

Truth and Love

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[0 : 00] Let's see how we go. There's no tenderness like people in your finger taste. You're trying hard not to show it.

But baby, baby, I love it. All right, that's enough.

Well done, well done. At the earliest services I did that, I think there was one solo person. So that was great, terrific. Yeah, and the connection, there is a connection.

The connection is this church we're looking at today, it seems that they had lost that loving feeling. But before I show you from God's word, so you don't take my word, but God's word for it, let me remind you of the situation.

In chapter 1, verse 9, you can look back in your Bible, it's on your screen if you don't have one there, but we heard how John was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus at the end of the sentence there.

[1 : 13] That is, he was exiled because he was a Christian who proclaimed Christ. But you also heard that last week, as Ricky spoke to you, that John is not the only one undergoing this suffering.

Notice in the yellow there, he says, I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering kingdom and patient endurance that is ours. In other words, they are suffering too.

John is a companion with them. This suffering belongs to them as well. And so the context or the situation is that of people, Christians suffering for Christ.

Now, with the cold temperatures at the moment, being exiled to Patmos in Greece sounds quite nice, actually. But it wouldn't have been a holiday for John, nor for his first readers.

For them, they were persecuted by both the Jewish synagogues and the Roman government of the day, sometimes even killed for Christ.

[2 : 18] In other words, this revelation that John receives, this book was written during a time when the church was not popular, a time that's increasingly like our time today, isn't it?

The church is becoming less and less popular. And so John writes to them to both encourage and challenge them to persevere, to keep clinging to Christ.

Like giving that picture of Jesus that you saw last week. Remember that big picture of who Jesus is now, that they might be encouraged that he really does reign and we really will win on the last day.

Or like these mini letters, Jesus now sends to seven churches in chapters 2 to 3. And so what follows are these letters, as I sent, and they're sent to churches in modern day Turkey.

It's a bit hard to see this, but just in terms of contemporary geography, Turkey is smack bang in the middle. Ephesus is on the coast on your left there. And you can see the countries that you know about around it.

[3 : 29] But a little bit easier perhaps is this one. So this is just a map of Western Turkey. And there are the seven churches that Revelation speaks about. They form a kind of horseshoe or ewe shape there.

And each letter sent to each church of those seven cities follows a similar pattern. And so it begins, to the angel of the church in...

Doncaster, Ephesus, wherever. And then it goes, these are the words of, and then you insert a description, or Jesus inserts a description of himself, taken mostly from chapter one's vision that you saw last week.

And then he goes on to say, I know, and then he talks about what he knows about them, which means either praise for what they're doing well, or rebuke for what they're not doing well, or sometimes both.

And then he adds a command with an encouragement or warning. And then the last two things of the pattern, the one who is victorious always ends with encouragement. To the one who is victorious, there's a promised reward, which is usually taken from elsewhere in the book of Revelation.

[4 : 39] And this plea to hear, whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Sometimes those two lines are reversed, which is why I put them both as the letter D.

Now what Jesus says, he says to that particular church, you know, whether Ephesus, Smyrna, Thyatira, or the like. But that doesn't mean it's got nothing to say to this church here this morning.

Because you notice that last line on the screen, even though the letter is, the individual letter is written to an individual church, it says, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches, plural.

And so it's God's will that we eavesdrop, as it were, on these letters, and hear what the Spirit says through the word of Jesus, not through some other thing, but through the word of Jesus, that we might hear it and follow their good and avoid their bad, that we too might persevere with Christ in our day, where the church is becoming less popular.

And so that's the big picture of the next couple of chapters in Revelation that we're going to be looking at over the next coming weeks. But what does the Spirit, or what does Jesus say to the church in Ephesus? Well, point one, verse one.

[6 : 04] 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.

Here Jesus reminds them that he walks among them. If you look back to the last verse of the chapter beforehand, he reminds us that the golden lampstands represent the churches and that the stars represent the angels.

In Revelation, the angel usually refers to a heavenly angel. But I suspect here in these letters, it refers to the messenger who will read aloud this particular letter to the church.

because the Greek word for angel also means messenger. And it kind of makes more sense that Jesus would say to the angel or messenger of the church in Ephesus, who will read this bit out, write this message.

