

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(March 21, 2010)

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Sermon manuscript

Forward, Church!

(Revelation 2:1-7; 3:7-12)

Introduction: Preferences...

This morning I'm bringing you the message I've wanted to bring ever since the Elders began discussing back in January the whole idea of what Jesus would say if He were to evaluate our church.

The congregational consideration of Jesus as Evaluator/Assessor of our church began on March 7th when we considered together the cross of Christ on a Sunday morning message, paving the way for a grace orientation to life.

Then, on March 14th, I brought a message that highlighted God's people crying out for more from God. We saw this both from the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah, as the Jews came to God, repentant over sins committed and obediences not fulfilled.

And we saw the same thing in the New Testament (Acts 4) where, despite the early church having seen thousands of people saved and miracles galore, they, like the Jews of Ezra's and Nehemiah's day, longed for more demonstrations of God's glorious power.

Today, we are heading into the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation.¹ We'll make the (perhaps) startling discovery that there are certain things that Jesus really, really likes to see in churches and that there are certain things that He really, really doesn't like to see in His churches.

¹ Often this book is simply called Revelation, or The Revelation - and either of these is appropriate. Just don't call it "Revelations" or "The Revelation of St. John." The book is a revelation of Jesus Christ. He is the main theme of the book.

Orienting to the book of Revelation -

The Apostle John wrote Revelation near the end of his life, near the end of the first century A.D., while living on the tiny island of Patmos, located just off the coast of Asia Minor in the Aegean Sea.

He was on Patmos, not to enjoy a Mediterranean vacation, but due to persecution. He refused to shut up about Jesus, so Rome finally said, "Enough" and sent him to live out his days on an island that was the ancient equivalent of Alcatraz.

[1:9] I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Revelation begins with a vision of Jesus, resurrected and glorified. It is the same Jesus we see in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, only as we never see Him the Gospels!

[12] Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; [13] and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. [14] His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. [15] His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. [16] In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength.

This is Jesus unveiled as the King of kings and the Lord of lords. And this Jesus told the Apostle John to write letters to seven churches. These seven letters make up the second and third chapters of Revelation.

Jesus writes letters to seven churches

There is a lot of discussion among Bible scholars about these letters. Why did Jesus write to these particular churches? What is the significance of the letters? What do they represent?

Me? I believe that the letters were written to these seven churches, out of all the churches that might have been chosen, because these seven were representative of churches that would exist through all the ages.²

In other words, I believe that these seven Christian congregations stand in the place of all congregations. When we read these letters and see what Jesus approves and disapproves in them, we can know what He approves and disapproves in our own church.

Today, we are going to look at letters Jesus addressed to two of the churches. They happen to be the two churches that I believe have something especially pertinent to say to Northwest Community Church.

It is important that we listen to Jesus' self-description at the beginning of the first letter, the letter to the angel³ of the church at Ephesus.

Reclaiming Our First Love for Jesus (Revelation 2:1-7)

Christ - the Church's LORD (v. 1)

Jesus is described as *[1]...The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands*

The seven stars are the angels of each of the churches (see 1:20) and the seven golden lampstands are the churches themselves. This initial picture of Jesus tells us two things.

² Given that there were hundreds of churches in existence when John sat down to write, many have wondered why these seven churches received letters. Is it because they were all on the same postal route? (they really were, by the way) Do these seven churches describe seven periods of church history, as some Bible scholars believe?² Maybe... (but probably not.)

³ You'll notice, too, that the letters are all addressed to *"the angel of the church..."* Who is this *"angel"*? In the Greek language, the word *"angel"* (Greek, *αγγελος*) can also be translated *"messenger."* Several different possibilities have been offered for who or what this *"angel"* is. My own conclusion is that the *"angel"* is truly a spirit being, perhaps pointing to the idea that each church has a "guardian angel." John Walvoord, former President of Dallas Theological Seminary, believed that the "angel" was the pastor of the congregation. But, since when have pastors ever been angels? This is obviously wrong! ☺

One, it tells us that He is sovereign over the churches - the church at Ephesus AND Northwest Community Church. He is the Benevolent Dictator of all churches everywhere and throughout time.

Two, He is present in the churches. He walks among the lampstands. Jesus was present in the worship services of ancient Ephesus. He is present here, today, with us.

