

# Getting Our First Love Right

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[ 0 : 00 ] Thanks so much, Phil. And as we turn to God's Word together, we do so, just so aware that we need God's help as we turn to this passage. So, as you know, in our morning services, we are beginning a study on the seven letters that we find in Revelation chapter 2 and 3.

These chapters contain short letters written to seven different churches in locations across Asia Minor, which is what we would call Turkey. And they're fascinating because they give us an insight into the challenges of life in the early church at the end of the first century. And at the same time, they teach lessons for us today as we seek to follow Jesus. Our series is called Getting the Basics Right. And for all of us, that's crucial. In life, no matter who we are and what we believe, there's key basics that we want to have in place across every aspect of our lives. But it's especially important for us as a church. There's fundamentals about what we believe and about how we behave that we've got to get right. Last week, we introduced the series and we saw that Revelation was written at a time when Christians faced opposition. The Roman Emperor at this period was called Domitian. It's around about the year 95 AD or so. And Domitian initiated a strategy of persecution against Christians. And it basically involved the Roman Emperor's had, some of them had kind of, well, basically they thought they were gods themselves. And they expected to be worshiped themselves as gods. So Caesar is Lord was what they were being asked, what people were expected to say. And of course, Christians couldn't say that because for Christians, the only Lord was Jesus. And so this persecution arose. These letters are written to Christians who are suffering. We said last week that Revelation is a letter. That means it's written to specific churches in specific locations. And it's addressing their real life experiences.

Revelation is also a prophecy. That means it's warning God's people about danger. And at the same time, it's giving precious promises about God's salvation. And we also saw that Revelation is an example of apocalyptic literature, which was a style of literature that you had in this period that used very unusual, very vivid imagery in order to reveal key truths. That means that we don't take every single detail literally. We have to interpret it appropriately to recognize the general truths that God wants us to know. All of these combine to mean that there's one big thing that Revelation gives us. Can you remember what it was? Encouragement. And that's the word I want you to think about throughout this whole series. And whenever you come to Revelation, it's written to give you encouragement. Over the next seven weeks, we're going to work our way through the seven letters that we have in these chapters. And we're just going to follow the order that they come in. And you can see the locations on the map in front of you. John is writing from Patmos, a small island where he's been exiled. And he works in a clockwise direction, starting with the nearest location, which is Ephesus. And so we can read this letter together.

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 found them to be false. I know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you've not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you've 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. Yet this you have, you hate the work of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. If you've read Revelation two and three before, you may have noticed that all of the letters follow a similar pattern. They start off with a greeting that tells us something amazing about Jesus. Then there's a brief summary of how the church is getting on. That's followed by either an encouragement to keep going, or a call to repent of somewhere where they're going wrong, or sometimes there's both.

And then the letters close with a call to listen. That phrase he has an ear to hear, and there's a precious promise about the future. And sometimes the promise comes first, and then the call to listen, sometimes it's the other way around. I just want to note that these four elements are exactly what we need as a church every single week of our lives. Every week we need to see more of how amazing Jesus is. Every week we need to examine ourselves and see how we're doing. Every week we need encouragement to keep going with the things that we're doing well, and we need to repent of the areas where we're going wrong. And every week we need to keep listening to Jesus and to keep holding on to the promises that he's given to us. It's important as we go through this series to remember that first and foremost these letters are all written to believers. If you look, if you remember back from Revelation 1 that we looked at last week, these letters are written, are they written from Jesus who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood. That's the people he's writing to, the people he loves, the people he saved by his own blood. So today we're looking at the letter to

[ 6 : 37 ] Ephesus and our title is Getting Our First Love. Right. I just want to go through each part of the letter bit by bit so we can start with verse one. The letter begins to the angel of the church in Ephesus. Right, and all the letters begin with the same way, this phrase to the angel. That originally raises the question, well what does that mean when it talks about an angel and there's different views as to what that is referring to. Some say it's referring to an actual angel, that there's an angel guarding each particular church. Some think it's more referring to the spirit of the church as a collective group, that that's sort of representing the kind of collective spirit and mindset that the church has. And some people think it's referring to the local leadership, to those who are elders, who are pastoring the congregation. It doesn't really matter which one you choose because either way the letter is written to the believers who are at each particular location. I think I probably lean towards the third option, that it's referring to the local leadership in the church, but I wouldn't be, I'm not dogmatic about that and I'd happily change my mind if it became clear that I was wrong. The key point is the next bit where it says the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. These are the words of Jesus. Now the end of chapter one tells us that the seven golden lampstands is a reference to the churches. This is what we mean by apocalyptic literature, you use kind of language that seems a bit funny to us to describe things that are actually very much every day. Jesus is the one who holds the seven stars, who walks among the seven lampstands.

