

I was going to try to cover all of chapters 2-3 in one sermon, but I changed my mind. Chapters 2-3 contain messages to seven churches. There are seven little sections each containing a message from Jesus to a specific church. But each of the messages is intended to be heard by all the churches. As we have seen before, the number seven is the number of fullness or completeness in the Bible and so the fact that these messages are addressed to seven churches means that they are addressed to all the church. They are spoken by the glorified Lord Jesus to all of his churches for their encouragement and correction.

Here is what made me think we should take these seven messages one at a time. Richard Philips in his commentary wrote, "Christ's message to the churches of Revelation are relevant to us today for the same reason they were so urgent nineteen centuries ago: Christ's people need to hear Christ's voice. The tendency is for our ideas about the church to veer in a selfish or worldly direction unless we are constantly under the correction of our Sovereign Lord. This being the case, it is remarkable that the messages of Revelation 2-3 exert so little influence among Christians today" (p. 88-89).

When I read that I thought that we should take the time to pay close attention to what our Lord is saying to us in these seven messages. That is not to say that it is wrong to have one sermon on the whole seven. There are always many legitimate ways to handle a passage in a sermon. Furthermore it is also true that Jesus speaks to us in every part of the Bible not only in passages like this where he is being quoted directly. The whole Bible is the word of God and no part of it is less the word of God than any other part.

Nevertheless this is a section of his word where Jesus expressly addresses his church with words of encouragement and words of critique, and it is a perfect passage for us to study as a way of evaluating our own church. This passage is intended to provoke such an evaluation. So we will take the opportunity to evaluate our church in the light of Jesus' messages to these seven churches.

It is significant that they are not all treated the same by Jesus. Four of the seven get both commendation and criticism. Two get only commendation. And one gets only criticism. What that tells us is that not all churches are the same in terms of faithfulness to Jesus. In sense that is obvious. But it is significant, I think, that Jesus in these messages does not treat all of the churches in the same way. We can assume that no church is perfect this side of eternity, but these two chapters make it clear that Jesus is more pleased with some churches than he is with others.

And there are some churches about which Jesus has nothing good to say. That is a very sobering thought. The glorified Lord Jesus walks among the churches of this world and he is always evaluating them as to how they are doing with his instructions. Just to call one's group a church is not enough. Jesus knows each church inside and out and he makes judgments about what he sees. That is why it is so important for us to hear what he has to say, so that we can be encouraged where his words commend us, but also so that we can be convicted where his words condemn us and repent where he calls us to repent.

So we begin with 2:1-7 which is addressed to the church in Ephesus. 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.’” The picture is of the majestic glorified son of man that we considered last week. He is walking among the seven golden lampstands which are the seven churches. He holds the seven stars in his right hand. We are told in the last verse of chapter 1 that the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. These could be literal angels who somehow represent each church. Or they could be the pastors of those churches. There is no consensus among the scholars. We will just call them angels without knowing for sure what they refer to. What is important is that the church is being addressed.

Verse 2, “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.” Jesus begins with the words, “I know.” He says that to each of the seven churches. Jesus knows what is going on in every church. Our congregational life takes place under his gaze. He is always paying attention. He always sees. He always knows. And that is not just what we do when we are together, but also what each of us do when we are not gathered. We are the church when we are gathered. And we are the church when we are scattered. And Jesus always knows what we are up to.

He sees the good things. He is aware of every act of love, of every temptation resisted, of every hard but right decision. “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance....” He knows about the visit you made even though you were tired. He knows about your hospitality. He knows about the many meetings you attended. These terms give us some idea of what he is looking for and what pleases him. “Works ... toil Patient endurance.” Jesus expects the members of his church to work and to toil. We are not saved by works, but we are saved in order to work. Work is in our fundamental make up. It is part of our being made in the image of God. We were created to work, and we are saved to work as well. We are both created and saved to be productive for the glory of God.

This does not exclude our everyday work. It does not exclude our family life. It does not exclude recreation. All of life is the arena for our work and toil in the service of God. It includes attending worship services faithfully and prayer meetings. It includes doing your everyday work with the motivation of pleasing God in it. It includes visiting a lonely person and helping someone in need. It includes loving and thanking God as you enjoy a good meal. It includes your prayers for missions. It includes persevering in the battle for sexual purity. The Christian life is all of life and it is to be actively lived to be pleasing to God and so work and toil. Self-discipline. Doing the right thing even when you really don’t feel like it.

Patent endurance. Keeping on going when keeping on going is hard – that is endurance. There is a lot of endurance needed in the Christian life. There is the inner resistance of our sinful nature. There are the outward temptations from the world and the devil. Certainly endurance includes continuing to confess Christ before men when those men think you are naïve and unsophisticated to believe the Bible to be the word of

God. It includes continuing to confess Christ before men when those men think that you are a hindrance to the common good – when they view Christian morality as hate – when they view the confession that Christ is Lord as subversive to the political order. Endurance is necessary in many different situations from resisting the temptation to go to that porn website to refusing to deny Christ when that may well land you in prison. Patient endurance is necessary not to become weary in doing good and to show up in church on Sunday evenings.

