

Letters to Seven City Churches: Letter to a Loveless Church

Revelation 2:1-7

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on May 11, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ A question we should be asking ourselves, as a church, every so often is: *What's our reputation? What are we known for?* We should be asking that from the perspective of church members and from the eyes of our community. *What are we known for?*
 - Are we known for our piety and personal holiness? Or are we known for our sound doctrine and biblical teaching? Or what about our worship singing and our many talented musicians? Or what about our care as a church? Are we known for our fellowships and small groups?
 - Do we have a reputation for evangelism, for reaching the lost? Or a reputation for mercy ministries and social justice? Are we *even* known for making God-loving and compassionate disciples of Jesus among all nations?

- ❖ *What are we known for?* And of course that's a different question from, "What *should* we be known for?" Now there are two mistakes we can make here: **The first is to reject all this talk of church reputation and "being known for something" and insist that every church be known for all that was just mentioned.** You shouldn't even be asking this question.
 - But this is the mistake of confusing the *is* from the *ought*. Yes, we *ought to* be striving to do all those things and have that be known. But the reality is that no church, at any given time, has a perfectly balanced set of spiritual gifts and strengths so that they do all those ministries equally well.
 - Based on the unique personalities and gift sets of its leaders and members, a church will, at any given time, be stronger in certain areas and have a greater reputation for it. To deny this reality or to avoid talking about it prevents us from identifying where we are weak – what we are *not* known for – so that we can move towards a more balanced reputation.

- ❖ **The second mistake is to be content with your church's current reputation and to just play to your strengths and ignore your weaknesses.** Churches have reputations. That's a fact. But instead of using that to humble themselves and to identify where they need to grow, some churches play to their strengths and use their reputation as a brand in order to market themselves. "Come to our church. We are a teaching church." (Meaning they're really into theology and bible study) "We are a Spirit-filled church." (Meaning their style of worship or their practice of charismatic gifts) "We are a seeker church." (Meaning they're really good at outreach and creating an inviting space for nonChristians)
 - That very well might be their reputation. That's what they're strong at. But no church should be content to just be known for one type of ministry. Rather, knowing our reputation as a church teaches us where else we need to grow to be more balanced.

- ❖ And friends, by extension this would apply to us individually. *What are you known for? What's your reputation?* Are you all about study and theology? Or all about worship and experience? Or all you all about reaching the lost or fighting social injustices? Knowing yourself (your reputation as a Christian) is helpful to know where else you need to grow to be more balanced.

- ❖ I raise all of this because for the last few months we've been talking about being *For the City*. We want to be known as a church that is for the city – that's for serving the poor and marginalized, engaging our culture, integrating faith into our schools as students, our workplaces as employees, and our neighborhoods as fellow citizens. **We want to be known as a church for the city. But that's not all we want to be known for.**
 - We simply highlight this because we need the balance. I think HCC has been, for many years, known for our fellowshiping. You come here and you know you'll be cared for and you'll build spiritual friendships. We're also known for our commitment to the Word of God, and we have a growing reputation for personal discipleship.
 - But this church began as a commuter church located here to be a central hub for all the surrounding suburbs – with no intent on serving and reaching our actual neighbors. So by trying to shift our reputation from a commuter church to a community church (a city church) is an attempt to bring greater balance.

The Context

- ❖ I've been looking forward to preaching this passage because it's been personally challenging, and I hope by the end you feel the same. So far we covered Revelation chapter one where we got a good introduction to the book as a whole.
 - We saw in chapter one that the Apostle John is on the prison island of Patmos when he receives a prophecy from Jesus, mediated by an angel, that he writes down as a letter to be circulated among seven city churches in 1st-century Asia Minor. These churches are under a dark cloud of persecution. The tribulation undergone by John is just a foreshadow of what's to come.
 - So what these believers need most if they expect to patiently endure the tribulation that is theirs in Christ Jesus (cf. v9) is to have the curtains of reality pulled back so they can get a glimpse of Jesus as he is in the present – as their Risen and Reigning King. They need the eyes of their hearts opened to see this reality. And that's what John does for them in vv9-20.
- ❖ Now in chapter two he begins addressing each church individually starting with the Ephesian church. Ephesus itself was a leading city in the Roman empire. It was the most cosmopolitan of the seven cities. It had the most important seaport in Asia Minor – any trade and goods going to or from Asia had to go through Ephesus. And it also housed the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Ancient Wonders of the World.
- ❖ We're told in the New Testament that **Paul** spent three years in Ephesus building up the church. By the time he left, they had elders in place who were instructed by Paul to oversee and care for the flock of God, looking out for wolves, for false teachers (Acts 20:28-30).
 - We also know that Paul left his trusted disciple **Timothy** in Ephesus to help pastor the church and protect it from false teachers. And tradition says **John** eventually pastored there. Tradition also says that Mother **Mary** was a member of the church since she was under the care of John. This is a church with a legacy of godly leaders. Quite a reputation. *So what would Jesus have to say to this most distinguished of churches?*