This as we said is telling us something amazing about Jesus. It's telling us that when it comes to these churches, Jesus is not distant and he's not detached. He's holding these churches. He's walking among them. In other words, he's right here and that's a massive encouragement to believers and epistists who are facing opposition. They're not on their own. Jesus hasn't abandoned them, even though the Roman emperor is against them, even though their circumstances are hard. It's an amazing reminder to them that Jesus cares about them. He cares about what's going on. He wants to know the details of their situation. He's attentive and he's interested and all of that's confirmed by two amazing little words that come next. He says, I know. He knows them and he knows their circumstances because he holds them and he walks among them. That's why when you read verse one there and it talks about seven stars in his right hand and seven golden lampstands, you shouldn't be picturing in your head Jesus kind of wandering around heaven with like stars twirling in his hand and with lampstands that he's kind of inspecting as he goes round. That's not what you should have in your head. What you should have in your head is Jesus sitting in one of these pews.

What you should be thinking about is him sitting in on our curesion meetings and our deacons court meetings. You should picture him walking over to the Sunday school to just see how the kids are getting on and to find out what they're learning. You should picture him coming to join us on a Thursday night as we pray whether it's on zoom or here in the building. You should think of him alongside us as we talk together as we spend time together during the week. That's what verse one is describing. That's what the imagery is pointing us towards. It's telling us that Jesus is with us and he knows how we are. And that is a wonderful reassurance because it reminds us that Jesus understands you and he cares about you. But it's also a penetrating challenge because it also means that Jesus knows about all the stuff that we would rather hide. Verses two and three, Jesus summarizes how these Ephesians are getting on and in particular he summarizes what they're getting right. And the key point is that they've got two things bang on. They've got their theology right and they've got their commitment right. So even though they're in the midst of opposition, they've remained faithful to the truth. Verse two describes how they won't tolerate false teachers.

They've been careful to test people and to see whether or not what they're saying is actually accurate and they've actually discovered that some people were false. This was one of the problems that the early church faced. There were the apostles, Paul and Peter and the others who taught the true gospel. But then often as they moved on to different places, other people would come in and say, oh, I'm an apostle as well, but they would teach something different. And that threat of false teaching was a huge issue in the early church. Ephesus were wise and good because they were careful about what they believed and they tested to see whether anyone who claimed to be an apostle was actually genuine. Moving on a couple of verses to verse six, it says that they also hated the Nicolaitans and we'll say a bit more about them in a couple of weeks time because they come up again. But it seems to be that they were a group who justified kind of just indulging in immoral behavior while still claiming that you were Christians and the Ephesians are good because they're saying, no, no, we're not going to do that. We can't stand that. And despite all the challenges that they faced, they've not grown weary. You can see that in verse three there.

Their commitment is good. As Phil was saying to the children, you know, you look at them and they seem to be just functioning well. Everything is keeping going. They're patient, hardworking and committed. And both of these things are brilliant in a church. Both are crucial. We've got to make sure that we've got our theology right. That means constantly learning and growing together.

[13:07] That means being ready to identify teaching that's inaccurate. And that means making sure that we never compromise in terms of what we believe. And we've also got to make sure that we get our commitment right. Following Jesus isn't something that we just do on good days. No matter what a week brings, we want to keep patiently, faithfully following Jesus. And both of these are key aspects of what it means to be a disciple. A disciple is a learner. That's why teaching is such an important part of our life as a church. We need to grow in our knowledge and our understanding of the Bible.

We need to dig in and explore the amazing depths of theology that we have in the pages of scripture. And we need to be alert to anything that contradicts that. Anything that might sneak in.