But either way, it doesn't really matter. Either way, Jesus reminds them that he also walks amongst them. He's one who walks amongst the lampstands, that is the churches. And so that means Jesus knows his people.

[7 : 21] He's with them, walks amongst them. He knows us. He knows our struggles, our temptations, our ups and our downs, which is a kind of comforting, isn't it?

That he gets how hard our life is and that he is with us to help us persevere. But he also knows our deeds, both good and bad.

How does that make you feel? I guess it kind of depends on our deeds, whether they're good or bad, doesn't it? And what about Ephesus? Well, it starts off with good. Do you see verse two to three?

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

You have persevered and endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary. Verse two, he knows their deeds, their hard work and their perseverance in particular.

[8 : 31] And I say in particular, because he repeats perseverance in verse three, doesn't he? Both using the word and then using the opposite. They've persevered and not grown weary, which means perseverance, right?

But how? How they persevered for his namesake? Well, I think in the truth of the gospel, because in between these two mentions of perseverance is the fact that they cannot tolerate wicked people, but have tested those who have claimed to be apostles and were found to be false.

These wicked people are associated with those who claim to be apostles, but are not, who are not speaking the truth, but are speaking what is false. And they cannot tolerate that teaching.

In other words, they have persevered in the truth. They've followed Christ, the truth of Christ, without adding to the gospel or taking away from the gospel.

They've stuck with the fact that Jesus said, he is the only way to God, that he's the only one who died for our sins and rose again, so that whoever believes in him will have eternal life.

[9 : 47] They've stuck to that truth, persevered in it. And so Jesus praises them for it. And this is pretty tough job, particularly when we remember the pressure that this church was under to change the truth.

You see, Ephesus was the second biggest city in the Roman Empire. Rome was the only one bigger than it. And it was significant. It had a population of 250,000 and came with its own mini MCG.

There it is, the amphitheater. Kind of looks like a demolished Death Star a little bit, doesn't it? For those Star Wars fans. But it held 25,000 people. And this city was wealthy.

It was on the coast. And so it had a port until it silted up. But it gained great wealth through trade. In fact, as you came up from the port, the harbour, up to the city, there was this massive road that was 10.5 metres wide, laced with columns all the way down.

It would have been very impressive to walk up. But it was also a city known for its temples to false gods.

[11 : 06] It had temples to the emperors, because at that time you're supposed to worship the Roman emperor. Here is an example of a temple that still exists today to the emperor Hadrian, that people were to go to and worship at.

But more than that, Ephesus was the home of the Greek god Artemis or Diana, whose temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

All that's left though today as one and a half pillars, the half in front and the one behind. But the historians have done a model of what it looks like, and they're pretty sure this is how impressive it would have been.

You know, it would have dominated the landscape and been very impressive indeed. And at these temples, they would sacrifice food to Artemis, and there would be temple prostitution happening as well.

And so there would have been huge pressure to participate in this false worship. Even back in Acts chapter 19 in the Bible, when this church first started, you know, Paul preached the good news of Jesus.

[12 : 19] People believed in Jesus. They stopped going to the temple, stopped buying little silver trinkets for Artemis God. And so the silversmiths got really annoyed because they lost business.

And so in Acts chapter 19 in our Bibles, we read, when they heard that as the silversmiths heard what was happening, people becoming Christians, they were furious and began shouting, great is Artemis of the Ephesians.

And then soon the whole city was in uproar. And they, people seized, guys and Aristarchus, and they, the traveling companions of Paul, they rushed into that mini MCG I showed you before.

And they're about to die until the city clerk calmed everyone down. The point is there would have been great pressure on this church. There was even pressure back then to bend the truth of the gospel, to add to the Bible, some of the city's beliefs, but they did not.

They persevered in the truth. And I'm wondering God's kindness, whether we might receive that praise from Jesus.

[13 : 27] Not because of anything I've done, but we here at Holy Trinity have a legacy of sticking with the Bible. I think I may have mentioned one time before, we had some visitors, not long after I'd started here, they went to another church.

And after the service, they asked the minister of this other church, oh, and we noticed there was no Bible reading. And, you know, the sermon didn't refer to the Bible much. Is that normally what happens there?

