

Love Letters to the Loveless Church

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, well good morning everyone. Great to see you again. I think we're a little smaller this morning with the car park being out and a bunch of other things. We're a little smaller this morning. Last Sunday, Chris kicked off the Revelation series and did so really fantastically.

We looked at, he kind of introduced the series and we looked at Revelation chapter 1. One, if you are new to Watermark or you weren't here last Sunday, I want to encourage you to download that because Chris really explained so much of this book of the Bible.

And really going to help you get your head around it. And we're going to work through it between now and Christmas. And so if you weren't here last Sunday, I want to encourage you to download it and listen to that. The other thing is, if you didn't grab one of these on the way in, make sure you grab one on the way out.

There's a whole lot of reading and information here that's going to help us work through this book of Revelation together. So if you didn't get one on the way in, make sure you grab one on the way out. And this morning we're going to continue by looking at Revelation chapter 2.

And before we do that, let me pray and then we're going to listen to the scripture being read to us. So will you join me as we pray together? Heavenly Father, we have come to worship and adore you this morning.

[1 : 2 1] Father, many of us come with such a heavy heart this morning.

We've come with confused emotions. We've come to have our eyes lifted off of ourselves and the circumstances of our world and to draw near to you. You are the rock of ages upon which we can build our lives and hinge our hopes.

You are God of the ancient of days. You have seen kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall. You have existed in glory since before the world began. And your dominion and your authority and your sovereignty has never ever been threatened or toppled.

You are God of the great I am. Everything we need is found in you. And so we come to you this morning to find our rest and our peace and our hope. God, where we are hurting and anxious, come and bring your healing power.

Where we are fearful and worried, come and bring your reassurance. Where we are hurt and upset, come and minister your peace, we pray. God, teach us what you mean when you say in the Psalms, be angry but do not sin.

[2 : 3 0] Help us not to sin in our anger, in our pain, in our confusion, God. Lord, you call us to love you supremely and for you to be first in our hearts and our lives.

God, we confess that so seldom is this our reality. Other things capture our heart's attention. Other fears, other loves, other things promise us the world and yet we fall for their lives.

Other gods and idols lure our hearts away. Father, we confess this, we do not deny it. And yet though we sin continually, you continually repeat your kindness to us.

Oh, that we would give ourselves to you forever and never attempt to live on our own or live for ourselves. Father, we need you to come and reorientate our hearts back towards you. Shine the light of the gospel into our hearts that we can turn back to you today, we pray, God.

Father, this morning we want to pray for the churches across Asia, this wonderful continent in which we live. And this morning we especially want to pray for the church in India. God, that country with millions of gods and millions of idols.

[3 : 36] We pray that you, God, will be supreme. We pray for pastors and church leaders there, for churches across India. We pray for an incredible outpouring of the Holy Spirit today.

God, revive and encourage and strengthen them. This morning, God, we want to pray in particular for our friends, Mark Davidson and Anand in Mumbai, for Aksha and Ranjit in New Delhi.

God, we pray for Jonathan and Rajiv in Bangalore. God, may they know your presence. May you draw closer to them. Father, we pray where they're facing challenges and difficulties, strengthen them and encourage them, we pray.

Oh, God, hear our prayers. We pray for the innumerable churches and leaders across Asia. Those we know and those we don't know. But you know everyone.

Be their hope. Be their guide. Be their encouragement. We pray these things in your precious and glorious name, Jesus. Amen. Amen. Theo and Echo, will you come and read Revelation chapter 2 for us?

[4 : 37] Thanks. The scripture reading comes from Revelation chapter 2. Please follow along. Your bulletins are on the screen. To the angel of the church in Ephesus write, the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

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

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

Remember, therefore, from where you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[5 : 47] To the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. And to the angel of the church in Theotira write, the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality, and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sick bag. And those who commit adultery with her, I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of their works.

And I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am He who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.

But to the rest of you in Theotira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden.

[7 : 13] Only hold fast what you have until I come. The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father.

And I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. This is the Word of God. Great. Thanks, Echo and Theo.

Okay, so we are in the book of Revelation, as you would have heard many times by now. And it is a book that's written by the last apostle, John. And he is on the island of Patmos.

He's there because of his witness of Jesus. He's there in exile. And while he's there, God gives him this revelation, and he writes it down for these various churches.

And this revelation, the Greek word is apocalypse. And sometimes when we think of apocalypse, as Chris said last week, we can think of fire and doomsday and comets hitting the earth and that kind of stuff.

