

Truth & Love

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[0 : 0 0] So as Christians, in many ways, we're defined by what we believe. For example, we've already said the words of the Apostles' Creed together, which summarize a lot of the key tenets of the Christian faith. To be a Christian, there are certain truths that you have to hold to, namely that the Lord is God, that Jesus died on a cross for our sins, that he rose from the dead, and that one day he's going to return in victory and power. But we're also defined by how we live, most crucially by our love.

We've reached the point, as I said, in Revelation where Jesus is sending messages to these seven churches in Asia Minor, or what's now modern-day Turkey. And the first church that Jesus speaks to is the church in Ephesus. Ephesus was an important city and a major hub for idol worship, particularly worship of the goddess Artemis. You can see that in Paul's travels to Ephesus in the Book of Acts, and worship of the Roman Emperor. So this would have been quite a difficult place to be a Christian.

Your whole life would have to run very much counter to the culture just in order to stay the course. And the Ephesians, to their credit, they didn't waver in their faith. They believed the gospel.

They believed those things we confess today as Christians, and they stood by them. But when Christians ardently defend what is true, there's also a real danger that we will forget to do it with love. And truth without love has terrible consequences. So the letter to the church begins with a comment, firstly, about the sender. All seven letters begin with similar comments, and they all more or less follow the same kind of shape. And here we see the sender, we see Jesus, and he's identified as him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.

This is a callback. It's a callback to what we saw in the vision of Jesus at the end of chapter one, where we saw him standing among the lampstands. And John told us at the end of that chapter, the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, but the seven lampstands are the seven churches. And so what this image conveys is the idea that Jesus is with his church and holds his church in his hands. It reminds us that Jesus dwells with his people. But notice that Jesus doesn't just stand among the lampstands here, he walks among them. And I suspect that there are some echoes here of God walking among the trees of the Garden of Eden after Adam's first sin.

[3 : 03] The temple lampstand, after all, was in the shape of a tree deliberately to echo the Garden of Eden. When God walked in the Garden, he was coming to banish Adam and Eve from Eden because they had broken the single command that he had given them. And what we see here in this letter is Jesus walking among the lampstands, but with a warning to the Ephesian church that he may remove their lampstand, effectively banishing them. And so in this sense, it's both encouragement and warning that Jesus walks among the lampstands. He walks among his church, which should be a taste of paradise and a light that points to Christ. And this means he is there to help the church to shine as they ought to shine and grow as it ought to grow. But he will also prune and punish where his church does not look like his church. And so the point must be made is that Jesus is intimately involved in his church. After all, it is his. Christ is the head of the church and we are his body. So when a church isn't living up to that identity, Jesus is not going to sit idly by, just as God didn't in the Garden.

And it's worth reflecting on where we are in our contemporary sphere, how in recent years, abuse within the church has been really put under the spotlight. In a way, this is quite uncomfortable.

Uncomfortable for the reason that we know as Christians, abuse and sin have no place in the body of Christ. And for many, particularly those who've been abused and bruised by churches and church leaders and church cultures, they can feel that they can't trust the church. And if you can't trust the body of Christ, there could be fears that you can't trust the head. Now, you can, but it's worth recognizing and sympathizing with this. It's a good thing when evil and abuse is brought to light. And we want to note that Jesus cares.

Jesus cares when his church is not shining. Jesus cares when the light has grown dim and the branch is withering. Jesus walks among the lampstands of his church and he will prune. And if a branch is stubborn, he will burn. Because the church of Christ must look like the church of Christ.

To bring this right into our context as CCG, if we are to be Christ Church Glasgow and bear the name of Christ, we have a responsibility to look like Christ. We are his body. We are his lampstand. And I hope that abuse never, ever, ever flourishes in this church. But it may well have done in the Ephesian church because they were a church that majored on doctrine but was lacking in love. And when love is absent, people suffer.

[6 : 24] Now, the Ephesian church did one thing very well. And this is a necessary element of bearing the name of Christ, which is why Jesus does commend them. He commends the Ephesians for their perseverance in the truth. Jesus says, this is verses 2 and 3, 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.

