

Ephesus: The Loveless Church

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 February 2023

Preacher: Rev. Murdo M Campbell

[0 : 00] Well, if we could, this evening, with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling, if we could turn back to that portion of scripture that we read, Revelation chapter 2.

Continue in our study in the book of Revelation, if we've only reached chapter 2, we're looking at the first few verses of the chapter. So we'll read again from the beginning, Revelation chapter 2, just in 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.

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not.

And found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

[1 : 11] And so on. As you know, as a denomination, the Free Church of Scotland, we have adopted and applied, you could say, the vision statement of a healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland.

A healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland. Now, some might be suspicious or sceptical about having a vision statement for the church.

But as Solomon wisely said, without vision, the people perish. Without vision, the people perish. Therefore, we need a vision. And the vision of a healthy gospel church in every community in Scotland is a good vision to have.

But of course, a healthy gospel church is not about figures. It's about faith. It's not about quantity. It's about quality. It's not about goals.

It's about godliness. It's not about popularity. It's about preaching, pastoring, and praying. Because a healthy gospel church is focused and fixated upon Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone.

[2 : 24] And you know, in many ways, that's the vision Jesus revealed to John in the book of Revelation. Because as we said before, the book of Revelation, it's not the revelation of John the Apostle, but the revelation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It is this apocalypse. It's the apocalypse of Jesus Christ. But as we said before, God is, he's lifting the lid. He's removing the veil.

He's pulling back the curtain in order to reveal to the church that Jesus Christ is the risen, ruling, and reigning king who is going to return.

And as we saw last time, John received this revelation when he was in the Spirit on the Lord's day. And as we saw in chapter 1, the Lord spoke to him, spoke to John, saying there in verse 11, Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

And what Jesus gave to John was a vision. A vision for a healthy gospel church for every community in every country of the world.

[3 : 41] And I say that it was that vision for a healthy gospel church for every community in every country of the world. Because as we said before, this number seven, it's a number of completion.

Therefore, the seven churches in Asia, as we'll see as we go through them, they symbolize the complete church, the universal church, the worldwide church of Jesus Christ.

But the seven churches in Asia, they're not only symbolic, they're also, as we'll see, they are specific. They have specific issues that they're facing. And each church emphasizes and exemplifies to us these specific sins and struggles and stresses and strains that the church of Jesus Christ as a whole will face and continues to face throughout her existence.

And so this evening, we're looking at the first of the seven churches in Asia. We're looking at Ephesus, which was known as the Loveless Church. Ephesus was the Loveless Church.

Now, as we study these letters to the seven churches, we'll look at them in chapters 2 and 3 of the Book of Revelation. What we'll notice as we go through each church is that there's this consistent pattern.

[4 : 59] There's a consistent pattern in each letter where Jesus gives a word of commendation and then a word of correction. Jesus gives a word of commendation and then a word of correction.

So there are two headings this evening. First of all, a word of commendation. A word of commendation. Now, look at verse 1 of chapter 2. Jesus says to John, The word Ephesus means desirable.

The word Ephesus means desirable. And that's because the ancient city of Ephesus was a desirable place to live. Ephesus was this wealthy seaport city situated, as you can see on the map.

It was situated along the southwest coast of modern-day Turkey. And the city of Ephesus, it had built up its reputation as this key trade route.

A key trade route on the Aegean Sea, making it not only one of the greatest seaports in the ancient world, But then as you moved inland, it was also connected to three major trade roads.

[6 : 46] One that stretched north towards Smyrna, another that stretched east towards Philadelphia, and another that stretched south towards Laodicea. This meant that Ephesus was this important and influential city within the Roman Empire.

Sadly, however, Ephesus was renowned for its idolatry and its immorality. Ephesus was known for its temple to the Greek goddess Artemis, Although the Romans often referred to Artemis as Diana.

But with all their importance and their influence as a wealthy seaport city, The Ephesians, they built this temple, the temple of Artemis. And they built it double the size of any of the other Greek temples.

In fact, the temple was so big that it became known as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. But of course, with such a prestigious and prominent temple to a famous Greek goddess, It was a money-making opportunity.

It was a money-making opportunity for the city of Ephesus. And the Ephesians, they took advantage of this straight away, Because they made their fortune by selling these little silver shrine replicas of the goddess Artemis.