[8 : 28] Actually, the word apocalypse just simply means a revelation. And the reason God gives John this revelation is because he wants to show him what's happening in the spiritual realm.

It's like peeling back the curtain and revealing what's behind there or what's obscure. And the reason for this is that God is showing John and us that so much of our lives is lived merely in response to what we can see.

We think just purely in a physical world, and God wants to reveal to us that there's so much more than what meets the eye. There's a whole spiritual realm going on around us.

And it's kind of like if you're watching a movie or a series or something, and let's say there's a villain, okay? And his name happens to be Dan.

And this villain you see here has a conversation with his partner in crime called Justin. And these two are plotting some case.

[9 : 29] And then this good-looking villain called Dan goes up to somebody innocent and starts sweet-talking them and having a conversation, getting them to try and give them access to government archives or some million-dollar deal or whatever it is.

What's happened is when you see that scene, the innocent person, innocent person Simon, all they know what's going on is this nice-looking person called Dan has come and spoken to them and is trying to sweet-talk them.

But because you've seen the preceding scene, you've seen what's happened, you're thinking, no, don't give them the access codes. Don't take that drink. Don't tell them that piece of information.

Why? Because what's been revealed to you is the real plot that's going on behind the scenes. On the surface, it just looks like these two people having a conversation. But there's a whole other plot that's going on behind.

That's what God is doing. He's saying, John, churches, Christians, watermark, I want to reveal to you to show you what's going on in the spiritual realm. And so the book of Revelation is that's what much of it's about.

[10 : 36] As Chris said, it's also a prophecy. We see this in chapter 1, verse 3, where he says, Blessed is the one who reads this prophecy. Now, in the Bible, prophecy is very seldom about foretelling the future.

Sometimes we think prophets are those that can see into the future and then tell us what's going to happen. Actually, in the Bible, prophecy is always a word from God that demands a response.

Thus saith the Lord. What are you going to do with this? And sometimes when God brings, or when a prophet speaks, he'll say, This is what God says. And if you don't respond, then this will happen.

But actually, when God brings a word via a prophecy or his prophet, it should arrest us. It should make us sit up and think, Wow, okay, what am I going to do with that?

How am I going to respond? And that's really important because as we go through the book of Revelation, it's easy to be caught up with all this imagery. There's the beast and the dragon and this Babylon and this prostitute.

[11 : 36] And we can get caught up with all the imagery and try and understand it. But actually, this book is meant to arrest us. It's meant to make us sit up and say, Okay, God, you're speaking. How am I going to respond to your word?

And then thirdly, the book is not only a revelation. It's not only a prophecy. It's also a letter. And that brings us to our passage of Scripture today. Because what we see in chapter 2 and chapter 3 is that John writes the book of Revelation to seven very specific individual real-life churches that are facing real-life challenges in modern-day Turkey, the ancient world of Asia Minor.

And these churches weren't just, or the letter isn't just theoretical. It isn't just an analogy or a parable that Jesus tells. These are real letters written to real churches facing real challenges.

I think we've got a map up on the screen. But what's interesting is that sometimes we can think that these are seven letters written to seven churches. Like the postman comes with his stack of letters and says, There you go, Ephesus.

There you go, Thyatira. There you go, Pergamum. And later, see at the back there's even a letter for you. But actually, what's happening is it's one letter, it's one book that is written and it first gets delivered to the church in Ephesus and they read the section to them and then they read the section to the next church and then they read the section to the church in Pergamum and Thyatira, et cetera, et cetera.

[13 : 06] And then they go and they read the rest of the book of Revelation and when they finish with the whole thing and they understand it, they then send it on to the next church and then Smyrna gets it and they read from the beginning and they read the letter to Ephesus and the letter to Smyrna and et cetera, et cetera, the whole thing and then they take the entire Revelation and they pass it on to the next church.

So they didn't just each get their own individual envelopes with kind of like a postscript at the end. The entire book of Revelation is delivered to each one of the seven churches.

Now what's interesting is that in each one of those sections of the individual churches, Jesus has some challenging things and He often rebukes the churches, which is interesting because as you're reading the letter, you know that all the other churches are going to read your mail, right?

Jesus is not very good at saving face. He kind of just puts it all out there, tells everyone what He has to say to everyone. But here's why this is important because our little church here in Hong Kong, right, on the west side of the island, hopefully there's some things we're doing well, hopefully Jesus would commend us, but there's probably also some things that He would challenge us on.

