian church, because we didn't have the New Testament written down at that point, they had been taught by Paul for three years.

So Paul would have been telling them about this is what love looks like, we can be sure, and making sure that their picture of love, of what it meant to love one another, was accurate.

So although they didn't have read that particular scripture, because it wasn't down as scripture in that time, they would have been taught that truth by Paul about what love looks like.

[16 : 53] And Paul would have been saying, emphasizing that love that they need to have for one another. So, Jesus goes on to command the Ephesian church to repent.

That's not a letter I'd like to get. You know, you've forsaken your first love. Repent. But actually, it's something that needs to be said sometimes. So Jesus commands them to repent, to turn around and says, do the things that you did at first.

He's underlining that repentance doesn't mean just feeling a bit sorry, but it's about changing their behavior. They need to return to that first love that they had. They need to demonstrate that passion, that first love that they had for Jesus and that needs to play out in the way that they love one another.

So, there's that stark command to repent, but it's something they need to take seriously. And you can imagine those poor Ephesians sort of squirming in their seats at that point.

You know, they've had all these nice things about you're working hard, you're persevering under oppression and all the rest of it, but Jesus says, repent. There's also a warning contained in that.

[18 : 08] Jesus says, if you don't repent, do the things you did at first, your lampstand will be removed. That means that the church will die, will go away.

So, if they don't respond to what Jesus is saying, that's going to be disastrous for the Ephesian church. If you go to Ephesus today, it's in ruins.

There is no longer a church there where the original Ephesian church was. The city itself is in ruins as well. And it's, I know things change over time and people move around over time, but it's really telling that Jesus said, if you don't repent and turn to, return to your first love, do the things you did at first, then I'll remove your lampstand and that church is no longer there.

So, I think there's quite a few things for us to think about here.

I just want to talk briefly about us as a church and a fellowship and this is not meant to be a criticism at all, it's just something that we need to be mindful of as a fellowship.

[19 : 23] As we grow, and it's so exciting that we're growing and new people are coming in and we've opened up the balconies and we're, you know, hoping to see those full of people and God's been blessing us.

But as we grow, we need to keep that first love, not lose sight of that first love. You know, my experience in this church is that we are good at loving one another and loving Jesus, but we need to always keep that in mind.

Just like with Andy and myself, you know, you have those first few months when everything's sort of, you know, really exciting and you're madly passionately in love and then you get married and the kids come along and it's, you know, who's going to take the bins out and all that sort of stuff.

But we need to, he's going to tell all sorts of stories afterwards, but we needed to maintain that love for one another.

If you just take it as an assumption, it'll probably fizzle out. And so I believe it's really important that as a church we are just mindful of that. We keep our first love, we keep that love for Jesus burning inside us and we extend that to loving one another and our community.

[20 : 43] And following on from that, sound doctrine and good deeds are really important. I'm not in any way trying to say that we shouldn't have good doctrine, we shouldn't think about our theology, we shouldn't pay attention to scripture and what it says.

And certainly the love that we have for Jesus should be played out in the good deeds that we do, the way we serve one another, serve our community. So they're really important things but they always need to be rooted in love.

If we get into so many programs of things that we're just sort of doing, ticking off things on a list and forgetting that first love, that's when the life fizzles out of them.

So there's just some things to reflect about as we go forward and a lot of that's about our own personal attitudes anyway but as a church those are things that we need to be mindful of.

So let's move on to think about ourselves as individuals. and I think it's really important to take this away and to pray about it and to think about it.

[21 : 53] As I said when I was reading it, it felt really challenging because you start asking yourself that question, have I lost my first love? You know, are there ways in which I've abandoned that first love?

Is that my priority? And maybe it'll get a bit uncomfortable when you ask that question but maybe that's because Jesus is just putting his finger on something and saying, here's something you need to address.

So we need to check ourselves. Spend time with Jesus. Ask that question. Have we forsaken our first love?

And again, probably lots of you remember when you became Christians and often that's really exciting and you can't stop talking about him. You know, and you just want to spend time with him all the time and again, over time you get distracted by things and maybe sometimes we lose sight of our first love.

So, it's good to ask ourselves what distracts us from our first love? Often it's just life, isn't it? You get absorbed in the things of life.

[23 : 05] You know, you go to work, you have jobs to do at home and so on, the grass needs mowing. Just all the humdrum stuff that we do every day but it can, if we're not careful, it can distract us from our first love.