[8 : 08] And they distributed these silver shrines all over the ancient world. But the Ephesians, they were not only selling their idolatry, They were also spreading their immorality.

Because with the presence of this idolatrous temple to a Greek goddess, It always brought two things. It brought temple priests and temple prostitutes.

And with many people passing through this sea trade route city, The temple prostitutes also made an impressive income for the Ephesians.

And so in reality, Ephesus was nothing more than sin city. Ephesus was sin city. It was a city full of idolatry and full of immorality.

And yet, in 52 AD, it was into the darkness of that context and that culture That the Lord directed the once persecutor of the church, Now preacher of the gospel, the apostle Paul, To plant a church and place a candlestick in sin city, The city of Ephesus.

[9 : 22] In fact, we read in Acts chapter 19, That during his third missionary journey, Paul remained in Ephesus for two to three years. And as you'd expect, Paul would have challenged and confronted the idolatry And also the immorality within sin city, Within the city of Ephesus.

And when you read through the book of Acts, You see that by God's grace, Many people in Ephesus were persuaded to turn away from worshipping Artemis And turning to the living and through God.

What's more is that the gospel had such an impact and such an influence upon the Ephesians That the sales of all those silver shrines that they were making and sending out to the ancient world, All the sales plummeted as the gospel was promoted.

And as the sales plummeted, it caused chaos among all the traders. You read about it in Acts 18 and 19. All these traders, they claimed that their business would come into disrepute And Artemis would be deposed as the goddess of Asia.

You know, the gospel had such an impact, It had such an influence upon the church in Ephesus That the church in Ephesus became a light in darkness. The church in Ephesus became a light in darkness.

[10 : 44] And the Ephesian Christians were, as Jesus describes to us in the Sermon on the Mount, They were the light of the Ephesian world. They were the salt of their earth.

These Ephesian Christians were a light in darkness. And you know, this is why Jesus mentioned, He mentions all these sevens.

We touched on this before. All the sevens in chapter 1. He talks about the seven lampstands, The seven stars, The seven angels, The seven spirits of the seven churches.

And Jesus mentioned all these sevens, Because as we said, number seven is the number of completion. It's symbolic of the complete church, The universal worldwide church of Jesus Christ.

But as Jesus explained at the end of chapter 1, The seven golden lampstands are these seven churches. The seven golden lampstands are the seven churches.

[11 : 45] Now, as you know, if you remember, A long time ago we did a study on the tabernacle. And you'll remember that the golden lampstand Was an item of furniture in the tabernacle.

In fact, the golden lampstand was the only item of furniture In the tabernacle which radiated light. There were no windows in the tabernacle.

There was no natural light coming into the tabernacle. Therefore, without the golden lampstand inside the tabernacle, If the lampstand wasn't there, There would be complete darkness.

And this is why Jesus describes these seven churches As seven golden lampstands. They are a light in darkness.

The church is to be a light in darkness. The church is to be a lampstand That dispels the darkness of sin By displaying the light of the Saviour.

[12 : 43] That's what Jesus emphasises to us in the Sermon on the Mount. That the church is to be a lampstand, A city set upon a hill that cannot be hidden. The church is to be a lampstand that dispels the darkness of sin By displaying the light of the Saviour.

And that's what we're to be. That's our role, that's our responsibility as the church of Jesus Christ in our community. We're to be a lampstand. We're to be a lampstand that dispels the darkness of sin By displaying the light of the Saviour.

But then we also read in verse 1 Jesus says, To the angel of the church in Ephesus write The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand And who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

Now if the seven golden lampstands are the seven churches Then the seven stars in Jesus' right hand Are the seven angels. That's mentioned also in chapter 1.

But the thing about these angels, These seven angels, They weren't holy and heavenly beings. The seven angels were simply messengers of God. The Greek word for angel is angelos, Which can also be translated as messenger.

[14 : 06] Therefore the seven stars and the seven angels Who are part of these seven churches. They are the seven messengers. The seven ambassadors. They are the seven preachers. They are the seven pastors of these seven churches To whom Jesus is writing.

And Jesus had John write letters To the seven pastors of these seven churches. Because it was their role And it was their responsibility To be God's messengers To God's people.

They were God's messengers to God's people. And you know this is why Paul, This is why he said to young Timothy, He exhorted and encouraged young Timothy As a messenger of God, As an angel of the church, As a preacher and pastor, He said to him, Preach the word in season And out of season.

