

Doctrine with Love

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- [0 : 0 0] Go with me, if you will, to Revelation chapter 2. We'll spend some of our time here this morning.
- Revelation chapter 2, and I'll read the first seven verses. Jesus says, Write to the angel of the church in Ephesus.
- Thus says the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and who walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your works, your labor, and your endurance, and that you cannot tolerate evil people.
- You have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and you have found them to be liars. I know that you have persevered and endured hardships for the sake of my name, and you have not grown weary.
- But I have this against you. You have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then how far you have fallen.
- [1 : 0 5] Repent and do the works you did at first. Otherwise, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet you do have this.
- You hate the practice of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.
- Danae and I, we have two running jokes in our marriage. The first is that my mother-in-law never gave me her blessing to marry Danae.
- The second is that Danae dumped me just a few months after we started dating, and I call them running jokes because we can laugh about them now, but they are both very much true.
- The first is a story for another day, and the second seems like an appropriate anecdote as we continue our study of John Kratz's book, Graciousness, Tempering Truth with Love.
- [2 : 1 2] When Danae and I tell the story of her breaking up with me, we often tell the short version. We describe it as her finishing her last year of college. She had a lot on her mind, and dating anyone was too much of a distraction, so she broke it off at the time.
- The longer version goes something like this. Danae and I, we came from very different church backgrounds. She came from a church with a very contemporary worship style.
- I came from a church that was extremely traditional in its worship style. Regarding soteriology or the doctrine of salvation, her church was on one end of the spectrum.
- Mine was on the opposite end. And for some couples, this gap isn't necessarily a deal breaker, but for Danae and I, two people who cared very deeply about our faith and were very involved in our churches, it became a problem.
- Let me rephrase that. I became a problem. I knew I was right. I knew I could persuade her with my vast knowledge of the Bible and my sound, irrefutable arguments.

[3 : 35] One way or another, I could convince her. So I flooded her email inbox with theological essays. I debated her over the phone. I found a way to turn every conversation into some sort of doctrinal disagreement.

I mean, she'd say, how about this weather? And I'd say, you know, that makes me think of something Paul said about total depravity. And that is not much of an exaggeration, I'm afraid.

Now, if you know Danae well enough, and some of you have gotten to know her well enough, you know that she has unbreakable convictions. I don't mean that she's stubborn about petty things by any means.

I mean she's a rock when it comes to her faith. But she is also one of the most gentle people you'll ever meet. Without realizing what I was doing, I was presenting her with an ultimatum.

Without ever actually saying these words, I was saying to her, you will either agree with me or we can't be together. And so she replied, okay, I guess we can't be together.

[4 : 40] It took me a while to come to terms with the fact that I was a self-righteous Pharisee in so many respects.

Now, I spoke a lot of truth in those days, and I sincerely wanted Danae to believe those things. But from her perspective, I was not motivated by love, not love for her spiritual welfare anyhow.

As far as she was concerned, I just wanted to be right. That's the way I came across. And when she gets here later this morning, you can ask her yourself.

I think she'll agree. The best way I know how to summarize our relationship at that time is to quote 2 Corinthians 3.6, which says, for the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.

And I'm taking this a little out of context, but only in hindsight did I learn that while I may have known the letter of the law, if you will, of course, I didn't know it quite as I thought I did, she knew the spirit.

[5 : 49] She knew love. She knew joy. She knew patience. She knew kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control better than I did. I nearly lost what has been the greatest blessing of my life, second only to Christ, because I failed to temper the truth with love.

Now, as we learn here in Revelation, we stand to lose much more than a good woman if we fail to temper the truth with love. We stand to lose the very life of the church.

The church in Ephesus has a rich history. I think we know more about this church than any other church in the New Testament.

We read about its dramatic origins in the book of Acts. Soon after, we read Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders, also in the book of Acts.

Paul wrote his New Testament epistle to the church in Ephesus. The apostle John wrote three epistles from Ephesus.

[6 : 59] And then, of course, lastly, we have this letter from Christ in the book of Revelation. So if we're willing to work our way through all of this material, we can learn a lot about the Ephesian church.

Now, I'll provide you with just a few of the relevant highlights here. I think if we were to go back in time, survey all of the first century churches and ask people, which church do you think will be the most successful, will be the most prosperous over time?

I'm guessing the church in Ephesus would get the most votes. They had what appears to be an unshakable foundation.

And let me explain what I mean. According to Acts 18, Paul and his ministry companions, they come to Ephesus for the first time.