- ❖ Note that in each of the seven messages he gives, Jesus addresses the *angel* of that church and refers to one of the images that we were introduced to back in chapter 1:12-20. Let's read chapter 2:1 again, "*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.'*"
 - Now some have suggested that the angel that Jesus is writing to is reference to the preaching pastor of the church. The word for *angel* could also be translated simply as *messenger*. That's a possibility. It's also possible that John is using the word metaphorically. A church's "angel" is its ethos, its reputation. That's another option.
 - But considering how every other use of "angel" in Revelation is clearly talking about supernatural, heavenly beings, then it's a safer bet to interpret it the same here. There's not enough here to develop a full doctrine, but in some sense God has assigned angels to each of his churches.

- ❖ Now here Jesus describes himself as holding the seven stars (angels, cf. 1:20) in his right hand and walking among the seven lampstands (churches). **That's a fitting image for the Ephesians because Jesus is implying that he is well aware of what's going on in the church.** He's not absent. He's not oblivious to its current state. He's in their midst. He's in position to evaluate the health of their church.
 - In what follows Jesus does three things: 1) He **commends** the church for four things that they're going well. Four things they're known for. 2) He **condemns** the church for one major thing they've abandoned – that they let fall to the wayside. 3) He **warns** the church for what's coming if they don't rightly respond.

Commending a City Church

- ❖ So let's first see how Jesus commends the Ephesian church. **He essentially says four positive things about this church and its reputation.** Look at v2, "*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 found them to be false.*"

- ❖ **First, the Ephesians were known for their good works.** Jesus says he knows about their works, their toil. They were workers. They were known to be active in ministry. No one could accuse them of being too lazy or too selfish to serve. They were known for their works.
 - **Second, they were known for their patient endurance.** Jesus says he knows their endurance in the face of tribulation. He says the same in v3, "*I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.*" So for Jesus' namesake, they were enduring persecution and not growing weary. They weren't about to bow to pressure to call Caesar their Lord. Jesus was Lord and King.

- ❖ **Third, they were known for their hate of evil.** Jesus says in v2 that he knows how they cannot bear with evildoers, and in v6 he mentions how they hate the works of the Nicolaitans. There's not much known about the Nicolaitans. The only other mention is later in v15 when Jesus addresses the church in Pergamum. The context there mentions idolatry and sexual immorality (2:14), so it's likely their teaching and practice involved such things.

- ▶ Now considering how Artemis was the goddess of fertility and how her temple worship included cult prostitution, that would suggest the Nicolaitans were teaching that Christians could still participate, to some degree, in this kind of pagan worship. The Ephesians were having none of that.
- ❖ And that leads to the fourth thing the Ephesian church was known for – their orthodoxy. **They were known for their sound doctrine.** Their works, their toil, their effort was primarily directed at maintaining doctrinal purity in the church. V2 says that instead of bearing with false teachers, they "*tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.*" These teachers claimed to be apostles, to be sent from God, but the Ephesians had a keen ability to discern false teaching and false teachers from the real thing.
- ▶ As we mentioned earlier, Paul had exhorted them to watch out for these wolves (Acts 20:28-30), and apparently they took him seriously. **This was a church known for its vigilant attitude towards maintaining doctrinal purity.**
 - In fact decades later **Ignatius**, one of the early church fathers, wrote a letter to them where he expresses his encouragement over a report he heard about the church – of how certain heretics passed through Ephesus but were unable to gain a hearing among church members.¹ These Ephesians had a nose for doctrine, for smelling out bad theology and guarding what is good and sound.
- ❖ Friends, I've also been encouraged by the way we, as a congregation, have been growing in the depth and richness of our theology. Just consider all the major doctrines of the faith and the contemporary theological issues we've covered here in this service over the past years.
- ▶ We wrestled with the problem of evil and suffering² We addressed the doctrine of assurance – how do you know if you're really a Christian?³ We touched on the incommunicable attributes of God.⁴ We taught a gospel-centered theology of marriage and singleness and even addressed the issue same-sex marriage.⁵ We haven't wavered from addressing the evils of abortion-on-demand.⁶ And we don't shy from insisting that salvation is found exclusively in Christ alone⁷. We emphasize his sovereignty over your salvation and simply over all the circumstances and events of your life.⁸
- ❖ And when I talk with many of you individually after service or during the week, you ask such perceptive questions demonstrating that you're thinking critically and deeply about the things of God. **You're chewing on spiritual meat and not simply content with sipping spiritual milk.** I believe we are a maturing congregation that is becoming known for the soundness of our doctrine and for a love of learning and sharing God's truth.

