

To Ephesus

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Date: 17 July 2016

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[0 : 00] Please have a seat and let's pray. Father God, we pray that we might be those that humbly receive your implanted words. Father, do your work in our lives, we pray.

Be with us in this time and teach us by your Spirit. We ask this in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen. We're in the second installment of We've Got Mail, this series looking at the letters that the risen Lord Jesus writes to seven churches in Asia Minor or modern day Turkey.

Ian kicked us off last week with this great description in the end of chapter one about the author, about what the risen Lord Jesus looks like, about what he is, what his character is.

And today we get into the letters properly. Today we're going to look at the church in Ephesus in Revelation chapter two and verses one to seven.

Everyone has an opinion when it comes to church. Everybody has an opinion. Church is too boring. Church is too exciting. Church is too modern.

[1 : 14] Church is too traditional. Church is too loud. Church is too quiet. Church is too big. Church is too small. Church is too formal.

Church is too casual. The sermons are too long. Everyone thinks the sermons are too long. There is no shortage of opinions when it comes to church.

You can buy countless books written by experts about what churches should do, what churches should be, how churches should run, what churches should look like. Just on my bookshelf alone, I have total church, center church, simple church, vintage church, wiki church, vertical church, transformational church, everyday church, urban church, organic church, slow church, provocative church, deliberate church, disappearing church, spirit-filled church, mission-shaped church, gospel-centered church, and purpose-driven church.

There is no shortage of opinions when it comes to church. Some of them are great. It's good to have opinions about church.

But there is one opinion that matters over and above everything else, what the Lord Jesus thinks and says about his church. What he says is good.

[2 : 33] What he says is bad. That must be the primary opinion that matters in our churches and in our lives. His opinion ultimately matters. His advice must ultimately be heeded.

And his verdict about church will be ultimately decisive. And so in Revelation chapter 2 and chapter 3, we have these seven letters written to seven churches in modern-day Turkey.

They are real churches, but they are also representative churches. There are lots and lots and lots of churches in Asia Minor when Jesus dictates these letters.

But these are the seven he writes to, and these are the seven that represent what church is. Letters dictated to the Apostle John on the island of Patmos by the risen Lord Jesus.

And they are so relevant to us. Even though they're written 2,000 years ago to a context that is quite different to 21st century Edinburgh. They are incredibly potent.

[3 : 42] They are ferociously contemporary. Why? Because people haven't ultimately changed. Because church hasn't ultimately changed.

Because Jesus certainly hasn't changed. And truth remains truth. These letters are written to them, but they're for us. What the Spirit says to these churches, the Spirit is saying to us today.

And they follow a regular framework. The seven churches all follow a very similar pattern. And it starts with an inscription. Jesus says to the message bearer of the church in Ephesus, right, there is a command to make an inscription.

Then there's a description of the author. To him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. Always a description.

A description that is picked up from the end of chapter 1. And that is incredibly pertinent to the church that Jesus is writing to.

[4 : 49] After the description, you get a commendation. Jesus says what they're doing well. I know, he says. And after the commendation, there's usually an accusation.

Yet this I hold against you, but this I hold against you. After the accusation, there's an instruction. This is what you're to do about it.

This is your steps to change and to bring your church back in line with what I want your church to look like. After that, there's an exhortation.

Either in the form of a warning or a promise. And then an affirmation. He relays a promise to them. To him who overcomes.

That word overcome is the word Nike. The word, the one that is victorious. To the one that is victorious, I will do this. And then it finishes with an invitation.

[5 : 46] To those who have ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. And understanding that not everyone who gets the mail will understand what Jesus is saying. There will be an invitation.

And the seven churches are different. I tried to write a three-word review for each of them. Ephesus is sound but hollow. We'll see more of that in a sec. Smyrna is vibrant but fearful.

Pergamum is evangelistic but undiscerning. Thyatira is loving but naive. Sardis is hypocritical and sleeping.

Philadelphia is struggling but strong. Laodicea is affluent and apathetic. To two churches, Jesus says nothing bad.