And the minister got very irate and said, oh, if you want a Bible believing church, go to Holy Trinity, Dongaster. Best insult ever. Not to do with me, but we stand on the shoulders of others in God's kindness.

And we can thank God for that, but we had to persevere in that truth. I mean, is there not pressure on us today to add to the Bible's teaching or to take away from it?

Some of our own city's beliefs on top of it, whether it's beliefs about marriage, gender, or Jesus being the only way. And some churches have. Fiona and I were at our ministry conference a couple of weeks ago.

[14 : 34] And there were some things there that I wouldn't particularly call the truth. And in fact, Fiona went to a workshop where the minister said that he also, along with Jesus, believes in the koala God of the Aboriginals.

Now that he was trying to show that we need to do a better job of caring for our First Nations people. And I agree with that. And we'll talk about loving people, but loving people doesn't mean believing what they believe, unless it's in the truth of the Bible.

There is pressure on us to add to the gospel, but we are to persevere in the truth like the Ephesian church did, without losing love, as the Ephesian church sadly did.

Point to verse four. Jesus says, Yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken the love you had at first.

You see, this church has lost that love and feeling. It seems their right desire for truth has led them to harden their heart to love.

[15 : 47] But love for whom? Is it for Jesus, for fellow Christians, one another, or for non-Christians, those outside? It's hard to tell from the text, actually.

It could be all three. For example, it could be that they've worked so hard at persevering the truth of Jesus, they've started to just go through the motions.

They're tired, and they've lost love for Jesus. Perhaps they were like Israel in our first reading, where they used to love God, but now no longer. And so perhaps for this Ephesian church, as I said, they persevere in the truth, but it's out of obligation to Jesus, not out of love for Jesus.

You know, it's a duty, not a joy. And it's worth asking ourselves whether we have fallen into this trap. You know, do we come to church and obey Jesus because it's the right thing to do?

Or because we love the one who died for you. Is it a duty or is it a joy? Have we lost that loving feeling for Jesus?

[16 : 59] Or perhaps it's love for one another inside the church. You know, they've worked so hard at persevering for the truth of Jesus that they've grown critical of one another. You know, they kind of are so careful to test for the truth.

Ah, that wasn't the truth. You got that wrong. And they've grown unloving towards one another. It's easy to imagine that, isn't it? Yeah, I guess we are meant to test the truth in everything to see if it matches the Bible, which is why we always work through the texts when we can, verse by verse, so that you can test it for yourself.

So you can check to see if what I'm saying is the truth. Perhaps we should also add this sign at the pulpit that says, don't trust this guy, but check what he says.

Should we do that as well? Well, maybe we just stick it there for the whole time. Bible's open. You got to test the truth. But that doesn't mean we stop loving one another when we get it wrong, does it?

Even when Timothy, Paul's spiritual son, Timothy, was left to look after this church in Ephesus, they had problems with the truth back then. Paul said, look, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines.

[18 : 21] But notice, the goal of this command is love. Thank you, one, two, three of you. Love, yeah. Upholding the truth of the gospel is meant to lead them to loving one another just as Christ has loved us.

And so, do I love that minister who says he worships that koala god even though that's clearly false? Do you love one another even when they get things wrong or even if they do something wrong to you?

Do you still love? Have we lost that love and feeling towards one another? Or perhaps they've worked so hard at persevering the truth of Jesus that they've bunkered down against their society.

You know, they've put their heads down to follow Jesus so much so that they never lift their heads up to love the world, to love them enough to share the good news with them that they might be saved.

Instead, they've become a Christian ghetto. And I think this is quite possibly the focus here in the passage because the description Jesus chooses to use of himself in verse 1 is of a lampstand which represents the church.

[19 : 38] And lampstands are meant to give light to the world, aren't they? In fact, in verse 5, that's the warning he gives as well, removing the lampstand. As Ricky said last week, these lampstands have an evangelistic edge to them like we saw from Zechariah or like Jesus says from Matthew chapter 5, you are the light of the world.

Or even later on in Revelation where it talks about the church being witnesses to prophesy these churches who are lampstands. And again, we can fall into this trap, can't we?

