

Motivated by love \* Revelation 2:1-7

January 7, 2024 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

I want to share with you something that's been on my heart lately as a pastor.

As I look around at our church, I get the sense that God is at work, doing something really special.

I see you doubling down on serving others, I see you making an effort to reach your neighbours and co-workers with the hope of the Gospel, I see new people joining us and blessing us with their gifts. I get the sense that God is at work, renewing us and refining us and setting us up to grow in the future.

And that makes me really grateful and that makes me really excited.

And I'll tell you, it had a big impact on my planning for the winter. I kept thinking 'what can I preach on that can help us to partner with God as He builds our church?' I spent a chunk of time praying through different options, but nothing really clicked, until the book of Revelation landed on my heart.

And not just the book of Revelation as a whole; I was sitting there in prayer and it struck me – 'what about the seven churches in Revelation?' – and I realized – that's it.

The book of Revelation starts with seven letters to seven churches. Jesus essentially pulls back the curtain on reality and shows His churches how things really are. It's like a gender-reveal party. Jesus writes to the church and says 'here's some good things, here's some bad things; here's how you can grow, here's what you gotta deal with if you want to succeed.' This is truly 'Jesus revealing things to His Church,' which is where the title 'The Revelation of Jesus to the Church' comes from.

So we're going to spend the next seven weeks looking at these seven letters to the seven churches. We're going to be reading their mail and thinking together about what it means to be the Church and how WE as a church can grow and serve the way God's made us to.

So that's the plan for the next little while and you have the outline there so you can follow along. Today though we are going to do a couple of things. First, I want to set the stage for these letters and then I want to look at the first letter, the letter to the church at Ephesus. And I'll tell you, I think that this is a really great place to start because it begs us to ask – what are we doing as a church? And maybe even more importantly, why are we doing it? What are YOU doing as a member of this church and what motivates you to do it?

Before we get to the letter though, let's spend a few minutes talking about who sent the letter and why it was sent in the first place. So I'd actually like you to turn to in your Bibles to Revelation 1:9 and we'll see what was going on when these letters were written down. Revelation 1:9 – easy to find – go to the back and then 1:9.

9 I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

This is the Apostle John writing – you know, James and John, the 'sons of thunder' (Mark 3:17). He's the guy who wrote the Gospel of John and the letters of John. He had followed Jesus since the beginning

but now things weren't going so well. He was actually in exile on the island of Patmos because he refused to stop talking about Jesus. You can see it there on the little map I've given you.<sup>i</sup>

When the church first got going, the Romans more or less left them alone. But by the end of the first century, the Church had grown and Rome was working hard to shut it down. By 95 AD there was a pretty significant wave of persecution hitting the church and John was caught up in that and sent into exile to try to limit his influence (clearly it didn't work).

10 On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, (he was worshiping in spirit and truth on a Sunday) and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,  
11 which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

I don't know about you but my mind gives these churches a semi-mystical feel – mythical all most. But really, these are just honest-to-goodness flesh and blood churches in the region that we now call Turkey. In fact, the order that they're listed is essentially an oval; it's probably the order that the mailman took to deliver the letters. There's nothing inherently special about these churches; we could just as easily add Langford to the list but taken together, they reflect the whole range of faith and spiritual health in the big C Church.

So John is at worship and he hears this voice saying 'write down these letters to these seven churches' and then we get a glimpse of who it is that's saying it. Look at verse 12 -

12 I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands (which represent the seven churches - v. 20),  
13 and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.

You hear 'Son of Man' and you immediately think Daniel 7:3 – 'There before me was one like a Son of Man coming on the clouds of Heaven to receive authority, glory, sovereign power and everlasting dominion' – this otherworldly Son of Man whom Daniel saw - that's who John sees now.

14 His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire.  
15 His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.  
16 In his right hand he held seven stars (again representative of the seven churches), and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. (I can understand that! This is an utterly overwhelming vision of a Being with the utmost power).

Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.  
18 I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. (Rev 1:9-18 NIV).

You know who is this right? 'I was dead and behold I am alive for ever?' This is the resurrected Jesus, ascended to the throne of God in all of His unhindered glory and power. John had known Him when He walked on Earth – 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' – this is the Word once again only now

He is unhindered by human limitations. This is our Lord and our Saviour in all His glory. This is who is talking to us when we read the letters in Revelation.

I suspect that sitting in exile far from home, John must have been feeling a little bummed out as a follower of Jesus, maybe a little alone, but now here is Jesus in all His power and glory. Just because he's been exiled doesn't mean he's been abandoned. The glorious Jesus is right there with him and eager to help him and His churches to persevere.

I'll try to keep that front and centre through this series. It can be really easy to get hung up on the churches because that's who the letters are to, but the one who wrote the letters, who is powerful enough and cares enough to help them to grow, is just as important to the message.

So here's Jesus, calling John to write on his behalf; let's see what He wants written in the first letter: Revelation 2:1.

NIV Revelation 2:1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands:

This is a pattern that we're going to see a lot of in the next few weeks. Every letter starts the same way. The glorified Jesus says 'To the angel of the church in (church name); these are the words of the Jesus' and then it describes Jesus using one or two of the descriptors that we just heard.'

In this case, Jesus is addressing the church at Ephesus and He is addressing them the one who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven lampstands.

Now this is a really neat way for Jesus to describe Himself. Chapter 1, verse 20 says that the seven lampstands represent the seven churches and that the seven stars represent the 'angels' of those churches. And Jesus is walking around in the midst of the seven churches, holding the seven 'angels' in His hand.

Now the most obvious meaning of 'angels' is 'angels' and so some take that to mean that every church has an angel that is uniquely responsible for what happens at that church. There's nowhere else in the Bible that talks about that though and practically speaking, I don't even know what that would mean, so I tend to side with the people who think that 'the angel of a given church' is the 'spiritual representation of that church.' It's like Langford in its spiritual essence. In which case then, Jesus is walking in the midst of His churches, holding them in His hand, addressing them each as corporate, spiritual communities that need to hear what He has to say.

And I just love that picture. That this magnificent Jesus is in our midst, to hold us and encourage us and challenge us and refine us as a church. I love that.

So we've got the magnificent Jesus walking in the midst of His churches and helping them in their walk with Him and the first church that He addresses is the one at Ephesus. John had actually lived in Ephesus and pastored in Ephesus – he probably wrote the letters of John there (1, 2, 3 John) – and so he has a personal connection to this church. He's probably thinking about the people there – the Mary Blacks and the Ralph Hastingses as he writes what Jesus tells him. You can see what Jesus says there in verse 2:

2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.

3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

The magnificent Jesus has been watching the church at Ephesus and He applauds them for three things that they've been doing.

1. They've been doing good deeds, working hard to serve one another and to make sure that people are taken care of. They've been collecting food for the poor and needy, they've been raising money for struggling people, they've been working hard to be the hands and feet of Jesus in their community. And Jesus has noticed and He applauds them for it. They've been doing good works...

2. They've persevered in the face of persecution. People have tried to shut them down in their walk with Jesus but they've held on tight and stood their ground. They've kept meeting together as believers. They've kept serving together as believers. They've kept on bearing witness to the goodness of God, even when people have spit in their face and Jesus has noticed. They've been working hard, they've been persevering...

3. They've stuck to the truth. They've been committed to right teaching, to doctrinal purity. When false teachers like the Nicolaitans come to town and try to introduce new ideas, they weigh them against the Scriptures and reject anything that doesn't fit. They're actually doing what John taught them to do in his first letter (1 John 4:1) – 'do not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether or not they are from God.' This church doesn't tolerate compromising ideas but works hard to preserve Gospel truth. And Jesus has noticed and applauds them for it.