And Paul, he has his sights set on Jerusalem. So he doesn't stay very long. He stays just long enough to, we're told in Acts 18, 19, enter the synagogue and debate with the Jews before continuing on.

[8 : 10] But he leaves behind Priscilla and Aquila. Priscilla and Aquila are this married couple, whom Paul will later describe in Romans 16 as my coworkers in Christ Jesus who risked their own necks for my life.

They're significant. They're significant. In other words, they played a very vital role in Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. Aquila and Priscilla are significant in the history of the Ephesian church, if for no other reason, because they evidently became founding members of this congregation.

Soon after, we read of a man by the name of Apollos who arrived in Ephesus. And it was, we're told, Priscilla and Aquila who explained the way of God to him more accurately, leading him to Christ.

And he does a tremendous amount of good in that region and beyond. Together, they hold down the fort, if you will, until Paul can return. This is where the church in Ephesus starts.

Now, in Acts 19, Paul returned to Ephesus and proceeded to turn the city upside down. And that is hardly an exaggeration. Luke tells us in Luke 19, 8, or starting with verse 8, Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly over a period of three months, arguing and persuading them about the kingdom of God.

[9 : 43] But when some became hardened and would not believe, slandering the way in front of the crowd, he withdrew from them, taking the disciples and conducted discussions every day in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

This went on for two years. So that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord. Now, as an aside, Paul's preaching during these two years became so impactful, so influential, that possibly six or more churches sprang up in Asia Minor.

Modern-day Turkey, that is. Now, I'll leave you to read the entire story for yourself. You can continue on in Acts from there. But let me share one more detail from the text.

Acts 19, 18. Luke writes, And many who had become believers. This is in the idolatrous city of Ephesus. Came confessing and disclosing their practices, their wicked practices.

While many of those who had practiced magic collected their books and burned them in front of everyone. So they calculated their value and found it to be 50,000 pieces of silver.

[11 : 00] In this way, the word of the Lord spread and prevailed. That's quite a sight. Think about this. An average day's wage, for a common person anyway, was one piece of silver.

One piece of silver. So collectively, these people threw the equivalent of 130 years, 137 years of income into the fire as an expression of repentance and allegiance to Christ.

Unsurprisingly, riots broke out in the city among the unconverted. As I said, Paul, he turned the city upside down.

Now, Paul stayed in Ephesus for a total of three years. And while three years may not seem like a long time in the grand scheme, it was significantly longer than he stayed with any other church.

And I also want us to remember that we are talking about the Apostle Paul. The Apostle Paul. In just a few months, Danae and I will have been with Grace Fellowship Church for about three years.

[12 : 14] And upon hearing that, most of you probably think, huh, has it been that long? But I think if Paul were to come and stay with us for three years, I suspect the reaction would be a little different.

I think we would all notice the impact of Paul's presence here, assuming the Lord was with him the way he was back then in Ephesus. And I'm not trying to place Paul on a higher pedestal than I should, but I trust you understand the point I'm making.

We would certainly notice the tremendous impact of his ministry if he were here week after week, month after month, year after year. I mean, consider how the Ephesian elders responded when he left them for the last time.

Acts 20 says there were many tears shed by everyone. They embraced Paul and kissed him, grieving most of all over his statement that they would never see his face again.

Suffice it to say, the Ephesian church had an incredible start, a remarkable start. Aquila and Priscilla, these faithful, devout, self-sacrificing people were founding members of the church.

[13 : 29] The Apostle Paul was their first pastor, if you will. They dramatically increased despite being in the middle of a wicked city that was thoroughly immersed in paganism.

They even multiplied across Asia Minor. I was part of a church plant in North Carolina, and after two years, we had only 40 people who, by the way, were still packing into someone's living room.

After two years, Sunday after Sunday, Paul moved the Ephesian church into a larger facility after only three months. That's the kind of impact that God blessed him to have in that place.

And to borrow a phrase from every infomercial on television, but wait, there's more. Because the Ephesian church had yet another notable pastor, the Apostle John.

As I mentioned before, John was in Ephesus when he wrote his three epistles that we find in our Bibles in the New Testament. We don't know what kind of role he may have played, along with other elders in the church, but I believe it's safe to assume that John was considered a primary leader as long as he was with them.

[14 : 47] He was, after all, an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. So, in short, the church in Ephesus had not one, but two apostles leading them in these early years.