To two churches, Jesus says nothing good. And to three churches, they get a mixed report. And Ephesus is a church that gets a mixed report. And the key for us over these seven weeks is not to diagnose what sort of church we are.

[6 : 56] We're not going to say, we're not going to rebrand. It's no longer Bruntsfield Evangelical Church. It's Pergamum Evangelical Church because we think that letter fits us. The key is to listen to what Jesus says, to discern what a healthy church looks like, and to spend all our energy and effort trying to orientate our church in line with what he says is best.

So if you've got a Bible, turn with me to Revelation chapter 2, and we'll read these seven verses. John writes,

The letter to the church in Ephesus.

And Ephesus is a major city. It is affluent. It is multicultural. It is pluralistic. It is the melting pot of lots of different cultures.

It's at the intersection of three of the big trade routes of the ancient world. It was a church that was planted by Paul.

[9 : 05] He spent about three years there teaching and discipling and getting the church off the ground. It's pastored by Timothy, his right-hand man, during a very problematic period.

It's invested in heavily by the dynamic duo of Priscilla and Aquila. And latterly, church history tells us that Ephesus becomes the base of operations of John, who's writing these letters down.

John acts as some kind of overseer and bishop of all of Asia Minor, and he has his base in Ephesus. And it is to this church that Jesus writes his first letter.

In the middle of this vibrant city, this large city, there is a real church of Jesus Christ. I like to call it Ephesus Evangelical Church, but I'm biased.

And Jesus describes himself as the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. It is Jesus who holds the churches.

[10 : 09] He is the one who upholds them. He is the one that ensures they keep on going. He is the one sovereign over them. But see, he's also the one who walks among them.

This idea of walking among takes us all the way back to Genesis chapter 3 verse 8, where the God of the universe would walk with Adam and Eve amidst his creation with his people.

And here we see the risen Lord Jesus walking amidst and amongst his people. This idea that in the church, God's people have fellowship with God through the Lord Jesus, who is with them.

And Jesus commends them in four ways. He gives them a cracking commendation. Four of them. The first thing he commends them for is their perspiration.

He says, I know your deeds, your hard work. That phrase hard work is literally sweaty toil. I know your sweaty toil.

[11:14] I've seen your t-shirt ringing with sweats. He says, I know. These are comforting words. He's not saying, I've read a report or I've heard a rumor or I've made an assumption.

He says, I know. That the Lord Jesus who walks amongst his churches knows. I know your sweaty toil. He's saying, Ephesus, you're a very active church.

You're a church of doers. You love rolling your sleeves up and getting your hands dirty. You love to be busy in the work of the Lord. You all put your hands to the plow and your shoulder to the wheel. It's hard work modeled by Paul back in the day. In Acts chapter 20, he says, In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way, you can take care of the poor and build the church of God.

Jesus commends them for their perspiration. That in Jesus' eyes, he values sweaty toil. And so if he values sweaty toil, would sweaty toil describe your Christian walk and Christian service of the Lord Jesus?

[12:27] Perspiration for the Lord. Working hard. Because Jesus says, I commend that kind of effort. The second thing Jesus commends them for is their perseverance.

Look at 2B. He says, I know your perseverance. Or verse 3. You have persevered and have endured hardship for my name. And have not grown weary.

Second thing about the Ephesians is not that they're just sweaty and toil, but they keep going. They keep moving forward. They keep trying hard.

Even amidst persecution, they haven't grown weary. Ephesus is a tough place to be a Christian. In this kind of multicultural, riot sensitive, with the temple of Artemis over and above, a very partisan crowd.

It's dangerous to be a Christian, and yet the Ephesian Christians keep on going. To own the name of Jesus in Ephesus was to put yourself in the crosshair of the culture.

[13:35] And Jesus says, you've done that. And you've kept on going. You've persevered even though it costs.

Now, as I look at Bruntsfield, I think we've got some wonderful examples of people who persevere. People who have gone through tough times or difficult times, worrying times, and have just kept on going.

And we learn from Ephesus that Jesus commands perseverance. Thirdly, he commends them for their purity. The last bit of verse 2.