So when we work and toil with patient endurance Jesus is aware of it and it pleases him. That is a wonderful encouragement. “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance.” Of course, the flip side of this is that Jesus also knows when there is little effort and endurance in living life for the glory of God. Jesus knows it when we are mostly living for our selfish pleasures without reference to God – when we are living lives of self-indulgence and this-worldly pleasure. It works both ways. Jesus knows it when we are seeking to please him in our lives, but he also knows it when most of what we do and think is just for ourselves without reference to him.

We can say with thanksgiving that when Jesus looks at our church as a whole there is work and toil and patient endurance for him to see. The question for each of us to ask ourselves is whether we are part of that.

Jesus also commends the church in Ephesus for their faithfulness in dealing with evil – particularly in the form of false teaching. “I know ... 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.” Way back in their past, when Paul was still alive, he had warned the elders of this very church to be on guard against false teachers. In Acts 20 Paul was on his way to Jerusalem, and he visited with the elders of Ephesus and one of the things he said to them was “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.” The book of Revelation was written some thirty years later and from Jesus’ words in our text to the church at Ephesus it is clear that the leadership there had taken Paul’s warning seriously. They had been diligent to discern false teaching and keep false teachers out of the congregation.

This is an important part of faithfulness for any church. The NT has lots to say about the dangers of false teaching. Most of the letters of the NT deal with it in one way or another. Being faithful to the teaching of Jesus and the apostles is a very big deal because the results of false teaching are deadly. Just think of what Paul wrote to the Galatian church on this subject. Galatians 1:8, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.” Clearly discerning and rooting out false teachers and teaching is very important for Jesus and that is reflected in his commendation of the church in Ephesus in our text.

We can be thankful for the concern for faithfulness to biblical teaching that is built into our confessional heritage. Our congregation was founded because the original members felt compelled to separate themselves

from false teaching in the churches to which they belonged and to form a church committed to maintaining the truth of the Word of God. They attached themselves to a confessional denomination which was committed to taking the Westminster Standards seriously. One of the key reasons for confessions is to summarize the main teachings of the Bible as a means of drawing a line between truth and error to aid in the preservation of the truth.

There is never reason for self-congratulation. But there is reason for thankfulness when we see how God has placed us in a church which takes maintaining the truth seriously. Our text shows us that this is a priority for Jesus, and we can be thankful to be part of a church and a tradition that seeks to reflect this priority.

And this is something that must be maintained. You don't have to know much about church history to know that many churches which were once faithful to the Bible are no longer so. There is always incredible pressure to compromise at pressure points in any given historical context. Today one of those is the biblical teaching about marriage and sexuality. Many churches are conforming to the world in this area. These words of commendation from Jesus to the church at Ephesus serve as a reminder to us of the vital importance of maintaining and proclaiming the truth of God's word where there are all kinds of pressures to compromise to false teaching.

I won't say anything about verse 3 because it is very similar in content to the first part of verse 2. Jesus says, "I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and have not grown weary."

So we come to verse 4. Here is Jesus' criticism of the church in Ephesus. "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 the first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent." This is a very serious and disturbing criticism.

This is rather puzzling after all the positive things that Jesus had mentioned. Even though the church in Ephesus was commended for her works and toil and patience endurance and her rejection of false teaching, she was seriously and even catastrophically deficient in that the love that she had had earlier had waned. This failing was so serious that unless she repented Jesus was going to come and remove her lampstand from its place. In other words she would be unchurched – the removal of the lampstand was the removal of the church. The churches are called lampstands. If the lampstand is removed the church is removed.

Jesus said this about a church that was active and faithful to maintain the truth. Jesus' criticism she had abandoned love. And that clearly was a very serious problem. Devastatingly serious.

What are we to make of this? Is this not pretty much universal among Christians and churches. Must we not all look back at a time when our love was stronger than it is now? This experience is even described in one of William Cowper's hymns. "Where is the blessedness I knew/When I first saw the Lord?" Why is Jesus so strong in his critique of the waning of love? Is this not the struggle of every Christian?

Let me make a number of comments to put this in its broader biblical perspective. First we must think of the first 3 verses of 1 Corinthians 13, "¹If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

These words of the apostle Paul give insight into Jesus' condemnation of the church at Ephesus for the waning of her love. Paul is saying that we can have many impressive things in terms of spiritual gifts and knowledge and even sacrifice but without love all of it adds up to a big zero as far as God is concerned. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13 are very convicting and so are Jesus' words in Revelation 2.