Maybe there are more specific things. We develop a relationship maybe which isn't altogether godly and allow that person to distract us from our first love. So, it's important to ask ourselves that question, what are the things that distract or maybe have potential distract me from my first love?

And there are lots of things in our lives which are good. I love going in the garden but actually if I'm so obsessive that I spend all my time in the garden and I don't have time to spend with Jesus and I don't have time to come to church, that's an issue.

So often, the things that can distract us are not things that are necessarily bad in themselves. It's when we let them get in the way of our relationship with Jesus and alongside just asking ourselves other ways in which we have abandoned our first love.

I think it's really important to say here this is not just about feelings and passion because if you've ever had a long-term friendship or you've been in love with somebody for a while or you've had family you'll know that sometimes love, those feelings of love aren't there as much as they were at first and they can ebb and flow and I think that's the same with our relationship with God and that's okay because Jesus wants us to go out and minister to people in the world and that can be hard, that can be tiring.

[24 : 44] So it's important to remember that our love is not just about feelings and passion but it's about actions and steadfast love and sometimes in a relationship you might say well you know I'm just feeling really tired at the moment or I'm exhausted or whatever but you know I choose to do things that are loving because that's the right way to behave so sometimes the feelings follow the actions rather than the other way around.

If you're newly in love properly it's all about the passion and the actions sort of follow that but I think it's really important in our relationship with Jesus not to look at the person next to us who's really excited or you know really excited and passionate and can't stop talking and say well I'm no good and I'm not loving because Jesus might be asking us to show our love in a different way at that point but if we can see that actually our actions aren't loving that we're not sort of interested in that relationship with Jesus or other things are just getting in the way that's the time to stop take stock and see where we need to change our behaviour so it's important that we ask ourselves these questions it's equally important that if Jesus says actually that's getting in the way of your relationship with me that's causing you to lose your first love that we repent we admit that we've been doing it wrong that we've allowed ourselves maybe to drift and we turn back to Jesus we do the things that we did at first we do the things that we know draw us closer to him so we need to develop good habits as part of repentance developing good habits to replace the bad ones is really helpful spend more time with Jesus maybe go to different church meetings or join church meetings more make sure that when you listen to things online or watch things on the telly they are things that are going to point you towards

Jesus and not away from him and there's all sorts of stuff out there and it's very easy to get sucked into quite negative stuff so it's really important that we allow the things that feed us to be things that will point us towards Jesus we also need to be attentive to the spirit Jesus says in this letter and in each of the seven letters whoever has ears let him listen to what the spirit is saying to the church we all have spiritual ears that's not about your physical ears and your physical hearing we all have spiritual ears we can all choose to listen to Jesus and to what he is saying so we need to be attentive to the Holy Spirit allow him to prompt us sometimes that means stepping aside taking some time to be quiet and to focus on him and what he is saying but we need to be attentive to the spirit and allow him to direct our gaze to Jesus to prompt us maybe to convict us if there are ways in which we're drifting from our first love and he will help us look back at Jesus and see how we can regain that first love if we've lost it

I wanted to just quote an example just because I saw it online the other day and I thought it was quite relevant to what I was talking about this morning I read about this is on the BBC news somewhere I read about a lady called Tessa Gay no reason you should have heard of it unless you follow the news she is now 105 which is a pretty impressive age to get to and her husband is now dead but she was married for 74 years and she said when she was asked about this the key to a happy relationship is to put one another first and it's the same in our relationship with Jesus the key to a happy relationship to a good relationship to a great relationship is to put him first to focus on how we can show our love for him how we can act and think and speak in ways that bless him and point to him so I just thought that was a nice little anecdote that we the key to a happy relationship the key to a godly relationship is to put one another first so I'd like to close just by going to 1 Corinthians 13 because I mentioned it earlier but also it's a great reminder of what love really should look like so this passage

I'm sure you'll know because it's often read at weddings but just listen to this and if there's something in there that makes you think just take it away pray about it bring it to God Paul says now I'll show you the most excellent way if I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love I'm only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol if I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have a faith that can move mountains but have not love I'm nothing if I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames but have not love I gain nothing love is patient love is kind it does not envy it does not boast it is not proud it is not rude it is not self-seeking so there's that bit about putting one another first it is not easily angered it keeps no record of wrongs love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth it always protects always trusts always hopes always perseveres and the first half of the next verse says love never fails let's pray!

[31 : 31] one