

# Don't Lose Your Love for Jesus!

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[ 0 : 00 ] This evening we're going to look at the first of the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation.

But as we heard last week in calling them that, we shouldn't imagine that each of these short letters were addressed individually and exclusively to the church in question, as if John had sent seven stamped and addressed envelopes, each containing a short letter to the relevant church.

If you look back for a moment to chapter 1 in verses 3 and 4, it's saying blessed are those who read and hear and take to heart the prophecy of this book.

And it's addressed, who's it addressed? It's addressed to the seven churches in the province of Asia. And in chapter 1, verse 11, John is told to write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches.

So it's one scroll and it's for all seven churches to read or at least to hear read to them. And if you like, John is sending the one message to his whole distribution list.

[ 1 : 25 ] But imagine for a moment that you're part of that church in Ephesus who hear the whole scroll being read out to them. Of course, you know from the very beginning, in fact, it's chapter 1, verse 1, that you're hearing the words of Jesus himself.

So if you're a believer, hopefully you'll appreciate that the whole thing will be not just relevant, but of the utmost importance. But as a listener, it's hard to pay attention for an extended period, isn't it? We tend to tune in and tune out as well. And perhaps a particular word or phrase grabs you and brings you back from where your mind has wandered. And if you're in a meeting of any kind, nothing brings you back, grabs your attention, quite like suddenly hearing your name mentioned.

So surely your ears would have pricked up as you heard this letter when you hear the words to the angel of the church in Ephesus. You would have wanted to pay particular attention, wouldn't you? What was Jesus going to say to us in particular? How much did he know about what was going on with us? What would he be pleased about?

[ 2 : 43 ] What would he not be happy with? What would he want us to do? As for us, clearly we're living 2,000 years later, long way from modern day Turkey.

Where all seven churches, in fact, were located. We don't live under the rule of the Roman Empire. Our culture is very different in so many ways.

But it's no accident, is it, that the contents of John's scroll have been preserved for us down through the ages, down through the centuries. So surely each of these seven letters deserves our most careful attention.

What is Jesus saying to us in Bon Accord Free Church in Aberdeen in 2023 through each letter? How much does he know about what's going on with us?

What is he pleased about? What is he not happy with? What will he tell us to do? So let's look just now at the letter addressed to the church in Ephesus.

[ 3 : 49 ] And as we'll see in the weeks ahead, the seven letters, they mostly follow a general pattern of commendation, rebuke, warning after that, and then promise, encouragement.

So that's how we will look at this one tonight under three headings. Firstly, well done. Then secondly, watch out. And finally, win through.

So well done to start with. If we know what follows in this letter, we might be tempted to skip over verses 2, 3, and 6 to some extent and focus on what you might call the negative.

But those verses, they do account for around half the letter. Jesus wants them to know that he sees and he knows all that they've done for him.

He hasn't missed or forgotten or disregarded what they've done. He wants to commend them for their service of him.

[ 4 : 53 ] And this isn't surprising when you see how he describes himself. He is the one who is holding the seven stars in his right hand and walking among the seven golden lampstands.

In other words, he's holding on to the seven churches and he's walking among them. He knows them. He loves them. And he wants to encourage them.

And it's right. In fact, it's essential for us to be conscious of our own sin. All the different ways we fall short of God's perfect standards and thought, word and deed.

But I wonder, do we sometimes lapse into feeling that God's general attitude towards us is one of disappointment overall?

A kind of reluctant toleration putting up with us. When he looks at us, he sees all our weaknesses and failings and he gives a big sigh to himself and says to himself, Oh dear, he or she is a very poor disciple indeed.

[ 6 : 03 ] Is that what we think about how God feels towards us? Well, of course, God knows everything about us, past, present and future. But he loves his people for whom Christ died.

And when he looks at his people, he sees the righteousness of his son, Jesus. So he's fundamentally pleased with his people because he's pleased with his son.

He loves and values our service and our worship. Imperfect though it always is. So what are the things here that Jesus takes the time to commend them for?

Well, we might summarize them as firstly, working hard. Secondly, keeping going. And thirdly, holding to the truth. So let's look at each one in sequence.

Firstly, working hard. They are clearly doing a lot for Jesus, aren't they? See the reference in verse 2 to deeds. They're clearly busy and active in his service.

[ 7 : 07 ] What does that look like? Well, no doubt they are caring for the poor among them. They are looking after widows and orphans, seeking to evangelize within their communities. After all, what else could deeds and hard work possibly refer to in this context?

So they're not lazy. They're not inactive. Their diaries are full of church activities. Their church is an impressive range of gospel-centered meetings and programs.

