

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Series – *Jesus Measures His Church: Are We Listening?*

The Importance of Love

Revelation 2:1-7

Introduction:

A. Introducing the book of Revelation

I'm excited about the new series we're starting this morning on chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, the last book of the Bible. But before we jump into chapter 2, let's briefly cover chapter 1 to get us up to speed. Now in chapter 1 the resurrected Jesus reveals himself to John, one of his closest disciples. By this time John is an old man, put in exile by the Roman government because of his faithful service to Jesus. Now despite John's intimate friendship with Jesus and decades of service, Jesus' appearance completely overwhelms John.

Sometimes we're so focused on the earthly life of Jesus that we can forget Jesus is the awe inspiring creator and runner of the cosmos. Jesus is described in Revelation 1 as having eyes like blazing fire, a face that shines with the brilliance of the sun, and a mouth with a sharp, double-edged sword coming out of it.

When John encountered the resurrected Jesus, he collapsed as though dead. Thankfully, Jesus graciously reassures John; and then instructs John to write down this revelation. John is to then pass along the revelation He receives to seven first century churches. Now the entire book of Revelation is a message to these seven churches. However, in chapters 2 and 3 there is a specific message for each church. Can you imagine being in one of those ancient churches as they read their personal message from Jesus?

B. How can Northwest please Lord Jesus?

Now there are many opinions in the culture and the church regarding what makes a successful church. But what kind of church do you think pleases Jesus? Or to state it more personally, how can we be a church that pleases Lord Jesus? That's what we'll consider during this sermon series, as we examine what Jesus has to say to these first century churches. Now these messages are not only for those ancient churches, they are also for us. For towards the end of each message it says, "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Notice that "churches" is plural. The Holy Spirit wants to speak through these messages to every church that will listen and respond in obedience. And it's important that we take these messages

seriously. After all, we certainly do not want to be a church that displeases King Jesus and fails to experience the glorious work that He wants to do in and through us.

C. Background on Ephesus and its church (Rev 2:1)

So, if you've got a Bible, please turn to Revelation, chapter 2. Revelation 2. We'll start in verse 1. "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands."

Now chapter 1 of Revelation explains that the seven golden lampstands represent the seven churches. So verse one of chapter 2 here is saying that this message to the church of Ephesus is coming from Jesus, who walks among His churches. And Jesus walks among us at Northwest as well, caring for us and measuring the quality of our service.

Now the seven churches addressed in Revelation were in Asia Minor, located in modern day Turkey. Ephesus was the most prominent of the seven, with three important trade routes converging there. It had 250,000 people, a very large population for the time. Ephesus also had the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and a center for much idolatry.

Ephesus was not the easiest place to be a Christian. The Bible book of Acts, in chapter 19, notes that many in the city practiced sorcery and that at one point a large mob nearly led a violent revolt against the Christians. Acts chapter 20 notes that there were groups who plotted against the Apostle Paul as he tried to establish the church and that false teachers from both inside and outside the church tried to lead it astray for years.

Now in the midst of these challenges God provided this church with some incredible leadership. The Apostle Paul helped establish the church, with assistance from Priscilla and Aquila. Later Paul wrote the Bible book of Ephesians to the church. Some years later Timothy, Paul's protégée, pastored the church. And tradition says that John was an elder in Ephesus for some years as well.

I. Pleasing Jesus requires good hands and a good head (Rev 2:2-3, 6)

A. Good hands persevere in kingdom work

So, let's see what Jesus has to say to the Ephesian church, which is about 40 years old at time. Please follow along with me, starting in verse 2, where Jesus says, "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.³ You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.”

Jesus starts by saying, “I know your deeds.” Now that could be an encouraging or concerning statement for the Ephesians. Imagine Jesus starting a message to our church or to you personally by saying “I know your deeds.”

I’m sure the Ephesians were relieved that Jesus followed that statement with praise for the church. Jesus is pleased with their good hands and head. Look back at verse 2. Here we see the good hands of the church, working hard for Jesus. And verse 2 also tells us that they persevere in their hard work. These are not the kind of Christians who stop serving their Savior as soon as things get difficult. They remind me of how Jesus works through our Bread & Water ministry, whose servants have been showing the love of Jesus to some of our friends experiencing homelessness for years now, even as they struggle with health and family challenges themselves. Now as we’ve already noted, Ephesus was not the easiest place to be a Christian. And not only is the church persevering in kingdom work, but verse 3 tells us that they have not even grown weary.