So, if you were to name a church during this time that was most likely to succeed, I think you'd put Ephesus somewhere near the top of your list, if not at the very top of your list.

I mean, Paul was a master of the Old Testament, a master of soteriology, a master of systematic theology. He grasped and he skillfully taught so many of the practical applications that come from what we know about God and what we know about salvation.

Then we have John, the disciple whom Jesus loved. He walked, literally walked with Jesus for three years.

He was with Jesus in those final moments before his arrest and crucifixion. And based on his epistles, we see that he absorbed every word that Christ spoke to his disciples that night.

[15 : 59] He witnessed the crucifixion. He witnessed the resurrected Christ. He witnessed Jesus' ascension into heaven.

So, with the exception of maybe Peter, I mean, can we name anyone better suited to give this church a strong, lasting foundation than Paul and John?

Now, maybe I've provided more context than what's necessary, but I believe it'll be very helpful to see the point I want us to see here in Revelation 2.

As Jesus addresses the church in Ephesus, he begins with a series of commendations. Now, having learned this church's background, we can't be too surprised that they were a commendable church.

Again, they had this remarkable, strong foundation. Well, Jesus says to them here, I know your works, your labor, and your endurance, and that you cannot tolerate evil people.

[17 : 06] You have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and you have found them to be liars. I know that you have persevered and endured hardships for the sake of my name, and you have not grown weary.

I mean, what more could you say about a church? The Ephesian church had labored tirelessly, enduring every trial, and I can only imagine their trials were many.

Jesus says they would not tolerate evil or wicked people. They wouldn't stand to let wicked, worldly people influence the church from without, from within, even when false apostles arrived.

They were wise, and they were discerning enough to reject those men and to reject their teachings. You have found them to be liars, Jesus says. Furthermore, the Ephesians didn't grow weary in all of this.

In all of the opposition, in all of the struggle, the political, the social, the cultural, the religious pressures, perhaps even persecution, did not cause them to back down from the truth of the gospel.

[18 : 19] They held fast. They did not attempt to make the truth a little bit more palatable for the society around them, for the idolaters and unbelievers.

The moment any amount of heresy or false doctrine revealed itself within the congregation, they quickly put a stop to it. They believed the truth.

They preached the truth. They defended the truth. They protected the truth. Even so, Jesus adds this solemn rebuke and warning.

But I have this against you. You have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember, then, how far you have fallen. Repent and do the works you did at first.

Otherwise, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent. What exactly does it mean for a church to abandon the love they had at first?

[19 : 27] Some Bible commentators suggest this love is love for Christ. Others say that this love refers to love for one another or love for others. And personally, I believe it's most likely both.

A little bit of all of it. Jesus taught that the greatest command in the law is to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your mind.

Right? He then said, the second greatest command is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. And then he adds, all the law and the prophets depend on these two commands.

That's the Decalogue in a nutshell. That's the Ten Commandments summed up in only two commandments. And we cannot really follow one without also following the other.

If we fail to love God, we will inevitably fail to love others. And if we fail to love others, we cannot love God. On the last night Jesus spent with his disciples before his crucifixion, He said, John 15, 9, As the Father has loved me, I have also loved you.

[20 : 49] Remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love. And He goes on in verse 12 to say, this is my command. Love one another as I have loved you.

You see, our love for God hangs on our love for others, just as our love for others hangs on our love for God. Evidently, the Ephesian church had slipped into a kind of cold, distant, impersonal form of Christianity.

They had held on tightly to the truth with both hands, but they seemed to have forgotten what motivated them in the beginning, what made them fall in love with that truth, what made them believe that truth.

They were no longer fighting for Christ. They were just fighting, it would seem. They were defending an idea, maybe more than their Savior, or the gospel.

Their heads, in other words, remained engaged, but their hearts seemed to have left the battle somewhere along the way. Several years ago, I read the history of this small association of Baptist churches in South Georgia and North Florida.

[22 : 13] And it was a fascinating book. The book covered about 200 years of this association's history. So, you know, you have multiple churches that are all linked together by this formal association.

And at one point in the book, it was interesting, the author sort of, you know, breaks the fourth wall, if you will, and apologizes because nearly every notable event in the life of this association was focused on some sort of fight or division.

And he obviously wanted to tell some good stories as well, but he was struggling to find any. One church leaves the association, another one gets kicked out, another one splits in half, and so half the members stay with the association, half the members leave the association, occasionally one would be brought back in, only to be kicked out again a few years later.