And so what is Jesus going to do to us? Does Jesus write an individual letter to every church in the world, to you at Watermark, here's your letter. To that church meeting under the tree in the Sahara Desert, here's your letter.

[14 : 30] To that church meeting on the corner of 5th and 17th Avenue somewhere in Pennsylvania, what does Jesus do? He gives us what He gave His original churches, which is the entire revelation.

And here's why He does that. Because what we don't just need is a performance review. We don't just need Jesus come and say, Hey, Watermark, I've gone through the checklist and you're doing three things right and four things badly.

Here I want you to prove. What we need is what the church has needed, which is a revelation of Christ in His glory on His throne. We need a revelation of how magnificent Jesus is.

We also need a revelation of how Satan is going to try and attack the churches and all the ways that He does that through false teaching and this and that. But we also need a revelation of how Jesus wins in the end and how ultimately Satan is crushed and Jesus is victorious.

Does that make sense? And so what we need is not just a performance review. We need the book of Revelation. And so Jesus gives us what He gave the original churches, which is, He has a revelation of my glory.

[15 : 37] Learn. Read this and be blessed by it. Okay? Something else we're going to learn about these letters is almost everything that's written in the section to the seven individual churches is also written later on found in the book of Revelation.

And everything we see later on in the book of Revelation is found in the seven churches earlier on. And so, in a sense, these seven churches are almost live flesh and blood case studies for what John is going to say later on.

So later on, you're going to see these images of beasts and warfare and horses and all this stuff and you can kind of think what on earth is going on? But actually, He's given us some case studies to show us how it plays out in real life early on in the book in these seven churches.

And so, for example, in the letter to the church of Philadelphia, Jesus says this, because you've kept my word about patience and endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world.

But then, later on, that's exactly what we're going to see in chapters 6 and 7. There's this tribulation that's coming on the whole world and who's going to keep God's people? Well, at the end of chapter 6 we see God's going to be the one who keeps His people.

[16 : 53] God seals His people and He keeps them even in the midst of trials and persecution. All we see in chapter 2, the letter to the church in Smyrna, Jesus says, Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.

In other words, He writes to this church and He says, You're going through difficulty even if you have to die, even if it costs you your life, be faithful because I will vindicate you and you will come back to life.

Well, that's exactly what we see in chapter 11. In chapter 11, there are these two witnesses and they are taken to the town square and they're talking about Jesus and they are killed, they're chopped down and they're left for dead in the town square so that everyone can walk past and mock at them and scoff at them and laugh at them but what happens?

They are vindicated. They're brought back to life. And so that's exactly what we see in chapter 2 with the letter to Smyrna. In other words, everything God writes to His people in the seven letters, He then shows how that plays out later on in the book and everything we see later on in the book is given to us an example earlier on in the letters of Revelation.

Okay, last thing by way of introduction and then we're going to get into one today. When we read these seven sections to the seven churches, one of the things we'll quickly notice is that it follows a very similar flow or pattern.

[18 : 16] It starts off telling us these are the words of Jesus and then describes some aspect of Jesus in His glory. And so it says these are the words of Jesus who has eyes like fire or these are the words of Jesus who holds the keys of life or these are the words of Jesus who holds the lampstands in His hands.

So it says these are the words of Jesus and then it describes some aspect of Jesus and His glory. Now, that's really important because what it means is firstly these aren't just letters of advice.

It's not like Joe Bloggs from New York City or Tim Keller. Tim Keller writing to Watermark saying, Watermark, I've done an assessment and this is what I think of you.

These are the words of Jesus, the sovereign God and therefore we better sit up and listen. But in addition, each aspect of Jesus' glory that's revealed in the opening lines speaks to some aspect of what the church is going through later on.

Either the encouragement or the challenge that He brings. So, for instance, look at the letter to the church in Philadelphia. It says this, These are the words of Jesus, the Holy One who has the key of David, who opens doors that no one can shut and who shuts doors that no one can open.

[19 : 35] Okay? But then later on in the letter, this is what He says to them, I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut. I know that you have little power and yet you have kept my words and not denied my name.

So, what's going on here? The church in Philadelphia is a small church. Okay? This isn't Philadelphia and USA. This is Philadelphia and Turkey. Okay? It's a small church. They're not very powerful.

They're not very rich. They don't have a lot of influence, either economic influence or cultural influence or political influence and they're feeling the pressure because the Roman world is closing in on them and they feel like our church doors are about to be closed and shut off.

Any minute now, the emperor is going to come and close us down and Jesus writes them and says, these are the words of the one who opens doors that no one can shut and who shuts doors that no one can close.