Bring God's message to God's people. And you know what's really interesting Is that Timothy was the pastor Of the church in Ephesus About 30 years before this letter Was sent by Jesus.

Because after planting the church And placing a candlestick in Ephesus in AD 52, After planting the church in Sin City In 52 AD, Paul wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus.

[15 : 26] We have it in the New Testament. And he wrote that letter to the Ephesians About a decade later in 62 AD. But unlike many of Paul's other letters To the Corinthians and the Galatians And the Colossians, And all these churches, They were all dealing with counterfeit Christians, They were dealing with false teachers, They were dealing with heresy in the church.

And yet, when Paul wrote to the Ephesians, Paul doesn't mention any of these problems. Because they seemed to be, At that time, Faithfully ploughing away In their furrow.

The Ephesians were just faithfully going along With the gospel. In fact, Paul's letter to the Ephesians, When you read through it, You see that it's a letter of encouragement, And it's a letter of exhortation, Where Paul reminds the Ephesians Of their salvation.

In chapter 2, We have those wonderful words, Where we're saved by grace alone, Through faith alone, In Christ alone. But Paul not only talks about their salvation, He talks about their service, That they're like soldiers, Who are to put on the whole armour of God, And stand firm.

And so Paul's letter to the Ephesians Was an encouraging letter, Where Paul commends them For their faithfulness, And their fervency with the gospel. He commends them for resisting This temptation of idolatry, And immorality, All around Sin City.

[16 : 52] He commends them for their diligence, And their desire to stand firm, And keep serving the Saviour. And Paul commends them for their patience, And their perseverance, In the Christian faith.

Which is just what Jesus does here, In the first half of his letter. Jesus says in verse 2, I know your works, I know your toil, I know your patient endurance, And 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.

I know you are enduring patiently, I know you are bearing up for my name's sake, And I know you have not grown weary. You know, If Paul had carried out a spiritual health check, On the church in Ephesus, They would have got fool marks.

But of course, Paul was only human. Jesus, On the other hand, Knew the hearts of the Ephesians. And when Jesus did his spiritual health check, He gave a deeper diagnosis.

And what they needed was a word of correction, Which is what we see secondly. So there's this word of commendation, But then Jesus gives a word of correction.

[18 : 19] A word of correction, Verse 4, A deeper diagnosis of the church in Ephesus revealed that they had left their first love.

They had become a loveless church. And they were a loveless church because they had become a legalistic church. They were a loveless church because they had become a legalistic church.

Of course, Ephesus wasn't always a loveless and legalistic church. Because for many years prior to this, Ephesus was a loving and a forward-looking church.

As we said, Paul commended them. Paul commended them for their fervency, And their faithfulness to Jesus. He commended them for their patience and their perseverance. Because they were a people who loved the grace of God.

They were a people who gloried in the gospel. More than that, They were a people who were well taught. They were well trained as a congregation. Because when you look at the history of the church in Ephesus, When you consider even the lineage of preachers that they had from their conception as a church plant, All the way down through the years, They had this great heritage of preachers who proclaimed to them sound and solid doctrine.

[19 : 56] In fact, In fact, In Acts chapter 18, We're told that when Paul planted the church, And placed the candlestick in Ephesus, He did so alongside other ministers.

There was Priscilla there. Aquila was there. And Apollos was with him. And Paul was the church planter. But Apollos, We're told, He continued as the church pastor for a number of years.

And during that time, When the seeds were being bedded down, Paul returned to Ephesus, And he built up the congregation by preaching the whole counsel of God.

And then later on, As time went on, We have Paul's apprentice, Timothy. He turns up in Ephesus. He continues the ministry in Ephesus. But it was at that time, That there was a doctrinal drift in Ephesus.

Not because of Timothy's teaching, But because there was pastoral problems in the leadership in Ephesus. And we saw that when we studied 1 and 2 Timothy. The leadership in the church in Ephesus had become soft on sin, Loose on the law, And they were glossing over the gospel.

[21 : 08] To the point that Timothy, You remember, He wanted to throw in the towel. He wanted to walk away altogether. But Paul says to him, No, Stand firm. Stay focused. Preach the word.