And it went on like this for 200 years. And as I was reading the book, I couldn't help but wonder, what was everyone involved thinking?

All of these years, did they see what was happening? Did they see how petty things had become? Because when I say they're dividing, they're dividing over things you cannot even imagine a church dividing over, or maybe you can.

[23 : 35] Did they understand the consequences on their churches? Or on the kind of impact they were having on the community around them?

I mean, you see this from the outside looking in, who wants to be a part of that church? Or did they always think to themselves, you know, this is about defending the truth, and nothing else matters.

Somehow, I suspect a few people thought just like that. Imagine I'm having a theological disagreement with someone.

Hardly matters what the subject is, but let's say we're debating the nature of Christ. And I say that God is, that Jesus is fully God and fully man. And my opponent, sitting across the table from me, he says, no, no, no, no, he's half God and half man.

And so after 30 minutes or so, we're going back and forth, posing our arguments, asking questions. I finally, I just stand up, I walk around the table, and I punch the guy in the nose.

[24 : 48] Now, if we examine that scenario, I think we'll find several things wrong with it. First, I am not going to lead this guy to the truth.

That went out the window as soon as I hit him. Now, if I had been successful in planting any seeds at all, I just trampled all over them when I hit the guy.

Second, I was clearly not acting in the spirit of Christ when I did that. Not at all. In fact, I broke Jesus' commandments.

I violated his word. I acted, ironically enough, outside of his truth as I was trying to lead someone to his truth. How much sense does that make?

And third, I cannot claim to love Christ. I cannot claim to love my neighbor if I'm breaking the Lord's commandments in this way. Paul said, in Ephesians 4.29, no foul language or corrupting talk should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need so that it gives grace to those who hear.

[26 : 05] He goes on to say, let all bitterness, anger, and wrath, shouting, and slander be removed from you along with all malice and be kind and compassionate to one another.

In other words, figuratively punching someone in the nose is just as disobedient as physically punching someone in the nose. And I will add, it is equally ineffective.

It's ineffective. It doesn't work. It doesn't accomplish what we think it will accomplish. Now, after all of that, perhaps you would argue that I'm reading too much in the text.

After all, this passage in Revelation doesn't explicitly tell us that the Ephesians were unloving or ungracious. But think back to Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

I remember studying and preaching through Ephesians a few years ago, and when I first began my study, my thought was, this book is about salvation by grace. That's Paul's primary message.

[27 : 10] And he does teach that. But as I worked my way through the book, I came to realize that I had come to a different conclusion about it. He does teach salvation by grace, but he primarily does so as a foundation for his teachings on unity.

Unity. Listen to this passage from Ephesians 2, starting in verse 11. So then, I'm going to insert, considering all that I've said about salvation by grace, remember that at one time you were Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcised, uncircumcised by those called the circumcised, which is done in the flesh by human hands.

At that time, you were without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope, and without God in the world.

But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ, for he is our peace, who has made both groups, one, that is, both Jews and Gentiles, and tore down the dividing wall of hostility.

In his flesh, he made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulation, so that he might create in himself one new man from the two, resulting in peace.

[28 : 38] He did this so that he might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross by which he put the hostility to death. He came and proclaimed the good news of peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near, for through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father.

And he continues the same theme all the way through chapter 3 of that letter. Then in chapter 4, he says, Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, which is what?

With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Now to be clear, Paul never mentions any particular divisions in the Ephesian church. Perhaps he alludes to some potential problems, but he never addresses any specific issues that were happening at that time.

Even so, I get the impression that maybe he saw some, I don't know, cracks in the church already forming, or maybe he knew there were distinct possibilities of that in the near future.

[29 : 51] At the very least, he sees a hint of danger of them becoming proud, becoming aggressive, becoming impatient and divisive, so he reminds them to walk worthy of the calling they have received.

Now I suppose we can all imagine how it may have happened, and I think it would be helpful to try this exercise and work it through in our minds.

These people, they knew the truth, and they knew it well. They also knew they knew the truth, which, sadly, led to arrogance.

Now what happens when you butt heads with an arrogant person? Are they prone to be gentle and humble toward you? No, they're much more likely to be irritable and hostile.

I don't know to what degree the Ephesians had become unloving or ungracious, but I have few doubts that some of these characteristics were part of the problem. The Ephesians' theology was not the problem.

[31 : 12] Their zeal for the truth wasn't the problem. Their stance against false teachers wasn't the problem. Their willingness to defend the truth wasn't the problem.