I know what's going on and even though you feel threatened, know that there's nothing that anybody in the world can do. If I want your church to stand, it will stand.

[20 : 40] You see what he's saying? The words of the one who has the resources to accomplish what you and your church needs. And friends, that's really encouraging because as Watermark, there are going to be a whole lot of things that we go through and every resource that we need as a church is found, not in your pastors, not out there through some pastor, it's found in Jesus.

These are the words of Jesus who has every resource we need to encounter or to go through the challenges that we're going to face. If we're struggling with unity, these are the words of Jesus who holds his church together.

If we're struggling with unforgiveness, these are the words of Jesus, the one who pours grace into our hearts and shows us what forgiveness looks like so that we can forgive others. If we're struggling with feeling unloved or unloving to those around us, these are the words of the one who loved us with an everlasting love, who pours his love into our hearts that we can make known and make known his love to those around us.

Does that make sense? Should I explain that all again? Okay, great. Thank you, Simon. Okay, so first thing is these are the words of Jesus who...

Second thing is then Jesus says, I know what's going on in your church and this is so encouraging. I know every challenge you're facing, I know what's going on.

[22 : 05] I know how you've endured. I know how you've put up with difficulty. I know how you're facing persecution. I know what's going on. But it's also a warning because he knows everything that's going on and he also knows where we compromise.

Jesus says, I know what's going on in your church. And often there's a commendation there, an encouragement. And then he says, thirdly, but this is what I have against you. There's an admonition or a correction, a rebuke.

Watermark, I'm so encouraged by this is what's going on in your church, says Jesus. But there's this thing that I want you to be aware of. Don't forget about this. And then fourth thing Jesus says, is he says, he who has ears, I want you to hear.

In other words, don't just think, that's interesting, I'm sure the elders will think about this. Listen up. What is Jesus saying to us as a church? And then the fifth thing is he always promises some gift of grace.

He says, to those who endure, I promise you this. I will give you this. I will stand with you in this way. And so, that's how the letters unfold. Okay, now with that introduction, today we're going to dive into primarily the letter to the church in Ephesus and we'll reference a little bit the second one that Theo and Echo read to us, the church of Thyatira.

[23 : 21] And so, look at Revelation chapter 2 verse 1 with me. Let's work through this passage together. If you've got your Bible, open up and let's work through it. Jesus says this, to the angel of the church in Ephesus, write these words.

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and who walks amongst the seven golden lampstands. Now, remember from last week, what does that mean?

Okay, Jesus says, I hold the stars in my hand. The stars are the angels, those that are kind of looking after the church and the church is the lampstand. Now, in other words, Jesus says, I'm holding you.

Church in Ephesus, you're going through challenges, you're facing persecution, the Roman Empire is squeezing in on you. Your future is not in the hands of your pastor, it's not in the hands of the Roman Emperor, Domitian, it's not in the hands of any political leader or the economy.

Your church is in my hands. I've got you. Friends, we as a church are going to face some challenges. There are going to be things that are awkward or difficult that come our way, no doubt.

[24 : 30] Jesus says, this church is in his hands. The words of him who holds the church in his hands. That's encouragement, but as we said just now, it's also a warning because when Jesus talks about a lampstand, he's not talking about an Ikea lampstand, okay?

You pull the little chain and then it goes off and you pull it again and it goes on. What's he talking about? He's talking about one of those Jewish lampstands that's got the stand in the middle and then the seven branches that come out of it.

Eric, I don't know what we call it. What do we call it? Menorah? Is that right? Okay, thank you. It's called a menorah. Okay, so it's got the lampstands got the seven branches that come out of it and on top of each branch is a candle.

And so when Jesus says, I'm holding the lampstand, I'm walking amongst you, it also means he has the authority to blow out the candle. He's the one that's holding it but he also has the authority to snuff it out.

Jesus says to the church in Ephesus, the one who's holding the stars and the lampstands. Look at verse 2. I know your works, your toil, your patience endurance, and how you cannot bear with those that are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and you found them to be false.

[25 : 46] I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my namesake, and you have not grown weary. So what's Jesus commending here? What's his encouragement to them? He says, I know your righteous deeds, I know you are swimming upstream against the tide of your culture, and I know that you love my word and you've taken my word seriously.

You see, what's happening in Ephesus is there are two great cultural pressures, or two other things that were distracting the Christians. The first is Ephesus housed the temple of Artemis.

And the temple of Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and Artemis was worshipped everywhere in Ephesus. It was the icon of Ephesus.