I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people. Or verse 6. But you have this in your favor. You hate the practice of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Jesus says, I know you cannot tolerate wicked people.

You have an aversion to sin. You disassociate from people who are not living holy lives. Ephesus is a people who don't walk in step with the wicked, who don't stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the company of mockers.

[14:47] They don't tolerate wicked people. And they also hate the Nicolaitans. We don't know really much about the Nicolaitans, except that they seem to be this antinomian, ultra-Christian, liberal sect, who say, we are free in Christ, we can do whatever we want.

Grace is sufficient. We can be licentious and promiscuous. We can be sexually immoral. We can be drunkards because Jesus has freed us.

And actually, the worst we get, we're just showing how great Jesus is. And Jesus commends them for their purity. Don't associate with wicked people.

And you hate the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. And then their fourth commendation is that they preserve truth. They preserve truth.

That you have tested those who claim to be apostles, but are not. And have found them false. They are committed to contending for the faith, once for all, delivered to the saints.

[15:53] They can smell a rat. They know their Bibles, and when people start sharing things that aren't from the Bible, they go, well, no. We're going to stop you there. In preaching and teaching, they are like the Bereans of Acts.

They receive the message with eagerness. They love the truth. But they examine the Scriptures daily to test whether what is being shared is from God.

Not cynical conspiracy. Not always trying to pick up on every mistake and every little slip of the tongue. But if it doesn't chime with the truth, they're on it. And they say, we're going to have to stop you there.

Don't worry about coming and sharing next week. We'll sort someone out. There's an eager and examining heart, not gormless and gullible. And you have to say, on the strength of that, Ephesus is a pretty splendid church.

It's doing really well. They're hardworking, striving for holiness, keep going even when it's tough, orthodox and sound, committed to God's truth.

[17:00] Who wouldn't want to be part of the church in Ephesus. You can imagine, as the guy reads this out, everyone's high-fiving, group hug, let's make sure we get this on the front page of the website, that the Lord Jesus, our Lord and Head, says we're good at these four things.

But then verse four comes. And stinging criticism follows. Yet I hold this against you.

You have forsaken the love you had at first. This is a crushing verdict. This is the criticism that totally overwhelms all the commendation.

This is the one test you don't want to fail. This is the church of the tin man.

Shiny and splendid. Dynamic and active. And yet as we learn from the Wizard of Oz, what's his problem? He doesn't have a heart. And so the church in Ephesus is like Dorothy's friend, the tin man.

[18:13] Shiny and splendid. Dynamic and hardworking. Truth-loving and striving to be holy, but doesn't have a heart.

It's hollow on the inside. And from the Lord Jesus, that is a fail. That is a massive problem that they need to do something serious about.

Jesus really does value hard work and holiness and perseverance and soundness. But absent of love, they're completely null and void.

It's rendered everything else that is good, bad, because it is superficial and not growing out of a loving and expanding heart. Ephesus, it seems, has morphed into Corinth.

If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not love, I am nothing.

[19:25] If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to a hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Ephesus has become Corinth.

And it seems that this love is particularly horizontal love, love for each other. There is a lack of life-giving fellowship in the church.

A lack of love for people in the church, but also a lack of love outside of the church. They have no burden for the lost or no concern. Church that runs great, but is only superficial.

A lack of life-giving fellowship, a lack of life-changing mission. They're great at stopping the world's message getting into the church, but they're terrible at getting the church's message into each other and out into the world.

And so what are they to do? They've fallen a long way. Paul wrote to them in Ephesians, for this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you.

[20:35] Remember you in my prayers. Now it seems they're cold and loveless, going through the motions, absent of love.

You're a church of tin men. Hard work, but heartless work. Holiness, but potentially legalistic because it's not done out of love for the Lord Jesus.

Orthodoxy, but maybe dry and dusty because it's not bringing about worship and love for the Lord Jesus. What are they to do? Three things. Verse five, remember.

Consider how far you have fallen. Consider what you used to do. Consider what you were like when I heard about your love for all God's people and never stopped giving thanks as poor.