B. A good head knows and stands for truth

And this church not only has good hands, it also has a good head. Look back in the middle of verse 2, which says, “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.” This church has a good head. They know God’s truth well enough to identify false teaching. And they don’t just know the truth, they stand for it as well – they do not tolerate wickedness or false teaching.

Now look down at verse 6, where Jesus gives more praise. “⁶ But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” Again, we see this church knowing and standing for God’s truth. Now we don’t know much about the Nicolaitans. But from the commentaries I read this week¹ it appears that the Nicolaitans tried to water down Christianity to the point where it was acceptable to the pagan society around it. Most likely, they did this by allowing the worship of false gods and by accepting certain immoral, evil behaviors.

C. How can it be good to hate?

¹ Bauckham, Mounce, Osborne’s works on Revelation.

Now some of you might be thinking, I thought God is love and tells us to love everyone, even our enemies. So how can Jesus praise the Ephesian Christians for hating?

Look back at verse 6. Notice that Jesus is not saying He or the church should hate the Nicolaitans. Rather they should hate the *practices* of the Nicolaitans. A loving parent will be deeply disturbed if their child gets involved with wicked things that harm the child and others. Some of us parents here have been through those deep, painful waters. And you know that a good parent can hate the evil practices of their child while continuing to love the child. In fact, the strong love fuels the hatred of the evil practices. And if a good, but flawed parent can do this, how much more so can our perfectly loving Savior?

Jesus' hate for the Nicolaitans wicked behavior, and ours, does not come from indiscriminate anger. Rather, Jesus loves us enough to hate our wicked behavior. Not only does it dishonor Him, but it keeps us from the freedom, love, and flourishing that Jesus longs for us to enjoy in Him. And if we really love others with the love of Jesus, we too will be disturbed when we see people make tragic, harmful choices.

In some church circles they attempt to describe this truth by saying things like "hate the sin but not the sinner." Now Jesus obviously holds this distinction effortlessly. He has a holy hatred for everyone's sinful behavior because of His perfect love for everyone. But this task is not so easy for the Ephesians, or for us. We've already noted that the Ephesian Christians were working hard for the kingdom in a hard place. In that sort of difficult context, perhaps especially for a church so strong on truth, it could be easy to move away from the most important thing.

II. Pleasing Jesus requires a good heart (Rev 2:4-5)

A. A good heart loves God and people

Let's see what that is, in verse 4. Look there with me. "4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first." Ouch; when Lord Jesus has something against your church, that's serious. And Jesus' criticism for the Ephesians is a very serious one - they've forsaken love. Although the church's hands persevered in service and their heads knew and stood for truth, their hearts were lacking. They had forsaken, which is a strong term, the love they had at first.

Now is the "love" here in verse 4 a love for God or people? I think the best answer is that when we look at the Scriptures, love for God and people are inseparable. John discusses this

reality in another book he wrote that is in the Bible, 1 John. Listen to what chapter 4 of 1 John says, “We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.”

B. Ways the Ephesians (and we) can drift away from love

Now the Ephesian church started out with a strong love for God and people, which is affirmed by the Apostle Paul in the book of Ephesians. However, like the Ephesians before us, we are in danger of drifting away from the love we once had for God and people, even when we believe and do the right things. Perhaps, like the Ephesians, you are so focused on serving Jesus that you have stopped pursuing a relationship with Him. Or perhaps, like the Ephesians, you see people promoting evil in our culture or even in the church and you get so focused on standing for truth that your heart grows cold towards them. I don’t know about you, but I’ve certainly been guilty of these two things at times.

C. The serious consequence of failing to love

And Jesus considers this failure to love an extremely serious offense. Look at verse 5 with me. It says, “⁵ Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”

Now given their good hands and head, it is likely the Ephesians had not totally stopped loving God and people. However, they had forsaken that stronger love they had at first. And no matter how much a church serves, no matter how much Bible it knows, if it continues down a path away from love, there will be serious consequences. And so in verse 5 Jesus warns the Ephesians that if they do not repent and do the things they did at first, He would remove their lampstand. Jesus loves His church too much to stand idly by and watch it forsake love. If a church forsakes love, He will remove His blessing and eventually let it die, if the church does not respond to His loving discipline.