People would come from far and wide to worship the goddess of Artemis. And Artemis was the goddess of life and fertility. So if you are struggling to have kids, your family would say, go and pay homage to the goddess of Artemis.

Go to the temple and burn some incense. She will look after you. And so Artemis is everywhere in Ephesus. And remember in Acts chapter 20, I think it is, 21, the city of Ephesus is unhappy with the Christians because they say, now Artemis is not going to be worshipped.

[27 : 07] And they drive them out of the city. And so the Christians, those facing persecution, are persecuted because their family members would tell them, it's okay to follow Jesus.

just don't forget to every now and then pay homage to Artemis. But the other great thing in Ephesus, or the other terrible thing, challenge, is that Ephesus was the primary city of imperial cult worship.

And so the first, the emperor Domitian came to Ephesus and they set up the first temple and the first shrine to the emperor. And so at the Agora, which is the marketplace where you do business and networking and you meet people and you do your weekly grocery shopping, as you walk into the Agora, you have to take a pinch of incense, throw it at the feet of the shrine to the emperor Domitian and pay homage to him.

And so for the Christians who go to the Agora to also do business and meet people and network and do their shopping, what are they going to do? And maybe they're in their company, they all go after work for drinks down at the Agora and there's only one person that follows Jesus.

What's he going to do? Sorry, am I making a noise here? What's he going to do? And so the Christians are constantly faced with this pressure. And so Jesus here commends them, he says you've stayed faithful, you focused on Jesus, it's required serious work, serious endurance.

[28 : 31] Jesus says I've seen it, I know your works, I know your toil, I know your patient endurance. But now look at what he says. He says I know you cannot bear with those who are evil.

Now who's he talking about when he says you cannot bear with those who are evil? He's talking about the emperor? He's talking about villain Dan and his sidekick Justin?

Who are the evil people that Jesus is talking about? Look at what he says. He says but you have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not and you found them to be false.

You see what's happening here in Ephesus is that some people are coming in and they're saying we know that Paul came and taught you the Bible and he said some good things but if you really want to know God we'll show you some other things.

We'll teach you some other things. And they're coming in with all sorts of false teaching or they're coming in saying do you think the Bible says that? Yeah Jesus is good but he's not God.

[29 : 30] You know. Or worship Jesus but don't forget to also pay homage to Domitian or Artemis or Deceitism whatever it is. They were coming in with false teaching and what did the church in Ephesus do?

They would open up their Bible and say really? Just show us in the scriptures where does it say that? In other words they would test what they heard from the stage on Sunday according to God's word and sometimes they found what people were saying was false and so they would reject it.

Here was a church which was strong theologically and dogmatic about we're only going to listen to what God says in his word. We're not here to be impressed by false teachers or eloquent teachers or great orators.

We're here to see what does God say and that's what we're going to follow. And all this makes sense because when we read the rest of the New Testament remember the books of 1 and 2 Timothy?

They're written by the apostle Paul to this young man Timothy and Timothy is leading a church and where is he leading the church? Do you remember? In the city of Ephesus. And as you read the books of 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy Paul says again and again and again, Timothy I want you to guard the good deposit of the doctrine that's been entrusted to you.

[30 : 41] Timothy I want you to preach the word. Timothy dedicate yourself to the public reading of scripture and to the teaching of God's word. Paul writes to Timothy about a hundred times and says whatever you do make sure you stick closely to God's word and to the theology and to doctrine that you've heard.

Don't take in these other teachings. Make sure that whatever you're teaching is found in the scriptures. And so here the church in Ephesus is rock solid.

They are theologically strong. They've been taught well by Paul. They've been taught well by Timothy and they're a church that know their theology and they know God's word and they love God's word.

And Watermark, can I say, can the elders say, we would love for this to be true of us as a church. When I think about Watermark, one of my dreams for Watermark is that in 50, 60, and in 100 years time, we are a church which is rock solid theologically and doctrinally because we know God's word.

We've been built on God's word. I pray that when my kids are grandparents, that anyone who comes to Hong Kong will know if you want to be taught God's word, there is a church called Watermark Church.

[32 : 00] You can go there and they will teach you God's word because that is a church that loves God's word. God's word. And so Jesus writes to this church and he says, well done. You've tested what you've heard against God's word and you've tested what's false and you love and you love my word.

Look at what he says in verse 6. He says, you hate the teachings of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. The Nicolaitans were a group of people that were teaching, worship Jesus, but you know, it doesn't matter if you also take on some other stuff and they were teaching, teaching that was promoting sin and unholiness and lack of purity in the church and Jesus says, I want you to follow my word.