Jesus, he commends all of these things here. Their lack of love, though, that was a problem. Again, Jesus says, I have this against you.

You abandoned the love you had at first. Now what comes next is a solemn warning from Christ. He says, remember then how far you have fallen.

Repent and do the works you did at first. Otherwise, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent. So notice that Jesus mentions the Ephesians' problem is not altogether intangible.

He exhorts them to do the works they did at first. What kind of works does he mean? I believe he probably has the same kind of works in mind that Paul did when Paul wrote in Galatians 6.10, as we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, especially to those who belong to the household of faith.

[32 : 25] He's referring to the good works we do for others out of love for one another, not to mention our love for God. In other words, the Ephesians' problem is not just a matter of the heart.

It certainly began in the heart with a diminished love and a lack of concern for others, but that intangible heart issue made itself tangible, if you will, through works, through their behavior, through the way maybe they spoke to one another.

And that's the way it usually works. The Ephesians may have been the most doctrinally sound church of the first century. I don't really know that for a fact, but they may very well have been, but they lacked love.

And a simple lack of love was enough for Christ to threaten to remove their lampstand. That is the very light of the church.

perhaps it's needless to say, but a church without light ceases to be a church, which means we can conclude from this that a church without love ceases to be a church.

[33 : 39] In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul says, knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. What do you suppose will stay in the air longer?

A helium balloon or a massive skyscraper, well designed and made from strong materials? Well, the knowledge, I think, is like that helium balloon and it will rise fast.

It will go high, but there's nothing to it. There's nothing more than thinly veiled air. It's going to pop.

It's going to fall back to earth almost as quickly as it rose. The skyscraper, on the other hand, is like love. It's a, it's something with a strong foundation, strong materials.

It may not give us the satisfaction of rising as quickly as that balloon, but it will stand an eternity longer. that's for sure. Sadly, the Ephesian church no longer exists.

[34 : 46] The city of Ephesus no longer exists. The Lord removed their light long ago. The last I knew, that association of churches in Georgia and Florida are down to one congregation and I think that congregation is just a handful of people.

We just can't afford to ignore this warning in Revelation 2. John Newton, the slave trader who became a pastor, perhaps he's best known to most people as the author of Amazing Grace, he once wrote, it seems a laudable service to defend the faith once delivered to the saints.

We are commanded to contend earnestly for it and to convince gainsayers. If ever such defenses were seasonable and expedient, they appear to be so in our day.

when errors abound on all sides and every truth of the gospel is either directly denied or grossly misinterpreted. Even so, he goes on to write, if our zeal is embittered by expressions of anger, insult, or scorn, we may think we are doing service to the cause of truth when in reality we shall only bring it into discredit.

furthermore, he says, what will it profit a man if he gains his cause and silences his adversary if at the same time he loses that humble, tender frame of spirit in which the Lord delights, into which the promise of his presence is made.

[36 : 25] Now, obviously, Newton's words are just as relevant today as they were in the 18th century. Perhaps we've all known churches that abandoned the truth in pursuit of what they considered to be love.

Perhaps you've known individuals of that nature as well. Maybe we've known churches to forsake love in a misguided attempt to defend the truth. And as I've already admitted, I've been prone to the latter in the past.

But a choice between love and truth is not one a Christian ever has to make. And if there's anything you walk away from this subject thinking about, that may be it.

You never have to make a choice between love and truth. We never have to compromise one for the other. If we compromise one, we lose both.

Writing to the Ephesians, Paul says, Speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ. From him, the whole body fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament promotes the growth of the body for building itself up in love by the proper working of each individual part.

[37 : 55] Ephesians 4, 15, and 16. Notice how the entire health and growth of the church depends on speaking truth in love.

All of it. Requirement number one, we must speak the truth. Requirement number two, we must speak in love. So for the sake of the church as a whole, we must have both.

Always. It's not an exaggeration to claim that tempering truth with love is what keeps the fire burning. If, on the other hand, we lose love, no amount of zeal for the truth is going to save us.

No amount of zeal. Christ threatens to remove our lampstand if we abandon the love we had at first. And I'll leave you with a final encouragement from John Newton.

He writes, Go forth, therefore, in the name and strength of the Lord of hosts, speaking the truth in love. And may he give you a witness in many hearts that you are taught of God and favored with the unction of his Holy Spirit.

[39 : 11] We're dismissed. Thank you. Thank you.