The church at Ephesus has been doing good works, they've been persevering and they've been preserving Gospel truth; really they've been doing things that every church should do. So maybe we should pause for a minute to think about these things in our church. Clearly, these are things that Jesus values and so we want to be majoring in these things as a church.

So first – Are we doing good works, working hard to see that the needs of others are met? I know that we work hard to collect food and funds for Friendship House, and for Compassion and Gleaners and Teen Challenge and the Pregnancy Resource Centre. I know that the Sunday school teachers have been working hard to instill the value of giving in our students. I know that you support each other as a congregation and pray for each other; LCW has done a great job reaching out to our homebound people. I suspect that Jesus has noticed and is applauding us for it, but if you have in your heart another way we can serve others, let me know and let's get it going. Frankly, works of love and service work best when they grow naturally out of the congregation, rather than coming from the top down. I think we're doing well in this category.

Second, are we persevering and enduring hardships for Jesus' name? This one's a little trickier because obviously we're not facing a wave of state-sponsored persecution the way that the church at Ephesus was and I am grateful that we have the freedom to meet together without worrying that we'll lose our lives or belongings. We'll actually talk a lot about this next week, so I've save my commentary 'til then.

And third, are we preserving Gospel truth? You know, I'm grateful to be pastoring a church where I can preach boldly and unashamedly from the Bible. Where I can unpack our statement of faith and have no push back. Where we can affirm the Apostles' Creed and the hymns of the faith. Where I can tease out

the implications of the Gospel in theological and pastoral Qs from the pews. I'm grateful that I can say – all paths do not lead to God – there is only one way, one truth, one life and that's Jesus. I'm grateful that I can say that Jesus is not just a good guy who gives us a good life, He's not just a good example – He is the atoning sacrifice to deal with our sin and the Lord who commands our obedience. I perceive that as a church we are committed to getting it right in terms of doctrine and details and I think Jesus applauds us for that.

But, I think we would do well to listen to the rest of the letter. Jesus affirms us, He applauded the Ephesian church, but then He says – verse 4 -

4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. (Or 'the love you had at first' your Bible might say).

There are a handful of ways to interpret this, but they all boil down to the same thing: the church at Ephesus had fallen into a religious routine and they were doing what they were doing out of habit or routine or obligation. When they had first come to know Jesus, they were in awe of His love for them and they loved Him and their neighbours intensely because of it, but now they were just puttering along. They had forgotten Jesus' love for them and their love for Jesus and got stuck in a rut.

Daniel Akin puts it like this: "The fervent and passionate love they had for Jesus and His gospel when they first received Him had waned. They were now going through the motions."<sup>ii</sup>

Sadly, I know exactly what they're talking about. I realized searching my own heart this week that this was true of me. I got thinking back to when I first came to faith. I was so overwhelmed by this idea that the God of the Universe would go to such lengths to freely redeem me, that Jesus would lay down His life for me, not because I was good enough but because He loved me that much. His love for me motivated a fiery love for Him in my heart. I remember going to my pastor at the time and saying 'if you want, I can get up in front of everybody and tell them how excited I am about Jesus because if they see my excitement, they'll get excited too! (He didn't go for it).

Now though I'm aware that the weight of doctrinal disputes and the concerns of the church and conflicts and plain old fatigue keep me from doing all that I do out of love for Christ. And that's no good. This passage spoke to my heart this week to say – 'Why are you doing this? Because you have to? Or because He loves you?'

I want it to be the latter. And verse 4, Jesus calls us to the latter. Do what you do out of love for Jesus. Let your good works and your faithful perseverance and your doctrinal purity be motivated by the love of Christ.

How do we do that? Jesus gives us three ways – three R's in verse 5 -

5 Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and [return to] do the things you did at first.