The church at Ephesus was an active church. There was work and toil going on with patient endurance. They were zealous about the truth and maintaining the truth. It sounds like a healthy church. But something was off. Something was weak and fading. And that something was the most important thing. There was a problem in the area of love. It was not what it had once been. It was on a downward trajectory. The wheels of the church were turning. Work was being done. The truth was being upheld. But there was a lack of love.

Jesus does not specify what kind of love he is speaking about. Is it love for him? Is it love for one another? Is it love for the world? I believe that the reason that Jesus is not more specific is because love for God and love for our fellow man go together. John makes this clear in 1 John in a number of places. 1 John 4:7, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." Love is from God and if he has given us love that love embraces both God and man. Either you love both God and man or you don't love at all. Jesus' problem with the Ephesian church was simply that they were no longer loving as they once had.

But how can we tell if our love is fading? Clearly there is something different about working and toiling and enduring with more love and with less love. Clearly we can be zealous for the truth while our love is fading. If the external actions can be there without love then the difference must be internal – what is going on in our hearts. Love is more than a feeling – but it is not less. It is possible to go through the motions without being motivated by love. Love is internal as well as expressed in actions.

Here are some things to think about. Love is directed to the other. It is possible to serve others in order to feel good about ourselves or for our reputation. It is possible to serve others for selfish reasons.

Regarding love to God, think of Jesus' quotation from Isaiah in Matthew 15:8 where he says, "This people honors me with their lips but their heart is far from me." If we love God our heart is not far from him. If we love God he is welcome in our thoughts and we long to know him better. There are also Jesus' words when he tells us to love God with all our heart, soul and mind. There is an inner attraction to God when there is love.

And love for our fellow man. Certainly there are acts of caring and kindness. But it is possible to do these without love. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 gives us much to think about in examining ourselves for love. Patience, kindness, not irritable, or resentful. 1 Corinthians 8:1, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Galatians 5:13, "through love serve one another." Ephesians 4:2, "bearing with one another in love." Ephesians 4:15, "speaking the truth in love." Colossians 2:2 "knit together in love." 1 Peter 4:8 "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins." 1 John 3:16-17, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has this world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."

There are lots of Scripture passages which help us to know what it is to love. And what Jesus was criticizing in the church of Ephesus was the activity and orthodoxy going on while the love that must be behind these things was fading.

So what shall we do? Is there anyone among us whose love strong and unwavering? Is there anyone among us who can read these words of Jesus and not feel convicted and even afraid? "[Y]ou have abandoned the love you had at first."

Notice first of all that the word "abandoned" is a very strong word. Jesus is not speaking about the ups and downs of the intensity of our love. The Ephesian church had abandoned the love that they had had at the first. They were no longer motivated by love. Their religion had become external and selfish. Their love had died or at least had almost died.

That does not mean that we can be complacent about our struggles to love. The road to abandonment had started somewhere. We need to be aware of where we are in the area of love and pray and use the means that Jesus has given us to maintain and strengthen our love. But we should not think that the fact that we struggle to love as we ought means that Jesus is accusing us of abandoning the love that we had at first. But these words do call us to consider our lives and our love to be sure that we have not abandoned our love.

The second key to our response is Jesus's call to repentance. Verse 5, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at the first." The key here is repentance. The Christian life is a life of ongoing repentance. That is living out of the gospel. We examine our lives. We confess our sins. We ask for forgiveness. We repent and we believe, and we do that on an on-going basis.

Jesus has not switched to work-righteousness here. The gospel is not as explicit in the book of Revelation as it is in other places in the NT. It is mentioned in passing or it is assumed. Revelation 1:5 reminds us that Jesus has "freed us from our sins by his blood." Our love is never what it should be, and we are right with God on the basis of Jesus's perfect righteousness. Jesus' call to repentance here is short for the whole gospel.

And yet the gospel will produce love in us. The warning that Jesus gives here about abandoning our love must be taken seriously. People do fall away. There are churches like the church of Ephesus. We may never be complacent.

I won't say anything about verse 6. The point about them hating the works of the Nicolaitans is the same as the point made earlier about not bearing with those who are evil. The Ephesians were faithful about false teaching. And that was a good thing.

And so we end with verse 7. "He who has an ear to hear, let him here 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." This is a serious word about the fight of faith. The ones who will eat of the tree of life are those who conquer. We can only conquer through Christ, but we must conquer and to conquer is to remain faithful in the face of opposition right to the end. There is a word of hope and promise to encourage us in the struggle. Ahead of us there is the promise of eating from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God - if we conquer. The great point of the book of Revelation is that the Christian life is a struggle. There is opposition and there will be suffering. But one of the great incentives to press on and to endure in the struggle is what lies beyond the struggle for those who are faithful to the end. "To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."