You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Remember the context of the Ephesian church. The culture that surrounds them is rooted and swarmed by idol worship. The next-door neighbors were out at the Temple of Artemis every day. They had posters of Artemis in their windows, and emperor worship was a really easy way to climb up the greasy pole.

And so in response to a culture like that, the Ephesians have made a real concerted effort to be rooted in the truth. They knew their theology. Their understanding of doctrine and their familiarity with scripture was rigorous, because they understood just how important it is that you know what you believe. Which is why Jesus commends them. He commends them because their doctrinal rigors actually allowed them to perceive false teaching when it's entered into the church.

There were these folks who falsely claimed to be apostles, but when they came to the Ephesian church, the Ephesians, they sent them packing because they recognized that what they were saying was not right.

And so Christ acknowledges that they have persevered and worked hard for the sake of that truth, and for the sake of his name. They recognized that the gospel is true, and was worth defending and knowing deeply. And they weren't weary of it. They weren't weary of the hard work of following Jesus and knowing him. They were a church with strong convictions. And there's an awful lot to be said for a church that is defined by its strong convictions. The Christians who work hard to know more and more understand the God who has created them and understand the nooks and crannies of his word.

[8 : 49] That is a wonderful, wonderful thing, to be commended and to be emulated. Which is why Jesus commends them. And in our world, which in many ways is not actually that dissimilar from Ephesus, a world where following Jesus is counter-cultural, and where disagreeing with the culture, because of what Jesus says can bring scorn from some and ridicule from others, this kind of theological rigor is to be commended amongst us, just as Christ commended it among the Ephesians.

In a world of false gospels and competing worldviews, we really cannot overstate the importance of persevering for the sake of truth, and guarding ourselves fiercely against the lies and corruptions of the gospel message.

If what is written in scripture is true, and it is, then it's important that we know it well and understand it well. Because without that, we will struggle to call out corruptions of the truth whenever they come up in conversation or more likely appear on our social media.

The false teaching is subtle. Don't ever be under the impression that you're going to be immune to the siren song of false teaching. Perseverance in the truth is essential to being a shining lampstand.

Working hard at knowing what we believe is never ever a wasted effort, but brings commendation from Jesus and will help us to keep persevering, because our convictions are going to deepen, and our confidence in God is only going to grow and grow and grow.

[10 : 36] But, and this really is the heart of the matter, and this is where we're going to spend most of our time. Rigorous doctrine and a deep understanding of the truth does not a Christ-like church make if there is no love.

Listen to the seriousness of Jesus' tone when he addresses this failing in the Ephesian church. Yet I hold this against you.

You have forsaken the love you had at first. 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.

The Ephesians have defended the truth to the detriment and abandonment of love. Now, love is a core part of the Christian ethic.

Without love, we cannot really call ourselves Christians. This is why Jesus is so forceful in this letter. Orthodoxy, that is right belief, orthodoxy without love does not display the whole gospel.

[11 : 51] Orthodoxy without love is a dead faith. Orthodoxy without love does not reveal Christ. So what we have in the Ephesian church really is a kind of trench mentality.

They're persevering. They've built up their defenses and their walls against untruth. But in so doing, they have lost love. And this is a problem because throughout the Bible, love is shown to be the defining mark of the Christian because it is the defining mark of God.

God is love. We watched All Quiet on the Western Front not long ago. It's a desperately sad film because we see in it not just how war destroys the lives of so many, but also the souls of the young boys who are made to fight in it.

Love and compassion and humanity are lost and stripped away in the fog of war. Now, the Bible often describes the Christian life as a battle, and it is.

But we mustn't let that idea of it being a battle drain us of love because then the church looks no better than the world.

[13 : 13] Cruel, uncaring, abusive, blinded by the fog of war, blinded by that trench mentality.

And without love, the church will just turn into a parliament of Christian Pharisees. Jesus criticized those teachers when he said, woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue, and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God.

You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone. The Pharisees, they were deeply concerned about right belief and right doctrine, but they neglected love, which meant that they ended up neglecting so much of what God has commanded about how to live.