Now, unfortunately, that's not all that Jesus says to the church in Ephesus because look at what he says in verse 4. He says, but I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love that you had at first.

Here is a church which is absolutely rock solid in theology and doctrine. They love God's word, but unfortunately, rock solid theology can sometimes lead to ice cold hearts and cold hearted worship.

Listen to what Tim Chester writes. He says, we can pride ourselves on not letting our theology, sorry, I just lost my place. We can pride ourselves on not letting our theology be infected by worldly ideas, but all the time our lives and hearts can be infected by worldly priorities, living for the treasure of earth, seeking our security in that.

[33 : 42] We may be strong on doctrine and moral orthodoxy, but are our churches characterized by a passionate love for Jesus and his people? That's an amazing, amazing thought.

We can be dead straight, absolutely spotless in terms of what we believe in our heads, but our hearts characterized by a passion for Christ and for his people.

Jesus says, Ephesian church, I know your works. I know your toil. I know your patient endurance. I know that you've tested those who call themselves apostles and teachers.

You found them to be false. I know how you are enduring patiently and you're bearing up for my namesake, and you have not grown weary, but I have this against you. You have abandoned the love that you had at first.

Now the church in Thyatira that Echo and Thea read to us, their problem is the opposite problem. They are a church which is characterized by great love. He says here, I know your love and your works exceed what they were at first.

[34 : 56] In other words, you love the people around you and you love me more now than you did previously. But this is what I have against you. You welcome teachers into your church that promote sin, and you welcome teachers that don't tell you about the holiness of God and the purity of the church.

And Jesus rebukes them. He says, I've given them time to repent, but they refuse. I will strike them, and all the churches will know that I am he who searches the heart and mind, and I will deal with them according to their works.

So we mustn't swing to the opposite side where we think theology is bad. Theology is just academic. What really counts is just if we love people and love God. Because that's where Thyatira was, and God says, no, that's not good either.

Friends, if the history of the church tells us anything, it's that when churches abandon God's word and doctrine, it's only a matter of time before that church and that city no longer knows God.

And so if we want our future generations in Hong Kong to know God and to love Him, we dare not abandon the Scriptures. We mustn't do what Thyatira did, the way we abandon the Scriptures.

[36 : 06] No, no, let's not swing to the opposite side. And yet, we cannot be a church that just knows God's word, but it hasn't dropped from our heads to our hearts.

Friends, FG, who Jesus is, and the message of the gospel, that you and I, because of our sin, because of God's righteous holiness, because of His justice, you and I deserve to be condemned to hell for all eternity.

And God would be absolutely just to do such a thing. But instead of that, Jesus took our condemnation in our place. Where our destiny was death, it's now life.

Where our future was condemnation, it's now reconciliation. Where once our fate was wrath and judgment, it's now that we are called sons and daughters of God. Friends, if that magnificent truth of the gospel is inside our heads, but it doesn't penetrate our hearts, what's the point?

What's the point? Because being a Christian is not only somebody who has a knowledge about Jesus, it's someone who loves God and walks with Him by faith.

[37 : 18] See, friends, a Christian isn't just someone who believes that Jesus is God. That's important, but that's not enough. Even the devil believes that Jesus is God. A Christian is not just someone who believes that the Bible is true.

You do need to do that, but that's not enough. Even the devil knows that the Bible is true. Friends, a Christian is someone who's come to see that Jesus is God. That Jesus is our only hope in life and death.

That outside of Christ, there is not one single drop of salvation. And therefore, someone who has thrown themselves at the mercy of Jesus. But in addition to that, a Christian is someone who is living their life loving Christ, trusting Christ, and obeying Christ because of the gospel.

Friends, the history of the church tells us that there are hundreds of churches, and unfortunately, it's the church leaders' fault, that we get 100% on a theological exam.

Every dot, every tittle, be able to answer every question perfectly. But our hearts are not filled with love for either Christ or one another. And so what's the point?

[38 : 26] What's the point? Now let me ask you this question. What do churches like that generally look like? What's the feeling? What does it feel like on the ground?

What does it look like when you come in to a church on Sunday? Tell you what it feels like. It feels like arrogance on one hand. We know our stuff better than the church down the road.

But it also feels like judgmentalism, doesn't it? It feels like that church down the road, if only they knew things as well as we did. If only they knew the Greek and the Hebrew and if only they could really know what was going on.