Remember. It was so refreshing for me to think back to the time when I first came to trust in Jesus, when I truly KNEW Him for who He was. It was powerful, it was life-changing, I felt like a brand new person with all the weight of the world (and sin) lifted off my back. Even if you don't have that kind of

conversion story, think back to a time when you were tangibly aware of God's unshakeable love for you and let that motivate you to...

Repent. Now when we think 'repent,' we think 'repent from sin,' but this word 'repent' really just means turn around, change direction, go from one way of thinking to another, and that's all Jesus is saying here. Remember what it was like to first know Jesus, repent and turn around from doing things out of duty or tradition and...

Return to the things you did at first. Get back to doing things out of love for Jesus instead of a sense of duty or obligation or routine or tradition.<sup>iii</sup>

When we remember why we're here, repent of what we've been doing and return to the love we had at first, we get back to being a church that acts out of love instead of obligation – the kind of church that Jesus applauds!

And that's what we want to be.

Verse 6 continues – Jesus says to us: 'If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.'

Now remember that the lampstand represents the church, not the individual, and so I don't think that Jesus is threatening to take away salvation; I think though that Jesus is saying that if a church is not being the church out of love for Jesus, they become dry and doctrinal, they lack love for others, both inside and outside the faith, and they cease to be the church that God intends us to be and we lose our light, our witness to the world.

We need to hear this. We need to consider why we are doing what we're doing. Are our actions as a church motivated by the love of Christ – His love for us and our love for Him? And are we being a city on a hill, a lampstand in the darkness, to show the world that God is good?

Verse 7 - 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Now I have to admit that 'To the one who overcomes' is a little intimidating but here we need to use Scripture to understand Scripture. Over in 1 John 5:4-5, John, who's writing down *this* letter says: "This is the victory that has overcome the world, [it is] our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God" and I think we can add 'and acts out of love for Him.'

Verse 7 then says this: 'If you believe that Jesus is the Son of God and you act out your faith out of love for Him, I (the glorified Jesus) will give you the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.' That is, not even Adam and Eve who were originally supposed to enjoy the tree of life, got to enjoy the tree of life, but YOU will get to eat from that tree, the tree that gives eternal life (see Genesis 2:9, 3:22-24; Revelation 22:2, 14) when you act as a church out of love for Christ in light of His love for you. That's the promise that Jesus holds out to us when we are motivated to love by love.

The letter to the church at Ephesus. And a letter to our church here too. It begs us to ask:

What are we doing as a church? And why are we doing what we're doing?

If we are working hard to serve one another, to bear faithful witness and to hold firmly to the truth then that's great. Jesus Himself says 'Well done! Keep it up!' (If you're not, I would encourage you to ask why not?).

But tireless service, faithful endurance and theological orthodoxy are nothing if they're not motivated by love. Are you doing what you're doing out of an awareness that Jesus loves you more than anyone ever could? And out of a vibrant love for Him?

Or have you fallen into a religious rut, doing things because you feel like you should or because it's tradition or because it's nice? Have WE as a church fallen into a religious rut, doing things because we think we should or it's tradition or it's a nice thing to do?

Remember who you are. Remember who WE are. Beloved children bought by the precious blood of Christ. Poured out for us as an expression of God's redeeming love for us. 'We love because He first loved us' (1 John 4:19). Do what you do out of love for Jesus.



<sup>ii</sup> Daniel Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Revelation* (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (p. 59). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>iii</sup> Again, Daniel Akin is very helpful. He writes: "By all outward appearances this church looked healthy. Its doctrine was spot on, and the lifestyles of its members matched their confession. However—and this is an ever present hazard—they were in danger of becoming "a Pharisee church..." They were still doing all the right things, but sometime in the past they had forsaken the right motivation... Obedience out of duty had replaced obedience out of love for Christ. The difference between the two is massive. It is the difference between "I obey and Jesus accepts me" and "Jesus accepts me and I gladly obey." Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Revelation* (p. 58). Kindle Edition.