Because of His sovereignty over the churches and because He is really present in each church, Jesus is uniquely able to assess each church.

First, He tells us what is good and right in the church in Ephesus.

Christ - the Church's HEALER (vv. 2-7)

The Diagnosis (vv. 2-4, 6)

Positive (vv. 2-3, 6)

[2] I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false [3] and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary...[6] Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

TIRELESS WORKERS

The believers in the church at Ephesus took their faith seriously. They toiled in worthwhile projects for Jesus. They patiently endured hardship. These are good things.

DISCERNING

They were also discerning, well-taught, discriminating Christians who were able to judge truth from error and right from wrong. And that's a good thing.⁴

⁴ As we read these words, we think of Acts 20, where Paul warned the Ephesian elders about *"savage wolves"* who would come in to the fellowship and who would try to lead the church astray with heretical teachings.

THEY HATE UNRIGHTEOUSNESS

On top of all that, Jesus commends the Ephesian church for hating unrighteousness. They were morally upright. And that is a good thing, too.

We really don't know anything about the Nicolaitans, except that they were evidently bad guys. And the Ephesian church would have nothing to do with them! They stood against the Nicolaitans.

Any church could learn a lot from the Ephesians about the need to **work hard**, the need to **discern truth**, the need to **hate unrighteousness**.

But despite these commendations, all is not well at the First Church of Ephesus. After handing out kudos, Jesus reveals that His searching examination of the church has uncovered something rotten at the core.

Negative (v. 4)

[4] But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

The Ephesian church had its share of virtues. Tragically, those virtues proved a fertile breeding ground for a spiritually passionless Christianity. We wonder...

- Was there such an emphasis on working for Jesus that fellowship with Jesus got lost in the shuffle?
- While the church was committed to truth, had they forgotten that TRUTH was, first, a Person, the Person who said, **[John 14:6] "I am the way and the truth and the life"**? Had they come to believe that truth was nothing more than a set of propositions?
- The church at Ephesus hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans. Fine. But hating can become a church's favorite form of recreation. Even hatred of a bad thing can turn a soul sour.

Honestly, we don't know why they had come to the point of passionless Christianity. Only that it is undeniably true that they had left (literally "abandoned") their first love.

To the outside observer, this was one fine church. And those in the church might not have sensed problems. But, isn't that the way it often is with serious illness?

- People with high blood pressure sometimes don't realize they have a problem until they blow a gasket.
- Folks with heart problems might not notice anything more than a tendency to tire easily just before an elephant lands on their chest.
- Cancer is sometimes painless in the early stages and so does its worst damage undetected.

Jesus says that the church at Ephesus is sick. The disease is lack of love for God, Lost Love Syndrome.

For the Christians in the first century church at Ephesus and for anyone here today who is suffering from Lost Love Syndrome, what follows is a three-part prescription for combating this deadly disease.

First, the person who has walked into Lost Love Syndrome must **remember**.

The Prescription (v. 5a)

[5] REMEMBER therefore from where you have fallen, and REPENT, and DO THE DEEDS YOU DID AT FIRST...

Remember

Back at the beginning, when they had first placed their faith in Jesus they had lacked theological sophistication.

Now, they understood redemption, propitiation, justification, sanctification - and lots of other big words! Before, they couldn't even say fundamental, evangelical, pre-millennial dispensationalist. Now they are one!

At the beginning, they had some bad habits. They slipped and used profanity every once in a while. They sometimes bet their paychecks on the chariot races, smoked, even got a little tipsy on occasion.

Not anymore. They used to be at Point A. Now they are at Point B.

And, surprise (!), Jesus says that there was something about them at Point A that was more alive, more right, more attractive to Him than what He is seeing at their more "advanced" state of Point B.

What is missing is a hot-blooded, fervent, zealous LOVE for a Savior who died on the cross for their sins!

- Tell them to pray? Prayer used to be second nature. Now, it is a chore.
- They used to break out in song to the Lord, but not anymore.
- Back then, nobody ever had to prompt them to witness. Talking about Jesus was the most natural thing in the world. No longer.

They had slipped, backslid. And the first step in moving back toward health was the step of **remembering** how it used to be.

Memory is so powerful. When the prodigal son was up to his knees in pig slop, starving, penniless and friendless in a foreign country, what prompted him to return home?