And Timothy did that. But tradition has it, That it was around that time, That Ephesus became home, To the apostle John. This may or may not be true, But historical circumstances, Make it very possible, If not probable.

And it said that it was from the city of Ephesus, From the church in Ephesus, That John wrote his three New Testament letters, First, Second, And third, John.

And John probably wrote his letters to these other churches, Mentioned here in Revelation. But as you can see from John's letters, When you read through his letters, The church had encountered and experienced some difficulties.

There was some division. Apparently, There had been a church split in Ephesus. No surprise. There's nothing new under the sun. But the split was because of Gnosticism.

[22 : 15] That's what 1 John is all about. Where false teachers claimed that they had this deeper knowledge of Jesus Christ. But in reality, They denied the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus.

And so when Jesus wrote this letter to the church in Ephesus, He was writing to those who remained faithful. Those who were the true church.

The doctrinally solid and sound church. Those who, They hadn't been diverted by Gnosticism. And so Jesus here, He commends them for their grace and their gospel focus, Their faithfulness and their fervency, Their patience and their perseverance.

But He also corrects them. Which is something none of us like. We don't like to be told that we're wrong. We don't like to be critiqued or criticized, Even when it's constructive criticism.

But what Jesus highlights to the church in Ephesus is not their head, But their heart. Because as a church, They had this great heritage of preachers.

[23 : 23] These preachers who preached solid and sound doctrine. And you know, You look at the lineage of preachers. They had the Apostle Paul, They had Priscilla, Aquila, Apollos, Timothy, And then the Apostle John.

And because of that, They had this biblical knowledge. They had a theological education. They had a confessional position. They were doctrinally solid and sound when it came to the gospel of grace.

So much so that they were able, You could say, They were able to dot all the I's and cross all the T's of Scripture. But the problem was, They had heard much, But did little with it.

They had heard much, But did little with it. They were full of head knowledge, But lacked love, In their heart.

And they had become so legalistic about all their knowledge. But in their legalism, They had become loveless. They had lost their first love.

[24 : 30] They had left their first love. And you know, You read it, And you have to see that it's a mirror. And we have to ask ourselves, We need to be careful that we're not like the church in Ephesus.

Because over the years, We've had a pedigree of powerful preachers. I think back to my childhood, And to people before my childhood. People you'll remember.

Pedigree of powerful preachers, Who have given us a biblical knowledge. They've given us a firm foundation. They've given us a theological education, And a confessional position, To the point that we could say, That we are doctrinally sound, And solid when it comes to the gospel of grace.

We've heard much. But it always comes back to the question, What are we doing with it? What are we doing with it? Have we lost our first love?

Have we left our first love? You know, I don't know about you, But I'm sure that you remember, When you first became a Christian.

[25 : 39] Everything was new. It was great. You were full of love for the Lord, Love for the Lord's house, Love for the Lord's people. You were alive. You were on fire. You were full of passion.

Full of life. Where you wanted to be at everything. You wanted to be in fellowship. You had this hunger and thirst to grow, And to know more. More than that, You had this burning desire, For everyone around you to be saved.

You wanted everyone to be saved. And you didn't care who you told, Or who you spoke to, Or how you spoke to them. But what the church in Ephesus warns us of, And I ask myself the same question, As you have grown in head knowledge, Murdo, Have you grown cold in your heart?

As you've grown in head knowledge, Have you grown cold in your heart? Have you become so legalistic in your head, That you've become loveless in your heart?

Have you left your first love? Do you need to go back to your first love? And if the answer is yes, Which, If you're anything like me, It probably is, Then Jesus says, What does he say?

[26 : 57] Repent. Verse 5, Remember therefore, From where you have fallen. Repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you, And remove your lampstand from its place, Unless You repent.

Repent, he says, Turn back to God. And he says, Not like the Nicolaitans. Yet this you have, He says, You hate the works of the Nicolaitans.

The Nicolaitans were people who loved God, And lived as they pleased. They loved God and lived as they pleased. But, Jesus says to them, You're not like the Nicolaitans.

No, You need to repent, Turn back to God, And love God, And live to please God. Love God, And live to please God.

Go back to your first love. Love. Go back to your first love. And as you know, We are called and commanded in Scripture, To love God, First and foremost.