It's actually unbiblical. And that's a crucial issue. What we believe has always got to be biblical. And the way to test whether or not something is true or false is to test it against the apostolic teaching that's recorded for us in the New Testament. A disciple is always someone who's learning. But a disciple is also a follower. And following involves commitment. When you think disciple, always think learner, follower. That's the two aspects of it. And that means that as disciples, we're not customers and we're not passengers. We're followers. And that takes effort and patience and perseverance. It takes effort to learn more. It takes effort to get together to worship at the beginning of each new week on a Sunday morning and evening. It takes effort to have people around to our homes. It takes effort to stay in touch during the week. It takes effort to be willing to be like Jesus at home, at school, at work. The Ephesians were getting their theology and their commitment right. And at that level, they're a good model for us to follow. But they were getting one massive basic wrong. Verse four tells us that they had abandoned the love they had at first. Now the question arises, what is that love that Jesus is talking about? What is this first love that they've abandoned over the years? People have kind of debated, you know, what that might be. And they kind of plumped for two options. Some say, well, it's referring to love for God. And others have said, well, no, it's referring to love for others. I don't think there's any doubt that the answer is both, because the two are inseparable. That's what it means to love

Jesus. That's what Venus Disciple involves. Having Jesus as our best friend, as Phil was saying, means loving him and loving all those who are united to him. Love for God, love for one another.

In the New Testament, these two things are inseparable. We cannot love God. And at the same time, not love one another. Jesus makes that absolutely clear. The two greatest commandments he identifies, love for God, love for your neighbor. Mark 12 is where he talks about that. He tells us elsewhere and John, that that's the defining characteristic of being a disciple. Someone who claims they love Jesus. Well, the way that that shows itself is if you have love for one another, as John 13 says, and then John, who wrote Revelation, also wrote three letters. And in the first of these letters, he says, if anyone says, I love God and hates his brother, he's a liar.

[16:52] For he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he's not seen. And this commandment we have from him, whoever loves God, must also love his brother. In fact, it's a really interesting historical record from the life of John. When John, John lived to LaVette till he was really, really old. So we're in the year about 95 AD here. If John, if Jesus was crucified sometimes around sometime around the year 30, and John was maybe in his 20s, then early 20s, we're not sure, go all the way through to 95. He's getting very, very, very old by that stage.

And it's said, there's a historical tradition that says that that John had to be carried to church in Ephesus. And when he was taken there, they would ask him to speak because, you know, he was held in such a high regard. And he would say one thing. And he would say it again and again and again. He said, little children, love one another. And theologically, this makes perfect sense. As Christians, we are united to Jesus. He's divine. We are the branches as we were thinking about on Thursday night at our prayer meeting in him, we are adopted into God's family. That means that we're united to each other. We are brothers and sisters together, we're branches connected to one vine. And the key point is that that first love for God and for each other is a basic that we have got to get right. This has got to be the single most prominent defining feature of our congregation. When people walk in here or to any place where we are gathered, the single most important thing we want them to be able to see is that we love God and that we love one another. And this is such a massive test for us. If if you were to knock on a door in

Carla way of somebody who doesn't go to church and say, can you describe Carla way free church in one sentence? If their answer is anything other than them saying, well, I don't know much about them, but I do know that they love God and that they love everyone who goes there. If that's not their answer, then we've got work to do. Because that that has to be our basic defining feature. And that's the crucial thing we got to recognize that this is the most fundamental basic of all. This is not kind of nicey, nicey, lovey, dovey, therapeutic sentimentalism at all. This is what makes or breaks everything that we do as a church. And that's why we read from 1st Corinthians 13. You look at verse 13, verses one to three. If the stuff that that describes was happening here, but people would say there's a revival in Carla way. If people were speaking in the tongues of men and of angels, if there was prophetic power, if there was miracles happening as though as big as mountains were being moved, if that kind of stuff was happening, people would say, Wow, look at what's happening in Carla way. And yet Paul says, if we have all of that, which we can have, if we have that without love, we're nothing. And it's a waste of time. What does that love look like?

First Corinthians tells us it's patient and kind. It does not envy or boast. It's not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It's not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and usual things love like that never ends. The Ephesians had their doctrine bang on. They had their church attendance rock solid, but the foundational basic of loving God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and loving each other as those who are united to Jesus Christ. That was missing.

I want you to imagine two churches in your mind. One is a free church committed to the authority of the Bible preaching each week, maintaining a faithful routine, but it's cold.

[ 21 : 56 ] There's little warmth. People don't talk to each other very much. They aren't very friendly, and they spend very little time together apart from just coming together for the service each week. That's one church. The other church is from a different denomination. It's gone off the rails theologically, but it's warm, friendly, and welcoming. Which one of them is doomed? Both of them. Ephesus was the first one. And that's why in verse five, Jesus says, unless you repent, I'm going to remove your lampstand from its place. In the past 50 years, many free church congregations have closed or are almost closed. How many of them went off the rails theologically?