Our country, as it moves further away from God and makes life harder for us, it's easy to develop an attitude of them versus us and to grow hard against the world rather than to keep loving the world.

I mean, our current government has already changed laws and they're trying to change more to make it illegal for Christian schools to hire only Christian staff. That battle is still happening right now.

Members of our own state government have actively targeted churches in the past. Or just last week, some parents of this congregation were called into the local primary school because their nine-year-old daughter was playing with a couple of friends at lunchtime, I think it was.

[21 : 00] And they were, I think, sprinkling leaves or something or other and one of them said, oh, this reminds me of baptism. And the third one, who is Muslim, was offended, went and told the teacher and then the teacher called for the parents to come into the school and told them to encourage their daughter not to talk about religion at school anymore.

Now, I'm not having a go at that little Muslim girl. They're kids, right? But should not the teacher have said, look, people believe different things. They're allowed to choose. That's okay. But let's love one another and let's go on with each other.

But no, no, we now live in a country where free speech has gone even for nine-year-olds. And when you hear that, it makes you angry, doesn't it? And it's very easy to develop a them versus us attitude.

But no, no, we need to keep loving the world enough to share the gospel with them. In that old phrase, we are to hate the sin but love the sinner.

Which is why in verse 6, Jesus says, I'll get to that in a second, but in verse 6 of your Bibles, Jesus says, he hates the practices of the Nicolaitans. He doesn't hate them themselves, he hates the practices, what they do, their sin, but not the sinner.

[22 : 22] No one knows exactly who the Nicolaitans are. They were probably a group who added temple worship and prostitution to their so-called Christianity, which means they probably weren't Christians to start with.

But the point is, Jesus doesn't hate them. He hates their practices and we've got to do the same. We've got to have the mind of Christ, as we'll sing in a little while, that hates the sin but loves the sinner just as he has loved us.

As it says on the screen, we're to speak the truth in love, both in a loving manner and out of love for the other, including the non-Christian outsider.

Even when they hate us, we're still to love them. That's not always easy, is it? And so to help the Ephesian church and us do this, Jesus gives them a command with a warning, which is more briefly point three, verse five.

Verse five, he says, consider or literally remember how far you have fallen, repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, this is a warning, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

[23 : 41] The command is to remember and repent. Remember what you were once like, how you first loved and repent of your lack of love.

Stop being a Christian ghetto and do the things you did at first, like sharing the gospel with those outsiders around you.

And to motivate them, Jesus warns them, if they don't, then he'll remove their lampstand. There'll no longer be a church in Ephesus. It will close down and they'll no longer be able to shine as a light to the world around them because in fact, it seems they're not doing that at the moment.

That's a pretty severe warning, isn't it, to close the church? That's how seriously Jesus takes love. I mean, what are the two great commandments?

Love God and love your neighbour, whether the Christian insider or the non-Christian outsider. That's how seriously Jesus takes love, that if they don't love, he'll close their church.

[24 : 49] I wonder if we take love that seriously. But Jesus always ends on a note of encouragement. Point four, verse seven. He says, whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

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. To the one who is victorious, that is, the one who heeds what the Spirit says, which for the Ephesians was to remember and repent.

The one who perseveres, trusting in Christ, will be given the right to eat from the tree of life. That tree of life that was first in the paradise of God in the Garden of Eden and will be in the world to come, the paradise of God.

And as the name suggests, the tree of life will give life, that is, life eternal to those who truly trust in Jesus and heed what the Spirit says to the churches, including to us here today.

And so what do you need to grow more in? What do you need to persevere more in? Is it in the truth of the Bible, the gospel? Are you struggling to not add to it or take away from it to make it more palatable, fit with our city's beliefs?

[26 : 05] Do you need to work harder at persevering the truth? Or perhaps you need to work harder at being loving towards others, whether inside or outside the church or even to Jesus himself.

whatever it is, whoever has ears here today, let them hear what the Spirit says and persevere in both truth and love.

Why don't we pray for God's help to do both? Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we pray that you would help us to have the mind of Christ that persevered in both truth and love.

Help us to follow in his footsteps that we might continue to persevere in truth and love. We ask it in his name. Amen.