¹ *Ignatius to the Ephesians*, 9:1. See online: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ignatius-ephesians-lightfoot.html>

² See sermon on Jonah 1:3-17 (3/23/14); Ruth 1 (10/14/12); John 9:1-7 (5/20/12)

³ See sermon series through 1 John (9/8/13 to 11/17/13)

⁴ See sermon series (8/11/13 to 9/1/13)

⁵ See sermon series through 1 Corinthians 7 (4/28/13 to 6/9/13)

⁶ See sermon on Proverbs 24:10-12 (1/20/13); Leviticus 20:1-5 (1/22/12)

⁷ See sermon on John 10:7-10 (6/17/12); John 14:1-11 (7/8/12)

⁸ See sermon series through Ruth (10/14/12 to 11/11/12)

Condemning a City Church

- ❖ Again the same could be same of the church in Ephesus. They had a passion for guarding and teaching sound doctrine. That was their reputation. **But sadly this church – known for its love of God’s truth and helping others learn it – was not really known for its love of God or of others.** That is condemning. And that’s what Jesus means when he accuses them in v4 of abandoning their first love. *“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”*

- ❖ How sad is that! This church started off in love with Jesus. Their hearts were filled with joy as they received his gospel of grace. They knew Jesus died for their sins to reconcile them to God. They were brimming with love and gratitude for their Savior.
 - But in time, as the church grew, so did the needs and challenges. Ministry expanded and become more time-consuming. The threat of persecution always loomed overhead. False teachers had to be confronted. False teaching required a response.
 - They were building up a reputation as defenders of the truth, which is good. But the Ephesians were beginning to be more known for what they hate (i.e. the works of the Nicolaitans) than for *what*, or better yet, for *who* they love.

- ❖ Friends, let's ask ourselves: ***Have we abandoned the love for Jesus that we had at first? Have we lost our first love?*** Has the gospel of grace lost its wonder? Has the thought of Jesus dying for your sins and rising to give you hope of new life – has it grown too familiar? Have we become so busy with good works, so active with ministry, so intent on getting the gospel right that we're no longer moved by the gospel?
 - Just keep this image in mind: Jesus walking among his lampstands, his churches. He knows what’s going on. He can see right through us – past all of our busy works, past all of our sound doctrine. **And he can see if at the center we’re empty – if a deep abiding love for God and others is conspicuously absent.** He knows if you've lost your first love. You can't hide it under a veil of busy works or good theology.

- ❖ This is where I’ve been so convicted. This verse is like a dagger. You can probably tell by now that I love theology. **But if I'm not careful I could easily end up loving the doctrine of God more than God. Loving the doctrine of the church more than my church.**
 - I love preaching and teaching the Word of God. As a shepherd, I'm happy to be known for that – for my passion and faithfulness in feeding the sheep. But I hope to God that I'm equally known for my love of the sheep. That's where I need balance.

- ❖ *What about you? What about us?* I think it's great to be known as a faithful lampstand that shines God's truth into this city with conviction and clarity. **But a lampstand's job is not just to give off light but also to give off heat – light and heat; truth and love.**
 - Imagine if you were a hiker lost in the woods on a moonless night. You're cold, tired, disoriented. It's so dark you can't see two steps ahead of you. What if someone hands you a lamp that gives off light but no heat? I'm sure you'd appreciate the light so you can find the path, but you're probably wishing it had some heat to warm you up.