None. How many of them got their love for God and for people right? That's the question.

And what we need to recognize is that being in a church in 2022 is not a choice between being Orthodox and cold on this side and being theologically dodgy and warm and friendly on this side, because that's a choice between disaster or disaster. We've got to be bang on with our theology just like the Ephesians were. We've got to be outstandingly warm, loving, and kind just as the Ephesians weren't. And I'm not saying all that to be negative. And I'm not saying that we are that church who's cold and harsh. I'm not saying that because there's so many ways in which you have all shown so much love to so many people. And that's brilliant. But we've got to keep examining ourselves honestly. We've got to be careful about this as Jesus sits in these pews as he takes his own minutes at our curc session meetings. As he joins you on a phone call as you talk about church stuff. As he listens to the way that we talk about people who aren't in the room, what would he say about our basics? Jesus doesn't ever just tell them what's going wrong. He tells them what they need to do. And you know what? I pressed my button too soon, because I was going to say that there's three imperatives in that slide. And I was going to say, can you see them? It's pretty obvious where they are now because they're all red. Never mind. Never mind. In verse five, there's three imperatives that I gave the game away with there. Jesus tells them, I want you to remember. I want you to repent. And I want you to do an imperative is a commanding word. It's something that he expects us to put into action. And the three of these are brilliant. Jesus tells them to remember from where they've fallen. Now, I think that there's maybe two aspects to that. At one level, remembering involves looking back. So there clearly was a time when the Ephesians weren't like this, a time when they did love love Jesus more and they loved his family more. And that's the behavior that he wants them to return to. But at another level,

I think remembering also involves looking up, not just looking back. And by looking up, I mean, looking again to Jesus and remembering what we have in him. Because if we remember who he is and all that he's done, if we remember how precious everyone else is in God's sight, then it helps us to see what really matters and it will rekindle love that might have gone cold. And this is where we remember that that that remembering in this way is not about filling you with guilt. It's about helping you to see that you're part of something so, so good. He tells them to repent. That's such a brilliant word. It basically means to change your thinking. Now, at one level, that's a hard imperative to hear because it's not easy to acknowledge that we need to change. Because by definition, the word repent means that there's something not right with us and not right in our lives. But it's crucial that we do that. We've got to be ready to examine ourselves. We've got to acknowledge where we might need to change our mindset. That's a key part of growing as a

Christian. And even though it's hard, repentance will always, always do us good. But what I hope you can see is that it's not just a hard imperative to hear. It's also a wonderful imperative to hear because the whole reason that Jesus calls the Ephesians and us to repent is why? Because he cares about us. The people being called to repent are the people whom he loves and whom he's saved with his own blood. The call to repent comes from one who wants the very best for us. And that's why faith and repentance always go hand in hand. Because if you think about it, if the Bible calls us to repent and we say, no, I'm not going to do that. Ultimately, that shows an unwillingness to trust Jesus because Jesus is saying, look, I think you really need to do this. And we're saying, well, no, I'm not going to do that. And that means we're not trusting what he's saying. Whereas if we do trust Jesus, if we really trust Jesus, if he says, repent, then we should be thinking absolutely.

[ 28 : 05 ] Because I know that you have my best interests at heart. I know that I can rely on every single word that he says. This is where you've got to remember Jesus doesn't say repent because he's raging at you. Jesus says repent because of how much he cares about you. And then the third imperative is do. Jesus tells them and us to do the works that they did at first. Again, this is such a brilliant little word. When we think about remembering, when we think about repenting, it's easy to conclude that that's all just stuff that goes on in here. That it's to do with our mindset and our attitude. So this can happen very easily. When we talk about loving God, loving one another, we can say, yes, okay, yeah, I remember that I need to do that. Yeah, I remember that that's important. I repent of it. And I do love God. And I do love everybody in church. And then we go home and nothing changes.

Jesus says, do the works that I want you to do. And that's reminding us that genuine love is never just an attitude. Genuine love has got to show itself in action. It's got to shape the way that we behave. And this raises a potential misunderstanding, a big misunderstanding that I think we can sometimes find ourselves falling into and we've got to be a wee bit careful to avoid.