D. Verses showing why love is so important

Now some of us might be thinking that Jesus’ reaction here seems pretty severe. After all, the Ephesian church is serving in a hard place, and they’re still getting two out of three right. They’ve got the good hands and head, they’re just missing the right heart. So, why does Jesus take moving away from love so seriously?

Well, let's see how the Bible answers some questions to better understand the absolute importance of love for God and each other. What is the greatest commandment? In the Bible Jesus answers, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself." In Matthew's Gospel the very next thing that Jesus says after this is "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Let's try another question. How is the world to know that we are Jesus' disciples? In the Bible Jesus answers, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." When Jesus is reinstating Simon Peter to leadership after he denied Jesus, what does Jesus ask him, not once, but three times? "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

When God's Spirit is at work, what takes place? When the Apostle Paul answers this question in the Bible book of Galatians, the first thing out of his mouth is love. Paul says, "The fruit of the Spirit is love." And speaking of Paul, we have to read a few verses from the Bible book of 1 Corinthians, where he gives his greatest treatment of the subject of love. Paul starts chapter 13 by saying, "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² 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 have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

Finally, Paul concludes the love chapter by saying, "¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

Any church who does not love God and people has moved away from the most essential thing. And how can Jesus bless a church that has moved away from what is closest to His heart? A church that does not love is a church just going through the motions, on a path towards death.

Now no church or individual Christian will feel love towards God and people all day every day. We are broken people living in a broken world. But if we ever sense that the love in our church is waning, we must take that very seriously; and if love for God and people is not a regular part of your life, please take that very seriously as well.

E. Primary application – remember, repent, and do earlier deeds

Let's look back at verse 5, where Jesus instructs us what to do when we are losing love. It says, "⁵ Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first."

First Jesus instructs them to consider how far they have fallen. In other words, they are to remember their past, back when they really loved God and one another. Remembering that richer time is meant to encourage them to repent of their lack of love in the present and return to the things they used to do, back when they really loved God and people.

So if you're struggling to have a heart of love, Jesus' instruction here is not to try to will yourself to loving feelings. Rather, Jesus encourages you to return to the things you did back when you enjoyed more intimacy with Him and others. Perhaps a few of us used to devour God's Word and pray often, but now we've gotten away from those things, and our love has waned. Perhaps a few of us used to faithfully serve Christ's church, and then over time we faced some challenges and decided we had served enough. We've been sitting on the sidelines ever since, and our love has waned. Perhaps a few of us have fallen into a pattern of sin, breaking our experience of close fellowship with God, and our love has waned. Perhaps a few of us used to have deep relationships with a few fellow Christians, and over time we've let other things fill our schedule, and our love has waned. Perhaps a few of us used to join God in the adventure of representing Him as we share our faith, and now it's been a long time since we last shared the gospel, perhaps even years, and our love has waned.

F. An illustration to encourage application

If God is moving in your heart this morning, and you're feeling conviction over your lack of love, please don't stop there. Repent, and do those things you did back when you loved. God wants you to experience the joy and meaning that can only come from loving Him and others.

Some of you know my wife Stephanie and I have two kids, Grant, who is almost three, and Kate, who is almost one. Imagine I started acting like the Ephesians towards them. Now I'd still have good hands, providing for their physical needs and giving them help when they ask for it. And I'd still have a good head, teaching them what they need to know and employing sound parenting strategies. But if the heart was missing, if I didn't care about pursuing relationship with them, didn't love them, imagine how impoverished they would be. Tragically, it's not that hard to imagine, for there are many in our culture and even our churches who know exactly what I'm talking about.

Or imagine instead that Grant and Kate started acting like the Ephesians towards me. They'd still have good hands, as they got older they would always get their chores and schoolwork done. And they'd have good heads, they would know what is true and obey me.

But imagine the heart was missing, that they didn't care about relationship with me, didn't love me, imagine how impoverished I would be. Baby Kate would no longer give me a big smile and wave at me when I get home. She would just sit there, completely indifferent to my presence, only approaching me when she needed something from me. Grant would no longer ask me to climb into bed with him at night, where I ask God to bless him and we joke around and tickle each other and he says, "I love you daddy." And when it's time for me to leave and for him to go to bed, he would no longer wrap his little arms around me and say, "One more minute Daddy." Then think a little more and say, "Three one more minutes Daddy."