They didn't love those around them, and in the end, they didn't really love God. If they had, they would not have crucified his son. But love is commanded of us.

Just take this smattering of commands from the New Testament. Paul, in his letter to the same church, said, live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

[14 : 32] Paul again, he said this to the Thessalonians, may the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else. Peter writes in his first letter, above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

And John, in his first letter, dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

And the root is, of course, in Jesus himself, who told his disciples, by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Love must practically course through the very veins of the Christian. But what do we mean by love? The English language is a wonderful language in many ways, but sometimes it doesn't really do justice to some words.

And certainly when we use the word love, it doesn't really do justice to what we're talking about. You could say that you love Donner Kebab, but you could also say hypothetically that you love your mum, especially on a day like today.

[15 : 46] Both of those statements might be true, but I really hope, especially today, I really hope that you don't love your mum in the same way that you love Donner Kebab. On a slightly more serious note, it's not just the sort of vague broadness of the term, it's also the way our culture speaks of love.

The way our culture speaks of love is both vague and ideologically charged. What does love actually mean in a culture that confesses the creed love means love?

What actually is Christ-like love? What is the distinctive love that marks the church of Jesus and the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit?

To grasp at this, it's worth reflecting, going out of Revelation for just a moment and thinking about how Paul describes love in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. These are famous words, but they help us try and get a handle on just what this love we're supposed to have is.

And Paul says, love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud. It does not dishonor others.

[17 : 01] It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth.

It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. And to add to that, Jesus shows us love in his very self and in his cross.

Speaking to his disciples just before he was betrayed, he said, my command is this, love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this to lay down one's life for one's friends.

And that's exactly what Jesus did for all of us on the cross. modern conceptions of love are, I think it's fair to say, ultimately quite me-centered.

Modern love is predominantly about my needs and my feelings and my desires. Modern love puts us at the heart of it.

[18 : 08] But in Christ, we have a much more satisfying understanding of love than just love means love. true love, Christ-like love, God love, is defined in the selfless, compassionate holiness of Jesus.

A love that is revealed at the cross of Christ. Jesus gave himself completely in love. He denied his own desires, his own feelings, his own needs, and all of it was for love.

This is love, says John in his first letter. Not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

But circling back to our earlier point about persevering for what is true, in Jesus, we don't just see love, we also see the one who stood, well, not only stood for truth, but actually embodied truth in himself.

But his defense of what is true and his teaching of the gospel didn't come at the expense of love. He spoke to the marginalized and went into their homes.

[19 : 23] He ate with the social pariahs of the day. He touched the unclean. He welcomed the unwelcomable. He gave of himself so freely and so totally to everyone who received him.

Love doesn't mean abandoning the convictions of scripture. Love does not mean diluting the gospel and it doesn't mean that we're lax with the truth and woolly about what we believe.

But love does mean sacrifice because love involves people and people, as we all know very well, are messy.

Real life is messy and love requires a willing sacrificial nature to be involved in that messiness of human life.

Eugene Peterson, who was a pastor in the United States, whose writings I find very, very helpful, he puts it like this. It's a long quote with quite a lot of detail but I think it's really, really helpful.

[20 : 28] So he says, a primary task of the community of Jesus is to maintain this lifelong cultivation of love in all the messiness of its families, neighborhoods, congregations, and missions.

Love is intricate, demanding, glorious, deeply human, and God-honoring. But, and here's the thing he says, never a finished product, never an accomplishment, always flawed in some degree or other.

And this is, this is because love involves being involved with people. It's, it's about relationship. It's about people. Peterson continues, belief and behavior are essential but as the defining mark of the Christian they lack one thing, relationship.

They are both prone to abstractions or programs, abstractions, learning right belief are good, programs, learning right behavior are good.

But it is also possible to master the abstractions and carry out the programs impersonally. In fact, it is far easier it is done impersonally.

[21 : 49] We cannot be abstract and impersonal Christians. Christians. It's, that's a, it's a contradiction in terms. Sacrificial love means being involved in the messiness of each other's lives and in the lives of our neighbors.