Jesus knows they are working hard. And he says, well done. Secondly, keep them going. They're persevering in the faith and serving Jesus.

They are keeping going in the face of hardships for Jesus' name. They're also experiencing persecution. Now, perhaps not as extreme as Smyrna and Pergamum.

And we'll look at those churches in future weeks. But it is persecution nonetheless. Possibly being harassed or discriminated against because they're Christians.

[ 8 : 14 ] Maybe it was harder for them to secure or hold on to employment. Maybe other people would even refuse to trade with them because they were Christians.

Maybe they struggled to find places where they could meet safely to worship as a church. But having said all that, they had kept going in the faith.

They'd not even grown weary. Look at that at the end of verse 3. He says, you have not grown weary. They were willing to carry on as Christians. If you'd asked them whether they might ever just give up and instead follow the ways of the world, they would have said, of course not.

And Jesus knows they are keeping going. And he says, well done. Thirdly, hold them to the truth. Clearly, they're a church who are what we might call doctrinally sound.

And they identify and reject false teaching. Again, as we'll see in future weeks, Pergamum and Thyatira, those other churches, they've allowed themselves to be unfortunately infiltrated by false teachers.

[ 9 : 28 ] And they've not taken decisive action to deal with that problem. But not Ephesus. Somebody wandering into their church, just claiming to be an apostle, they wouldn't just be taken at face value.

Instead, what would happen to them? They would be tested, as it says here. In other words, the church would assess carefully what they have to say. And also what they're like as people.

And they would see whether it lines up with what they need to be true. And it's not just that the church in Ephesus had the good intention of trying to detect or reject false teaching.

Their judgment is actually sound in these things. Because they know the truth and are holding on to it, they've actually been successful in telling the true teachers from the false ones.

And what's more, they've had the resolve to send the false teachers on their way. In particular, like Jesus, I look at verse 6, they hate the practices of the Nicolaitans.

[ 10 : 39 ] And again, that's in contrast to the church in Pergamum, which was actually tolerating Nicolaitan teaching in their midst. Now, not too much is known about the Nicolaitans, but it seems they were some kind of sect who sought to compromise with the pagan society around them.

Seemingly, they were teaching that the believers' spiritual freedom in Christ meant they were actually free to engage in idol worship and immorality and so fit in better with the society around them.

But the church in Ephesus, they would have nothing to do with such teaching or practices. Look what it says. It says they hated it.

Hated it in the sense of strongly opposing and rejecting it. Now, this holding on to the truth and rejection of false teaching is exactly what they should have been doing.

And it's exactly what we should continue to do today. Have your Bibles, or at least your Bible apps, open in front of you. Always make sure that whatever has been said from the front lines up with what God's Word says.

[ 11 : 58 ] We know that there are some things in the Bible which are difficult to understand and which Christians do honestly disagree on or hold differing views on, but please don't tolerate teaching which you know contradicts fundamental gospel truths.

It's not the kind or loving thing to do that, to tolerate false teaching. False teaching, it ruins churches and those who attend them.

And note in particular here, Jesus, he doesn't tell them they've been a little hard on teachers with different viewpoints and they should be more open to new interests and perspectives and broaden their minds a bit.

He doesn't rebuke them for being narrow-minded. No, he commends them for holding to the truth. We see elsewhere that Paul's letters to the Galatians, the Philippians and the Colossians, they have as a theme the dangers of heresy, the dangers of false teaching.

Now, no doubt those churches could have done with some of the vigilance and zeal for the truth shown by the church in Ephesus. The Ephesians evidently don't need any particular warning from Jesus about false teaching.

[ 13 : 20 ] They're alert for it. They identify it when it shows itself and they take nothing to do with it or those who spread it. So again, Jesus knows they're holding on to the truth.

And what does he say to them? He says, well done. So that's well done. What about watch out? Imagine again, you're part of that church in Ephesus and you're listening to the whole book, being read out to you as a congregation perhaps, and you were particularly attentive when the reader got to the letter addressed to your own church, naturally.

You've listened with pleasure and maybe even a bit of pride to Jesus' words of praise in verses 2 and 3. You know, you're working hard, you're keeping going despite hardship, and you're sticking to sound doctrine.

So surely nothing more needs to be said to a church like that. Surely a church like this is doing well and lacks nothing at all. Surely that merits an A plus or a first class with distinction.

What more could possibly be required of you as a church? Well, the word yet in verse 4, that should snap us out of any complacency that we would be feeling.