Jesus tells us that he remembered. *[Luke 15:17] But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!'*

It was that memory that prompted him to leave for home.

What would happen if you shoved a disk into your mind's DVD player and watched recordings of earlier days with Jesus? Would you identify times in your life when you were more passionate for Jesus than you are right now? Or even times when the hunger for being passionate for Jesus was more on the radar than it is now?

This morning, Jesus invites you to remember when that love or the longing for that love was the controlling force of your life.

If, upon remembering, you realize that your love for Jesus is not what it used to be or what you long for it to be, Dr. Jesus prescribes another action step. **REPENT.**

Repent (The Shasta Principle)

Kathy and I have always had a dog or two, and our first dog was a beautiful, sweet-spirited Norwegian Elkhound named Shasta.

Shasta died many years ago, but Shasta's going to help me illustrate repentance this morning. (she's done it before, as some of you may remember...)

For a while Kathy and I lived in a home that had a backyard, but no fence. When we had to leave Shasta outside we would tie her to a tree with a long chain. Throughout the day, Shasta would wander around from place to place.

Unfortunately, Shasta (who didn't have a great deal of sense) was constantly moving *around* the tree. Here every movement around the tree shortened the chain and limited her freedom.

At the end of the day I would come home to find Shasta tight up against the tree. She couldn't for the life of her figure out what happened to her long chain.

For her to regain her freedom Kathy or I would have to lead Shasta back around the tree in the opposite direction she had been traveling. As she walked back around the tree, the chain lengthened and she regained her freedom.

That walk back around the tree was Shasta's repentance.

If you have wrapped yourself around the tree of a passionless Christian experience, the only way back is to repent.

Let's call it "The Shasta Principle." Reverse course. Back up.

And of what does repentance consist? Jesus tells the Ephesians, and He tells us to repeat, ***"do the deeds you did at first."***

Repeat

When a counselor is working with a married couple who tells him that they have fallen "out of love" with each other, the counselor might ask them what they used to do for each other when their love was strong.

Maybe they fixed each other breakfast, took long walks together, talked about everything under the sun, or washed the car together.

The counselor knows that there is a link between people's emotional and volitional life. Repeating behaviors that were in place when love was strong can rekindle love's dying embers.

That is the point of Jesus' words here. He wants Christians suffering from Lost Love Syndrome to recall what they used to do to nurture a growing relationship with Jesus when things were good, when there was passion, when love flowed - and repeat them.

What would that mean for you? Might it mean -

- taking long walks where your sole agenda is to talk with God?
- taking in large sections of Scripture on a regular basis?
- talking with brothers and sisters - about Christ?

What did you used to do when there was great intimacy between you and Jesus? Did you memorize Scripture? Take overnight prayer retreats? Fast? Did you have a really tight-knit fellowship group?

Brothers and sisters, if you have recognized today that you are suffering from Lost Love Syndrome, Jesus prescribes medicine to return you to spiritual vitality.

REMEMBER how good things were when things were good. **REPENT** of having wrapped yourself around the tree of a cold soul. And **REPEAT** those *first love* deeds. Take that medicine and your heart will swell with love for Jesus and your life will be filled with the richness only He can give.

That's the message from Jesus to the church at Ephesus. Ask yourself this question: Is that the message He might give you? Is that, perhaps, what He might say to Northwest Community Church?

As you are pondering that question, turn a chapter over to another letter. The second letter for our consideration today is the letter Jesus wrote to the church in the ancient Asia Minor city of Philadelphia.

To kick off our consideration of this letter, I'll tell about an incident that happened one year, probably about eight years ago, while driving up to Colorado for an annual backpacking trip I like to take with my sons.

Open Doors; Open Hearts (Revelation 3:7-13)

Suburban woes...

After ten hours of driving, at approximately 2:30 AM, my old, reliable Chevy Suburban began to run poorly.

A mechanic in Santa Fe, New Mexico, fixed a problem that wasn't the problem. After I paid him, we got back on the road and limped north.

Late in the afternoon, realizing we weren't going to make it much farther if we didn't get the car fixed, I pulled into a small repair shop in a little Colorado town, just south of Creede, right about closing time.

I walked into the office to find the mechanic resting his feet on his desk, ready to call it a day.