[28 : 04] To love the Lord your God, With all your heart, Mind, Soul and strength, And your neighbour, As yourself. But if we have lost our first love, If we have lost our first love, As Paul said in that chapter of love, In 1 Corinthians 13, He said, Even if I speak with the tongues of men, And of angels, But have not love, I am a sounding brass, And a tickling cymbal.

Why? Go back to the first love. Love is patient, Love is kind, Love does not envy or boast. And Paul is describing what Jesus is like, And he's saying to us, This is what you need to be like too.

Love is patient, Love is kind, Love does not envy or boast. It's not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It's not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, But rejoices with the truth.

Love bears all things, Believes all things, Hopes all things, Endures all things. Love never ends, He says. Faith, hope and love abide, But the greatest of these, Is love.

The greatest of these is love. And so if we've lost our first love, If we've left our first love, If we're so legalistic in our head, That we've lost love in our heart, Then we will not see the importance, Of loving our family, Our friends and our work colleagues, To the point that we will speak to them, And tell them about Jesus, And invite them to come to church, And even keep praying for them, And pleading with the Lord for them.

[29 : 45] If we've lost our first love, We will lose sight, Of why we are the light, In darkness. If we have lost our first love, We will lose sight, Of why we are the light, In darkness.

My friend, The church in Ephesus, Is a warning to us. We need to be a loving church, Not a loveless church. We need to be a loving church, Not legalistic in the head, And loveless in the heart.

No, we need to be loving. A loving church, Not a loveless church. Time has gone. Verse 7 says, He who has an ear, Let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

To the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, Which is in the paradise of God. I won't touch on this this week.

We'll look at the phrase. The phrase is repeated, As you'll see, Throughout every section, Every church, It has the same phrase. He who has an ear, Let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[30 : 54] Something Jesus said, Right at the beginning of his ministry, In the parable of the sower. He who has an ear to hear, Let him hear. We'll consider it next week, When we look at the church in Smyrna.

But this week, Ephesus warns us, That we are not to be a loveless church. We are not to be so legalistic in the head, That we are loveless in the heart.

We need to be a loving church. That seeks to be a light. In our community. We need to be a loving church. That seeks to be a light for Jesus.

In our community. Well may the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray. O Lord, our gracious God, Forgive us, we pray, If we have lost our first love, And help us to confess with the psalmist, And say that I love the Lord, Because my voice and prayers heeded here.

I, while I live, will call on him, Who bowed to me his ear. We thank thee, O Lord, For loving us first. And Lord, we pray that we would not lose sight, Of who it is we have been saved by, And who it is we serve.

[32 : 15] Bless us, Lord, as a church. Bless us as a light in this community. That we would let our light so shine before men, That they would see, The goodness and the graciousness of our God.

O Lord, help us to love our neighbour, And our friends and our work colleagues. Help us to pray for them, And to plead with them, That they will come to know Christ.

Bless us, Lord, even as a nation. And Lord, we are to be a light in this dark nation. And although it seems to be getting darker day by day, We bless and we praise thee, That Jesus promises to us, That he who is in you, Is greater than he who is in the world.

We thank thee that Jesus Christ, Is the light of the world. And that he who walks in him, Shall not walk in darkness, But shall have the light of life. Bless us then, we pray.

Keep us, we ask. Keep us ever looking to Jesus, And walking in the light, As he is in the light. That we might have fellowship with him. Take away our iniquity.

[33 : 23] Receive us graciously, For Jesus' sake. Amen. Now we're going to bring our service to a conclusion. This evening we're going to sing in Psalm 116.

Psalm 116, In the Scottish Psalter, Page 395. And we're singing from the beginning down to the verse marked 6. Psalm 116, From the beginning, I love the Lord because my voice, And prayers he did hear.

I, while I live, Will call on him, Who bowed to me, His ear. Down to the verse marked 6, To God's praise. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. I love the Lord, Because my voice, And prayers he did hear.

Thy, while I live, They will call on him, Who bowed to me, Is here.

[34 : 43] Of death and wars and sorrows, I have heard me come past round, The pains of hell do hold on me, I clear my trouble find, Upon the name of God the Lord, Then did I call and say, Deliver thou my soul, O Lord,

I do thee humbly praise. God merciful and righteous is, Yea, gracious is our Lord, God saves thou me, I was brought low, He let me help afford.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, The love of God the Father, And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, Be with you all, Now and forevermore.

Amen.