[ 14 : 41 ] Jesus holds something against this hard-working, persevering, doctrinally sound church. And note in particular, it's the language of personal offense.

Jesus says, I hold this against you. What is it that Jesus holds against them? Well, it's that they have forsaken the love they had at first.

Love for who or what, we might ask. Well, it must mean love for Jesus and love for his people too, because our love for one another will grow or decline in direct proportion to our love for Jesus.

Now, they might possibly have been prepared to concede that they were maybe stuck in a bit of a rut in this respect, or on some kind of slight downward trajectory.

But there's actually nothing slight about their dropping off, about the dropping off of their affection for Jesus. Look at verse 5. Their love for Jesus has plunged off a cliff edge.

[ 15 : 52 ] He wants them to look back up the cliff face and be shocked at where they have landed. They were not doing the things they did at first. So again, what were these things they'd done as new believers and had stopped doing more recently?

Well, we don't know for sure. But it was all due to them not loving Jesus. As much as before. And actually, it's maybe quite helpful for us not to know the precise details here.

Because if this letter was very specific about what they'd stop doing, maybe we would somehow be able to avoid the main point by telling ourselves that at least, you know, we are actually continuing to do those particular things.

But the main point is they didn't love Jesus nearly as much as when they first became Christians. So what might this have looked like? We've already seen that they were hardworking, that they were persevering, they were zealous for the truth.

So their lack of love for Jesus had not translated yet into laziness, giving up or laxness in doctrine. Well, one writer says their service of Jesus had become all hands and head with no heart.

[ 17 : 10 ] All hands and head with no heart. So maybe they were now beginning to neglect prayer a bit. Maybe their singing was in a half-hearted, distracted kind of manner.

Perhaps allowing their worship services to become very cold and formal and simply a matter of habit. Viewing their evangelism as a chore.

Yeah, still doing it, but now merely out of some kind of sense of duty. And in their tireless activity, maybe they were developing seeds of pride among them.

And self-righteousness, even resentment and judgmentalism towards other people. So, why aren't other people in this church working as hard as me?

Why are others not committed to this ministry the same as I am? Why is no one else willing to take a turn on this rota? A bit like in Luke chapter 10, when the busy Martha becomes annoyed about Mary sitting listening to Jesus and says to him, Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?

[ 18 : 32 ] Tell her to help me. So was her walk with the Lord now something of a grim struggle? Yeah, dutiful, but with less thankfulness, joy and peace.

Maybe their relationships with each other now are a bit cooler and more formal, a spirit of criticism among them. Maybe their zeal for sound doctrine was tipping over into a kind of heresy hunting and harsh condemnation of anyone who gets something wrong or who has a different view and a disputable point.

Well, whatever it was, clearly their motivations were no longer right. Because our actions count for little apart from genuine love.

Service without love is deficient service, according to Jesus. And a truly faithful church is a loving church, isn't it?

After all, when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, what did he say in Matthew 22? He said, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

[ 19 : 45 ] What was the second one? Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your neighbor as yourself. Also, if we lack real heartfelt love for Jesus and fellow believers, we will struggle to see what real faithfulness and real obedience actually require of us.

We'll think, we'll know, but we won't. We'll see you next time. We'll see you next time. Hopefully, by this point in the letter, the Christians in Ephesus would be able to acknowledge that their love for the Lord was not what it was or what it should be.

And maybe, hopefully, they would have wondered how they could actually recapture that love which they'd had at first. What could they do about it? Well, Jesus tells them plainly, verse 5, repent and do the things you did at first.

So, the answer was certainly not just to sit around and try to somehow generate greater feelings of affection for Jesus.

Yes, our love for Jesus should certainly engage our emotions. But love in the Bible is not primarily an emotional thing, is it?

[ 21 : 04 ] If you love me, keep my commands, said Jesus in John chapter 14. And again, in 1 John chapter 5, verse 3, this is love for God to keep his commands.

So, they needed to repent, to turn away from their sinful attitudes of heart and their sins of omission, the things they had stopped doing.

And they needed to obey the commands that they had been defying or ignoring. Praying in all situations to their Father in heaven, worshipping joyfully, loving one another, loving those in the communities around them.

And as much as they would do these things, they would actually be recapturing the love they'd previously had for Jesus. But it's all very well to say that.

Where would the motivation for this change come from? Well, it would come as they reflected on what Jesus had done for them. As the one who, back in chapter 1, is described as having been pierced.

[ 22 : 06 ] And having freed them from their sins by his blood. As believers, we always need to come back to the cross and the empty tomb, don't we? And what Jesus did there for sinners such as ourselves.