Friends, the Bible tells us from beginning to end that we are made for loving relationship with God and each other. If you have moved away spending time with your loving, heavenly Father, if you no longer have a heart of love towards other people, you are neglecting the best that life has to offer. Repent, and do those loving deeds you once did.

Conclusion:

A. Pleasing Almighty Jesus requires good hands, a good head, and a good heart

This morning we've considered the question, "How can Northwest please Jesus?" And we've seen that pleasing Almighty Jesus requires good hands, a good head, and especially a good heart, a heart of love.

B. Jesus died on a tree so we can enjoy the tree of life (Rev 2:7)

But as messed up people, living with other messed up people, in a messed up world, it is hard to keep focused on loving God and each other. So Jesus concludes His message to the church with a powerful motivation. Let's look at it together, in verse 7. "7 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."

In this verse Jesus encourages us to imagine our glorious future, when we have the opportunity to eat from the tree of life, in the paradise of God. Now to understand how this motivates us to keep loving today, let's reflect on the tree of life.

At the beginning of the book of Genesis God placed our first ancestors, Adam and Eve, into the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve flourished there, enjoying absolutely perfect relationships with God, each other, and creation. The Garden of Eden was literally a paradise, so much better than our best experiences that we can't even begin to really imagine it. And there, in the center of the Garden, was the tree of life. And Adam and Eve were free to eat from it, anytime.

But tragically, Adam and Eve rebel against God and everything falls apart. In the book of Genesis it tells us that Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden after their rebellion, cursed. They lost their relationship with God; they lost access to the tree of life; they lost paradise. And in its place, because of their sin, and ours, we struggle in a broken, tragic world. And rather than experiencing loving relationship with God, the thing we most need, we instead stand guilty before holy God.

Adam and Eve quickly sensed their guilt before God. After Adam and Eve sinned, the Bible tells us that they hid from God and began to cover their nakedness. Before this point they were comfortable being naked before God and one another. But now in their sin they felt compelled to cover up. Like Adam and Eve, we too are flawed and guilty. And there is nothing we can do to really cover up the shame of our sin before the Holy God who sees all. We deserve death and punishment forever. In fact, we are so flawed in our sin that we often feel the need to hide, to cover up, even from one another. And as we sin against each other and hide our true selves from each other, we miss out on giving and receiving love that we dearly need.

Now God is a perfectly holy judge and our sinful rebellion demands a punishment. And God could have left us to suffer the hellish consequences of our sin, forever. But instead our heavenly Father loved us enough to send His Son Jesus to take our punishment and restore our relationship. You see, Jesus came on a rescue mission for us. Jesus lived the perfect, sinless life we should have lived, in our place, on our behalf. And on the night before Jesus took the punishment for our sin, He was in the garden of Gethsemane. Now this was no Garden of Eden, no paradise, this was a garden of agony. Jesus was so anguished about absorbing God's wrath for our sins that He literally sweat drops of blood. Jesus could have told us to take the horrific penalty ourselves, but instead He took our blame. The next day Jesus endured incredible suffering, nailed to a cross. And as horrible as that physical pain was, it was nothing compared to Jesus taking the wrath of God for all of our sins.

After Jesus died on the cross for our sins, He rose from the dead, displaying His victory over sin and death. And now Jesus invites everyone to come to Him in faith. And if you trust that Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead, you are forgiven of every sin and restored to a love relationship with the Triune God. You once stood naked and condemned before God, but if you know Jesus, He has taken your shame, He has provided you forgiveness, and you are naked no more, for He has clothed you with His righteousness.

And one day, Jesus will return. The last two chapters of Revelation look forward to that time. We will be united in love with God and His people forever, every tear wiped from our eyes, no more sin or pain or death, as we serve God and joyously celebrate in His glorious presence, forever. Now as the end of Revelation tries to describe our indescribably wonderful future with God, guess what is located there... the tree of life.

When Jesus talks about eating from the tree of life, He invites us to look back at the paradise mankind lost when our access to the tree was cut off. And He invites us to look at Him dying on a tree for us, so that He could restore us to loving relationship with Him and one another. And He invites us to look forward to the magnificent future we will share together with Him, as we freely eat from the tree of life, in Paradise.

Now, as we long for that future glory, if there is anything worth pursuing in the meantime, it is relationship with our loving Savior. And as we let Jesus fill our hearts with His extravagant love, we will be free to adore Him and love others. And we will begin to get a taste of the abundant life that is our destiny.

Let's pray...

Dismissal - Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.