I explained our situation. The car idled well, but had no power. I told him what the other mechanic had "fixed" - he just scowled.

He got up, and told me to go start up the car. I revved the engine and he had it diagnosed in (literally) 5 seconds. He fixed the problem in less than an hour.

As we drove out of his shop, the Suburban ran like a dream. In a few minutes, I'll tell you what he did to fix it.

And, believe it or not, the repair my car received that day illustrates exactly what Jesus wants us to see about the church at Philadelphia and what made it such a healthy church.

It also provides a beautiful picture of what I believe needs to happen here, for Northwest Community Church to be the church of Jesus' dreams.

In the letter He wrote to this church, the Lord Jesus makes no mention of heresy, backsliding, compromise, or apathy. In fact, He says not one negative word to them.

Which is not to say that there were no problems in Philly. There were problems, all right. The Christians there were being persecuted.

Persecuted & Vindicated (vv. 7-9, 10)

[7] And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens...[9] Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not, but lie, behold, I will make them to come and bow down at your feet, and to know that I have loved you. [10] Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth.

There is no detail given as to the kinds of persecution the Christians in Philadelphia were suffering. Let's just assume that they were suffering what persecuted Christians have suffered through the centuries.

- They were ostracized from family and friends.
- They bore financial hardship, maybe even losing their livelihood.
- They were physically abused, tortured, put to death.

Without question, the mostly Jewish opponents were making it tough for the Christians to live like Christians. They were trying to get them to stop evangelizing and to give up being salt and light.

But Jesus urged the Philadelphian Christians to stand firm. He promised that He would keep them from an hour of testing, a period of trial that was coming⁵ and then held out the hope that if they kept living faithfully He would bless them beyond measure!

⁵ Some Bible scholars believe that Jesus is giving here a promise that Christians will not experience the horrors of what we commonly refer to as The Great Tribulation Period, a seven year time period described in Revelation, chapters 6-19. This is my own interpretation.

Blessings Flow to Philly! (3:12)

[12] He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore He who overcomes I will write upon him the name of My God,⁶ and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name.

These two promised blessings are to us as much as they were to that first century church in Asia Minor.

If we are faithful, God will make us a permanent fixture, a pillar, in the Temple, which is the place where God dwells. AND, if we remain faithful, God will take us, gift wrap us, and stick an address label on us that says:

Recipient: God
Destination: Heaven
Attention: ME!!

So why is praise being heaped on this church? Why all the protection and vindication?

Jesus seems to be especially pleased with the church at Philadelphia. But why? What is it about these believers that makes Him smile?

The answer is found back up in verse 8, where He commends them.

A Church to Makes Jesus Smile (3:8)

He knows their deeds

[8] I know your deeds...

⁶ In the Old Testament, Aaron, the first High Priest, wore on his forehead a golden plate with the engraving "*Holy to the Lord*" (Ex. 28:36-38). That symbol designated Aaron a special possession of the Lord. This is the same sense we find here in Revelation. The believer who is an overcoming Christian has the assurance and certainty that he is secure in Jesus and has a home reserved in Heaven.

Throughout the letters of Revelation, reading those words - “***I know your deeds***” - produces a cringe, because they are usually the prelude to the lowering of a boom.

Not for Philadelphia. No, He likes what He sees in Philadelphia.

The Church of the Open Door (v. 8b)

[8] I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My Name.

There are different ways to take those words “open door.” Bible scholars have suggested that they refer to everything from Jesus Himself to our free access to God through prayer to a doorway to Heaven for the martyrs of Philadelphia.

And while these are all possibilities, I think that there is a better understanding of the term “open door.” The New Testament repeatedly uses the words to refer to an *opportunity for the gospel*.

For instance, when Paul was writing of his travel plans to the Corinthian church, he explained why he was going to stay in the city of Ephesus for “***A WIDE DOOR for effective service has opened to me...⁷***”

In a word, to have an “***open door***” put before the Philadelphians meant that they had opportunities for evangelism.

An open door for evangelism had been placed before the church at Philadelphia. And what were those believers doing with that open door? They were marching right through it!