Or, sometimes churches like that, there's fighting inside and there's judgmentalism and the pastor can look down at his people and think, I wish these people knew their Bibles better.

If only they could get their act together. Friends, how many times have we heard of one church attacking another church because they're not theologically perfect? And this is particularly relevant for us because at Watermark, our elders are passionate about not neglecting the truth of God's Word.

[39 : 31] We never want to be a church which is careless about the way we handle God's Word. We want to be a church which knows God's Word and is changed by it and is radically committed to it, even in the face of opposition.

We want to be a church which encounters God and His Word and has God speaking to us from His Word and are submitting to it and surrendering to it. But friends, if we are absolutely doctrinally precise and theologically as straight as an arrow, but our hearts are not moved by love for Christ, it's all in vain.

And so remember how Jesus comes to the religious leaders one day and He says, You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you will find eternal life. And don't you realize that they bear witness about Me?

The Scriptures are there to bring you to Me, says Jesus, to show you the wonder of Christ and who He is. I've got a hero called Ray Ortlund and he's becoming a hero of mine.

He's just handed over his church actually in America and he wrote a book many years ago. The book is called The Three Priorities for a Strong Church.

[40 : 37] Now when I see a book like that, I want to read it, right? Because I want Watermark to be a strong church. The Three Priorities for a Strong Church. What do you think those priorities are?

He says, number one, you love Christ. Number two, you love one another. Number three, you love the world out there that is dying because they do not know Christ.

Friends, more important than getting every perfect thing right and understanding every verse perfectly, are we a church that loves Christ, that loves one another and loves the city in which we live and is dying because it does not know Jesus?

Tim Keller says, God doesn't just want us to know and obey him as a citizen obeys a king or merely follow him as sheep follow a shepherd. He wants us to know him and love him as a wife loves her husband.

You see, friends, to be a Christian is not just to have knowledge about Jesus. It's to love him and to walk with him by faith. And that's what Jesus is calling this Ephesian church to.

[41 : 44] In the midst of all the imperial cults, in the midst of the persecution, in the midst of the challenges that they're facing, he says, will you love me? Will you trust me? Will you obey me?

Domitian, the emperor, would say, Caesar is Lord. The Christians weren't just to know academically that Jesus were Lord, but to love him as Lord. And still, friends, today in our world, the devil will come to us and say, Watermark, you can love Jesus, just also love money as well.

You can love Jesus, just love this as well. You can love Jesus, just love this as well. The devil would come to us and say that we are mature Christians if our theology is all straight, even if we're seduced by other loves.

Do we love Christ? Do we love one another? Do we love the city in which we lived? Now, as we come towards the end, look at what Jesus says in verse 5.

Jesus says this. He says, remember therefore from where you have fallen. Repent and do the works that you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

[42 : 57] Now, remember what we said earlier. Jesus, when he's talking about a lampstand, is not talking about an Ikea lampstand, he's talking about this Jewish menorah, right? And there's candles on top.

But in the ancient world, the candles didn't rely on wax. They were full of oil. And so the oil would burn and keep the candle going.

And if you wanted the candles to keep them going, you had to top up the oil. Remember, Jesus tells a parable about some people that didn't bring enough oil and so their lamps go out because they weren't prepared.

They weren't ready. Well, in the Bible, oil is almost always a symbol of the Holy Spirit. So what's Jesus saying here? Jesus is saying that when he says, I'll remove your lampstand, he's talking about closing down the church.

But how is he going to do it? He's not going to do it by just magically closing down the meetings. Jesus is not going to close down the church by sending a meteor to, you know, smash our building or something.

[44 : 01] How does Jesus close down churches? How does he snuff out the lampstand? He removes the oil. He takes the Holy Spirit from the church.

And so if we just go through the motions until eventually we die out. Friends, the scary thing is that you don't even realize it's happened until years down the road, there's no more life left in the church.

Friends, all around the world, there are hundreds of churches, thousands of churches which gather each week in church buildings. And they sing some songs and they listen to a message.

But the Holy Spirit is not there. There is no life there. There is no light there. And there is no church there. And Christ is not there because they have long since forgotten their first love.

Their first love. And so the question is, what do we do about this? Well, Jesus says something very interesting. Look at verse 5. He actually says it twice. He calls this church, which is a pillar of theological and doctrinal strength, he calls them to repent.

[45 : 03] Look at how he says it. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, repent and do the works that you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent.

And Jesus calls us to repent of our lovelessness. Now that's interesting because we typically think that if you don't, we think of love as an emotion that you feel.