This must be our way and it must be what we are known for. The gospel itself is not going to be believed if it's not accompanied by love.

Hence, the tagline of Christ Church Glasgow, loving God, loving each other, loving Glasgow. When we say that at the start of our service, it needs to be a true comment about us.

We need to be obviously marked by our extravagant love because God has loved us so much. And so because of the wonderful love that we've received from Christ, love so amazing that he died for us and bore our sin, the question is how are we then going to go out and love people?

We have to ask that question. Are we going to be relational, sacrificial, and compassionately involved? Or are we going to be distant, self-contained, and comfortable?

[23 : 12] As we relate to one another, will our brothers and sisters around us as we sit in the pew, are we going to be known by our church family as individuals and as families who are defined and known by our extravagant love?

And as we relate to everyone else, our neighbours, our families, our colleagues, the people we meet week in, week out, are they going to know us as people who love and care in a way that no one else really does?

To be frank, as I look at my own heart, I feel the challenge of this passage. Abstractions and programmes are easy. Loving is harder. But loving is the way of the Spirit and it is the distinctive mark of the church.

And I suspect very strongly that when it is absent, a domineering and abusive attitude is just around the corner. And so, if love is absent, what is the Christian or what is the church to do?

Well, three things, says Jesus. One, consider how far you have fallen. That is, he wants us, if love is absent, to recognise that love is gone or recognise where it can grow.

[24 : 32] This requires prayer and meditation and reflection. It means asking is love on display in my life? It requires a real frank honesty with ourselves and our hearts to ask, are we content with programmes and abstractions or are we involved relationally and lovingly with those God has placed around us?

Two, Jesus says, repent, repent of lovelessness if love is absent. And three, do the things you did at first. that is, let love characterise your life again.

And he says, if you do not repent to the Ephesians, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. That really does reiterate, doesn't it, what we've been saying that love must be at the heart of all we do.

But we must mention one caveat because Jesus says just after this, but you have this in your favour. You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans which I also hate.

Real love does not mean the acceptance of all things. It's important and essential as we've said that we love everyone. But that doesn't mean that we throw our convictions and our ethics out the window.

[25 : 52] Jesus actually commends the Ephesians for hating the practices of the Nicolaitans. This was a group that was teaching a distortion of the gospel message and proclaiming an ethic and a morality that just, it was going against the gospel.

And it's interesting that Jesus, who is love, hates their practices. He hates them because they are wrong. They go against the gospel. What they teach is not good.

What they teach will not bring any good and is not helpful or kind or ultimately loving because it is not true. But notice, though, that it is their practices that he hates.

The Ephesians must not condone what the Nicolaitans do or teach, but they must still love them, love the people. Love does not mean we affirm every idea or every desire.

In fact, sometimes love means we have to say that we don't. But when we do that, when we disagree, we must do it in love. Any other way is simply not the Jesus way.

[27 : 05] And so, as we close, what then is the end point for the church that embraces truth and love together? Well, Jesus says, 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. We began with Jesus walking through the lampstands just as God walked among the trees of the Garden of Eden.

If the church in Ephesus is rooted in the truth and characterized by love, well, a return to paradise is what they have in store.

The tree of life, which stood at the very center of the Garden of Eden, represents the promise we have of eternal life.

Eternal life is what awaits the church, it's what awaits the Christian who doesn't deviate from the truth revealed in the gospel, but who follows Christ by being marked by his love.

[28 : 13] And the blessings of the tree of life, they all come from Jesus. He died on a much cruder and crueler tree, the cross of Calvary, so that we can have that blessing of the tree of life.

He died as a sacrificial lamb so that we might reach the tree of life which Adam forfeited through sin and which we forfeit through sin and that we might have the victory and that is the theme of this whole series, the victory of the lamb.

And part of that victory is receiving the promise of life in his name. And so, if we believe in Christ, if we hold to the truth and if we are marked by the love of the lamb, then this is our future.

And our prayer should be that we are not like the church in Ephesus, but instead live up to our motto of loving God, loving each other, loving Glasgow.

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