In Luke 7, 47, I read to us earlier, Jesus says, Whoever has been forgiven little, loves little. And so conversely, if we have a greater and renewed awareness of how much Jesus has forgiven us, that will enable us to love him more.

But there's a solemn warning here too, which we mustn't miss. It says, If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

That's in verse 5. So feel the force of that for a moment. A church which carried on in its sinful ways, ignoring the call to repent, it would be uprooted.

They had no right at all to assume that there would always be a church in Ephesus. They needed to listen to Jesus' voice and return to him. Otherwise, they would face this discipline.

[ 23 : 21 ] Now, we ourselves, we're blessed to be part of a long-established congregation, part of a long-established denomination, in a country that has a long Christian heritage.

And yes, of course, we should be very thankful for this, but consider this. We have no right to assume that until Jesus returns, there will always be a Bon Accord congregation, or even a free church of Scotland, or even any sizable body of believers in Scotland as a whole.

We need to watch out that our lampstand is not removed from its place. We need to keep going with Jesus and not allow our love for him to fade away. So thirdly, win through.

The letter doesn't end with that solemn warning, though as with all seven letters, all those with ears are urged to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

And then as with all seven letters, there's a promise about overcoming. In this case, to the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

[ 24 : 32 ] So what does this imagery mean here? Well, the book of Revelation, again, as we'll see in the weeks ahead, it's continually referring back to the Old Testament. And we find the tree of life is mentioned along with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis chapter 2, verse 9.

God had placed both of those trees in the middle of the Garden of Eden. And as we know, Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in defiance of God's command not to do so.

So God banishes them from the garden, saying that Adam must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever, as it says in Genesis 3.22.

It then says, after God drove the man out, he placed in the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

So eating from the tree of life would give eternal life. And Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden prevented them from being able to do so and to live forever.

[ 25 : 44 ] In Genesis chapter 5, verse 5, we find that Adam dies and clearly Eve did too. So what is Jesus promising here to the church in Ephesus?

He's promising that if they remain in him and wait faithfully for his return, he will undo the banishment of Genesis chapter 3.

Now the reference to being victorious or overcoming, as it says in another version, another translation, that means it will not be easy. Clearly it makes no sense at all to be talking about being victorious or overcoming unless there is some kind of opposition.

So being victorious will mean keeping going to the end and they will need to keep going in the face of further hardship. And true perseverance means continuing to love Jesus.

But it's really important to remember always that the victory is truly not ours, but Christ's. He has already won the victory through his death and resurrection.

[ 26 : 48 ] And all who trust in Jesus and remain in him will share in his victory and receive eternal life, living forever in a perfect relationship with God.

So this is the promise that the church in Ephesus were to hold on to. And it's the same promise for us to hold on to and believe as well. A few thoughts in conclusion.

Of course we should be asking ourselves, are we at all like the church in Ephesus? A lot of hard work and commendable, admirable activity goes on in Bonacore, doesn't it?

So many individuals engaged in so many different kinds of worthwhile forms of service. And we've kept going over many years and decades as a congregation.

And many of you I know have been following the Lord for 10, 20, 40 years and upwards. And as for holding to the truth, well as a congregation and a denomination we do take the view that the whole of the Bible is God's word and is too irrelevant today as it ever was.

[ 28 : 06 ] And I hope you personally view the Bible in that way also. So these are all good things which Jesus commends us for. But if you're working hard, keep them going and hold them to the truth.

Ask yourself, as I must also ask myself, is your heart, is my heart still in it as it once was? The message for us this evening is don't lose your love for Jesus in all your hard work and busyness for this church.

Working hard, persevering, sound doctrine, they're all good things, essential in fact for the life of the believer and the church, but we mustn't become proud or conceited about these things.

Church activity and theology, no matter how sound, they become idols if they take the place which Jesus himself should have. It can be very easy to lose ourselves in doing good things, learning important things, but how is our heart towards Jesus himself?

If we feel ourselves drifting or growing cooler towards Jesus, let's not simply accept it as an inevitable consequence of growing older in the faith.

[ 29 : 27 ] Instead, let's reflect again on his love for us and respond in thankfulness and obedience. And finally, if you would say honestly that you know nothing of what it means to love Jesus, consider what the Bible tells us of his goodness and his mercy towards sinners.

Revelation chapter 1, as we saw earlier, it describes him as the one who was pierced by the nails on the cross and who frees from their sins by his blood, all who will come to him.

So if you will repent and believe in him, then you are obeying his command and called to do so. And that is how first and foremost we show our love to him.

Let's pray just now. Amen. Amen.