You either love something or you don't. Love is like a ditch. You fall into it and you fall out of it, right? Not really. But that's how we typically think of love. If I love something, great.

If I don't, there's not much I can do about it. It's just a feeling. It's an emotion. But actually Jesus says, I want you to repent of your lovelessness. How do you repent of losing and abandoning our first love?

Well, sorry, I'm making a noise of this thing. I don't know what I'm doing wrong. Anyway, we're almost done. Let me tell you a story. Sorry.

[46 : 02] About a year, a year and a half ago, Claire and I were going for a walk up the peak. And we're going for a walk on the ring road. And Claire says to me, how's our marriage doing?

Now, I think you know what's happening, right? When Claire asks that question, she's not asking because she doesn't know. She does know what's going on. It's a kind of way of saying, our marriage sucks at the moment, doesn't it?

Right? And so I know that Claire was saying that for two reasons. One, because after being married for 10 years, I know what she means when she says, how's our marriage doing? But secondly, because I knew how our marriage was doing.

And it wasn't at its best. It wasn't sweet. It wasn't full of life and joy. It felt like hard work. And so we'd both noticed this. And so we go for this walk.

And Claire brings it up. Which, can I be honest, wasn't easy. We talked through it. It wasn't an easy conversation. But it was a good conversation. And so one of the things Claire says to me in that conversation is she says, Kevin, I see the way that you're serving around the house.

[47 : 12] I see the way that you wash the dishes. I see the way that you try and come home and have dinner with the kids. I see the way that you're helping and you're serving. And I'm grateful for all those things.

But if I'm honest, I don't sense that there's much tenderness. I don't sense there's much gentleness. You're doing all the right things. But it feels like there's lacking this tenderness, this sweetness, this love in your actions.

You're going through the motions because that's what a good husband does. But it doesn't feel like your heart is really in it. Now, to be honest, she was absolutely right.

And I think I knew exactly what she meant because we had recently moved to Hong Kong about four or five months before that. And my heart and my mind was so focused on the job and the work and what am I trying to not mess everything up that actually something else, in other words, the job, had captured my attention and my heart.

And so even while I'm at home and I'm trying to do the right things, my mind is elsewhere and my heart is elsewhere. In other words, over a matter of time, Claire was no longer first in my heart.

[48 : 28] Something else had captured my heart's affection and my heart's attention. Something else had become first in my life. And so even though I'm trying to go through the motions, actually, while I'm trying to serve at home and I wash the dishes and the kids and Claire's saying, hey, can you make sure you're home for dinner?

Part of my heart is getting frustrated because I'm thinking, you're taking me away from what's actually first in my heart. And so what did my wife need in that moment? Well, what is going to bring back the sweetness?

What is going to bring back the joy and the tenderness? What is going to revive our marriage again? What Claire needed was firstly for me not to be defensive. Okay, that's a good start. She needed for me to admit where she was right and where I was wrong.

But what she actually needed was for me to go away and repent. She needed me to go away and do business with God and say, God, you're right. She's right. God, I'm sorry.

Something else has become first in my heart. And I want to put that right. She needed me to not just go through the motions and stir up my love. She needed me to repent.

[49 : 34] Friends, can I say repentance always feels like death because it requires us that we humble ourselves and admit that we're wrong. But repentance always, always leads to life.

And Jesus calls the Ephesian church and he calls us today to put right our lovelessness. Not by just stirring up our emotions. Not by doubling down and working twice as hard. Not by being twice as dedicated.

But by repenting. By coming to him and saying, Christ, something else has captured my heart's attention. Something else is first and foremost in my heart.

Something else has come before you. By coming to him and returning to him and making him first in our lives again. And so how do we do that? How do we turn to Christ in faith and repentance?

In one of his final letters in the New Testament, the Apostle John writes and he says this. This is how we know what love is. Not that we love God, but that he loved us.

[50 : 35] And he sent his son to be an atoning sacrifice. Indeed, we love because he first loved us. Friends, when we had done nothing right.

When all we had done to God is scorned him and mocked at him and laughed at him and rejected him. Jesus came to us in profound love. For God so loved the world, you and I, that he gave his only begotten son.

That we can be welcomed in back to his family, his children again. That he might pour his love into our hearts and bring us back to him together. Jesus comes to us and says, Friends, turn away from the things that have captured your heart's attention.

I have this and this is what I'm calling you to. Return to your first love. Return to your first love. Come and love me again. Repent.

Come to me again. Come and love me again.