⁷ At the end of the First Missionary Journey, as Paul and Barnabas related what had happened during their travels, they reported “***...all things that God had done with them and how He had opened A DOOR of faith to the Gentiles.***” (Acts 14:27) See, too, 2 Corinthians 2 where Paul explained that God had given him an opportunity for ministry in the city of Troas. “***Now, when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when A DOOR was opened for me in the Lord...***” He asked the Colossians to pray that God would “***open up to us A DOOR for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned.***” (Col. 4:3)

No one can shut this open door!

[8a]... I have put before you an open door WHICH NO ONE CAN SHUT

Their persecutors - whether Jew or Gentile - haven’t managed to shut it. Satanic powers can’t shut it. Nothing can shut the door of opportunity for the gospel set before the Philadelphians.

Nothing and nobody can keep them from going through that door.

They are bound and determined to get the good news that Jesus saves out to everyone they meet, even to their persecuting neighbors, the very ones who are making their lives miserable.

In the church at Philadelphia, we have a church filled with folks who are taking advantage of doors God has opened to share Christ with their neighbors, friends, relatives, and strangers. They are actively, lovingly evangelizing.

And THAT is why there was not one word of rebuke, reproof, correction, warning, or condemnation from Jesus to the church at Philadelphia. Jesus really, really likes evangelistic churches.

So, what is the Spirit saying to us, to Northwest Community Church, through the message to THAT church?

Conclusion:

A few minutes ago, I told you about some car trouble I had on a trip to Colorado. Here’s “the rest of the story...”

After being mis-diagnosed at the shop in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the mechanic in Colorado told me to go start up the ‘burb and rev the engine.

He walked around to the back of the car, put his hand in front of the exhaust pipe, looked at me and said, “*Your car’s constipated. You’ve got a restricted exhaust system.*”

With that, the car went into his garage and up on the lift. He hacked open the exhaust system, found the obstruction, removed it, and put the car back together.

We left his shop a little more than an hour later, and from that point on it ran like a dream.

Interesting. I was feeding my car excellent fuel. I serviced the car regularly. I tuned up the car prior to leaving on the trip - it was a car on which you could actually perform a tune-up!

But, because the exhaust was restricted, there was no get up and go. It turns out that a healthy exhaust system on a car is very important.

Same thing with your soul. Same thing with our church.

We can be feeding our souls with great food. We can listen to the best teaching and preaching on the radio or on TV. We can soak up sermons and can learn in Adult Bible Fellowships and get fed at Care Groups.

But, if there is no outflow, if there is no evangelism, there will be no power, no get up and go.

Here is something interesting...

While the exhaust system on my Suburban was restricted, it idled like a champ. The only problem came when I put the pedal to the metal and tried to accelerate. Or when we tried to climb a hill. Then, there was no response.

Christians can along just fine with Restricted Output Syndrome - but neither Christians nor cars were made to idle.

God saved us so that we would accelerate through trials, respond to challenges to faith with faith, move ahead for Jesus while being opposed, serve while suffering.

Well, power gets to the wheels of a car when there is great fuel getting to the engine AND when there is an unrestricted flow of exhaust out the tailpipe.

Power to live for Christ comes when you and I are feeding our souls with truth from Scripture AND giving out what we have received to those who have never placed their trust in Jesus for salvation.

Power comes when we pray for these people whom Jesus loves, love them well, and seek to introduce them to our Jesus.

The exhaust system in the church at Philadelphia was unobstructed. They were reaching out for Christ right where they were. And that, coupled with their good intake of truth, made for a healthy church, a strong church, a church that was the apple of Jesus' eye.

So, as I read Revelation 2 and 3, here's the "bottom line" as I see it.

If the Lord Jesus were to make a searching evaluation of our church, I wonder if He might say something like this -

- First, "You don't love Me as you should. You don't pray and talk to Me like you would if you really loved Me. You're in jeopardy of losing your first love. If you're not careful, you're on track to become Ephesus II - and that would be a tragedy."
- Second, "You don't talk about Me enough to the people I died for. There is a congregation-wide lack of fervor for evangelism. I want Northwest to become Philadelphia II. To become that, you'll have to be bolder witnesses for Me."

I believe that many of us have suffered long with Restricted Output Syndrome and with Lost Love Syndrome.

If we are to become the church of Jesus' dreams, the apple of His eye, the church He died and rose again to make us, it will be because we have looked in the mirror and seen what we have become and have determined before God that we will start talking with Him more in prayer and talking about Him more to people He desperately loves.

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."