Remember those days. Do you know when I've had the very few opportunities to help people whose marriages are struggling? And one of the great questions is, talk to me about a time when you got on really well, loved each other and your marriage was strong.

[21:40] And it suddenly dawns on them that once they liked each other. And Paul is saying, get back to those days where you liked each other. Where you were gracious and loving, where you were concerned, where your hearts were bursting with love for the saints and your minds were buzzing with how you could help and bless and serve each other.

When it wasn't an academic exercise, but it was an adoration exercise. when it wasn't joyless duty, but joyous delight. He's saying, remember those days.

Consider how far you've fallen. Go back to what you did at first. And then he says, repent. Repent. A change of mind leading to a change of direction.

Change how you think about church. Change how you think about each other. Reignite a passion for one another deep in your soul.

When you weren't just going to church, but you were church. When you weren't just doing services, but you were being family. And then he says, once you've repented, you've changed your mind.

[22 : 54] Repeat. Do the things you did at first. Serve others. Contribute. Don't just consume. Don't be tin men any more.

Remember what you used to do. Repent and get back to the early days. Repeat what you used to do at first. In order that Ephesus might be a place of life-giving fellowship and life-changing mission. A loving church is a church that hangs in together and goes out together. Brunsfield, a place of life-giving fellowship and life-changing mission.

It's so easy, isn't it, to retreat to a satisfactory working relationship with each other, with the Lord Jesus. Retreating to just rubbing shoulders rather than having a deepening relationship with each other.

Jesus says to the church, you need to remember, repent and repeat. Remember, repent and repeat. And like all good letters, Jesus ends with a conclusion.

[24 : 03] He says this, end of verse 5, if you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. And then he says, whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.

What the Spirit says to the church is 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. Jesus' conclusion has a warning and a promise.

And the warning is this, if you don't change, if you don't remember, repent and repeat, I will destroy and disband your church. It's that serious.

Jesus will not tolerate a counterfeit version of his church representing his name to other people. He says, if you don't change, the end is coming for Ephesus' evangelical church.

If people will know Jesus' disciples by the way they love one another, then to be loveless is to be anonymous in Jesus' eyes. And therefore, if you don't sort it out, the lights will go off.

[25 : 10] It's a serious situation. Ten for effort. Ten for holiness. Ten for orthodoxy. Ten for perseverance. But the church is on its last legs because there's no love.

Hard hearts, calloused over time, passionless formalism. The church of the tin man. Serious.

You need to take action now. But he leaves with a wonderful promise. To the one who overcomes. To the Nike people.

I will give the right to eat from the tree of life. It will be like going back to Eden. It will be being in God's place, having fellowship with God in a real and full way.

The hope of heaven in the future but seen as a working model in the life of the church now. That the one who walks amongst the lampstands will walk amongst his people again.

[26 : 16] Those who have ears let them hear. So what about Brunsfield? Well, we want to be the best of Ephesus. The best of Ephesus.

We want to be commended for all the things Ephesus are commended for. Working hard, standing firm, suffering long and being set apart. But we've got to be better than Ephesus as a place that loves much.

Well, I must go to Oz and get my heart, said the tin man. So he walked to the throne room and knocked at the door. Come in, called Oz. And the tin man entered and said, I have come for my heart.

Very well, answered the little man. But I shall have to cut a hole in your breast so I can put your heart in the right place. I hope it won't hurt you. Oh no, answered the tin man.

I shall not feel it at all. So Oz bought a pair of tin smith shears and cut a small square hole in the left side of the tin man's tin man's breast.

[27 : 21] Then, going to a chest of drawers, he took out a pretty heart made entirely of silk and suffered, stuffed with sawdust. Isn't it a beauty, he asked. It is indeed, replied the tin man.

He was greatly pleased. But is it a kind heart, asked the tin man. Oh very, answered Oz. Let's pray. Almighty God, to whom all hearts are opened, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, encourage the size of our hearts, inflame the warmth of our hearts, enrich our compromised hearts.

And do this by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and sacrificially love each other and worthily magnify your name to those outside.
We pray this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Amen. Thank you.