- ❖ In the same way, the spiritually lost need gospel light to help them see but also gospel love to warm and melt their hearts. They need churches to be full-functioning lampstands and their members to be well-balanced lamps.
 - So what kind of a lampstand are we? What kind of church? **Are we known more for our zeal for right theology than our zeal for the Lord himself?** That would be a gross imbalance. It's great to be known for taking a stand for truth. **But are we also known for our graciousness and patience toward those with whom we disagree?** Towards those who hold a position or point of doctrine that we consider wrong and harmful? Do they know we still love them?
 - **Or are we just giving off lots of light but little heat – lots of truth but little love?** Listen to Paul in his famous love chapter, "*If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.*" (1 Cor. 13:2)

Warning a City Church

- ❖ ***So what do we do if we find ourselves in this unfortunate position where we love God's truth more than we love God or God's people or the lost?*** Jesus doesn't just condemn a church and then walk away. No, he patiently and lovingly instructs.
 - Let's see what he says in v5, "*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.*" So there are three things Christ calls us to do: Remember, repent, and re-do the works we did at first.
- ❖ **First, we need to remember.** We need to remember from where we've fallen. That means remembering the heights of love you had with Jesus when he saved you. Jesus is saying, "*Remember how much I loved you even in your sin. Remember how you responded to my grace, how natural it felt to pray, how you loved to worship, how you hungered for my Word, how zealous you were for my name and for proclaiming it to everyone. Remember.*"
 - The whole point of remembering the heights from where you've fallen is so you can recognize and confess the present condition you're in. Not so you can fall into despair and beat yourself up over it. But so you can return to your first love.
- ❖ **Second, we need to repent.** To repent simply means *to turn*. Whatever it is that has led you to abandon the love you had at first – turn away from it. Turn away from that which has made you lose sight of Jesus. Turn away from those things that have dulled your appetite for the Word. Turn away from whatever steals your time from prayer, from corporate worship, from fellowship with other believers. Turn away from the pride and callousness that causes you to be more concerned with being right than being a loving, caring, truth-telling friend.
- ❖ **Third, we need to re-do.** Jesus says to do the works you did at first. Think about that season in your life when you felt the closest to Jesus. *What kind of habits, what kind of priorities, what kind of activities characterized your life in those days?*

- ▶ Were you active in fellowship within a small group? Were you exercising your spiritual gifts in service to God? Did you have regular times of devotion? Did you memorize Scripture? Were you actively sharing your faith or serving others?
 - Jesus says to do them again. To reintroduce these habits back into your life. This time seek others to keep you accountable. Do the works you did at first and ask God to "*restore to me the joy of your salvation.*" (Ps. 51:12)

- ❖ Notice how Jesus gives a warning at the end of v5. "*If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.*" If they don't recover love, if they don't restore love to its central place in the life of the church, if they don't repent and begin functioning like a lampstand bearing light and heat – then Jesus warns that he'll come and remove their lampstand.
 - ▶ He's Lord of the churches. He walks among us. He has every right. It's his authority to remove a church. He's done it before. There are plenty of buildings that have all the trappings of a church, that once shone light and emanated heat – but no longer.
 - Friends, let's take this warning to heart. **A lampstand that no longer gives off heat, that cannot warm or melt a heart, is a faulty lampstand that will soon be cast aside.** That's doesn't mean individual members of a church will love their salvation, but it does mean the church's doors can easily close.

- ❖ But Jesus leaves us with a promise. Look at v7, "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*" There's hope, my friends. Those who have ears to hear, let him (her) hear what the Spirit of our Lord is saying right now. If you're feeling convicted, if you're realizing that you've abandoned that love you had at first, then don't ignore the voice, don't shake off the conviction. If you have an ear to hear, then listen – listen especially to what Jesus has to say about the tree of life. "*To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*"

- ❖ That's obviously a reference to the tree of life found in Genesis 2 in the middle of Eden. It's also mentioned again at the end of Revelation in chapter 22 located right in the center of the new city of God in the new creation.
 - ▶ Now in the first creation we're told that the way to the tree of life was blocked because of Adam's Fall, because of human sin. **But in the new creation, the barrier is gone. Why? Because a conqueror we call Christ has broken down the barrier with shed blood.**
 - If you don't know the love of Jesus, if you've never experienced a love for him, then come to Jesus in repentance. Receive him as your Savior and discover that in him you're called a conqueror (more than a conquerer!) and you'll be granted to eat of the tree of life in the paradise of God.

- ❖ Let me end with the question I began with: *What is our church's reputation? What are we known for?* May it be for our deep love for the Savior, a genuine love for people, and a real passion for the gospel – for getting it right and proclaiming it boldly and faithfully.