I'm nervous saying it because it's going to make me sound like, it's going to make me sound dodgy when I say it, but I hope you're going to understand what I mean. When Jesus says that you need to get your first love right, we could easily think to ourselves, okay, that means I've got to get my house in order. I've got to get my individual devotional life to God right. I've got to sort that. So we think, okay, I'm going to shut myself away. I am going to get my spiritual house in order. I'm going to read more. I'm going to pray more. I'm going to cut myself off from distractions. I'm going to make sure that I'm sorted. Now, at one level, absolutely, we've got to pray. We've got to read and our devotional lives as individuals is incredibly important. But if we think that getting our first love right means kind of locking ourselves away in this kind of bubble of pious meditation and kind of militant religious activity so that we are getting ourselves sorted, if we think that we're right, that that's the way to do it. We're wrong. We're completely wrong. Getting our first love right means doing the works, do the works, doing the works that Jesus wants us to do. And you might say, well, how do I know what they are? How do you know? You just look at the works that Jesus did.

Look at how he ate with sinners. How he had compassion on the people whose lives were an absolute disaster. How he welcomed the outcast that nobody else really wanted to mix with.

How he provided for the needy. How he stood up for what was right and was able, was willing to call out behavior and attitudes that were wrong. How he was so gentle with people who were hurting.

[ 31 : 58 ] If you want to know what getting your first love looks like, the greatest example of that is Jesus Christ because he has loved God perfectly. Total obedience, doing everything the Father needs and wants. And he has loved you perfectly as well. Doing everything that you need in order to be saved all the way as we said to the kids, all the way to the point of dying for you on the cross so that you will be saved. Getting our first love right does not involve locking ourselves in a kind of church bubble of strict religious routine. Why is that wrong? What's wrong with that?

What's wrong with that? I'll tell you what's wrong with it. It's all about you.

It's all about making sure that you are good enough. And that is not how Christianity works. We do not read and pray and come to church because it makes us better people. We read and pray and come to church because we hunger and thirst for God.

And we need him so much. And we don't love people around us because it makes us more valuable in God's sight. We love the people around us because they are already so valuable in God's sight. That's how love works. It's never inward looking. Love is directed towards God and it's directed towards other people. It's so easy to think that getting our first love right just involves our thinking changes. That's part of it. But it's got to go beyond that. It's not just a matter of how we think. It's also a matter of how we behave today, this week, and for the rest of our lives. The short letter to the Ephesians closes with verse 7. Jesus, as we said, gives that call to listen. If you've got ears to hear, hear. And then he gives them an amazing promise for the future.

He reminds them of what's promised for them in God's garden paradise to the one who conquers our grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. This is another crucial part of why we are to love God and to love one another. Why? Because that's who's going to be there in eternity. Trials will pass. Theological controversies will fade. Opposition will rise and fall. If you're a Christian or if you become one in eternity and for eternity, you're going to have two things. You're going to have God. And you're going to have each other.

[ 35 : 17 ] And that is why loving him and loving one another is the basic that's got to come before everything else. And it just, this is just what makes Christianity so fantastic compared to everything else that the world offers you. Just look at the news. Look at the way people behave at work or in your community or whatever. You see that everything is directed towards ourselves. It's all about me.

People just looking after themselves, protecting themselves, feeding themselves. Christianity is the opposite. It's just the beautiful, magnificent opposite to all that selfish rubbish that you have to put up with every week of your lives. And that's what makes following Jesus so wonderful because for him, you know, there's so many places you can go and say, well, you know, what's the basic rule in life? Well, basic rule is look after number one. Jesus says no way. Basic rule is love God, love one another. That is what my kingdom is all about. So getting the basics right means getting our first love right. And I'm going to leave you with two questions to think about.

For everyone who's a Christian here today, we need to ask ourselves, how is our first love? And as I said, I'm not saying that to guilt you or to make you feel like you're doing rubbish or anything like that. It's just a really good, healthy, important question to ask. I think, well, this week I want to make sure I'm cultivating love for God and love for one another in my life.

And I want to put that before other stuff. So it's good to ask yourself, how is your first love? And if you feel it's cold, then pray Lord Jesus, rekindle that first love because I wanted to flame for your glory. So for us as Christians, that's the question we have to ask ourselves.

For anyone who's not yet a Christian, you've got an even bigger question to ask yourself. What on earth is your first love? Amen.

[ 37 : 41 ] Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are the perfect example of getting your first love right. May that be true of us all, that we would love you and love one another more and more and more. Amen.