



FUNDAMENTALIST IN EPHEBUS: ALL HEAD, NO HEART

Part 3 of The Seven

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Revelation 2:1-7 | April 29, 2012

Revelation 2:1-7

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² “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. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ 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.’

THE CITY OF EPHEBUS

Father God, as we gather in the great city of Ephesus, we thank you for our hosts who have welcomed us. We thank you, Lord God, that they have allowed us to rent the entire city, so that we might have an opportunity tonight to study the Bible together. We thank you for wonderful weather. We thank you for good friends. And, God, we thank you for the Scriptures, which tell us about this very important city in the history of the world and in the history of the Christian church and the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And as we open your Word tonight, God, we want to have ears to hear, and minds to conceive, and hearts to believe in the truth of Jesus, and so we invite you, Holy Spirit, to lead us, to guide us, to instruct us and correct us. And, Holy Spirit, I invite you to enable me and to empower me to teach the Bible well, so that I might serve these people, whom you love so much. And so I ask for this grace, in Jesus’ good name. Amen.

Well, here we are, the great ancient city of Ephesus, and where we find ourselves at present is an ancient library that was constructed a few hundred years after the writing of the New Testament, but it gives you some idea of the magnificence of this city. Curiously, as well, just above us there is an inscription over the library that says, “Caesar is never wrong.” And so no matter where you happened to be in the day, Caesar was always literally above you, and he was ruling and reigning as a king, and as a god, and as a lord.

The city of Ephesus in its day was a very, very large city, one of the three largest cities in the nation at its time, and it was the leading city of Asia Minor. Perhaps a quarter million people lived here. This is one of the most significant archaeological excavations of this period of history on the earth. There’s really nothing that matches it in majesty. And if you can conceive of it, only perhaps 10 to 15 percent of the entire city has actually been excavated. So, work has been going on for decades, and it will continue.

In its day, as well, this was a very important city, because just around the corner and down the hill was an ancient harbor, where people would come in via boat, lots of commerce and trade, people visiting from other nations. They would then walk up the marble pathways and find themselves at the massive amphitheater that seated some twenty-five thousand. And in Acts 19, that is where a riot gathered when Paul came on his third missionary journey, preaching Jesus as God. The city responded with some hearty opposition.

As we continue up the marble streets and up to the top of the hill, there is the agora, marketplace, where Paul, in all likelihood, did preach and teach, because he was a Roman citizen and had the legal right to do so. And as we continue, then, they actually excavated in the last few years the ancient city gates. And there’s a cross that is on the front of one of the city gates, across from the image of Nike, the god of victory.

So this was a very significant city, and from this place goods and people and ideas would spread, making this a very important, significant city. This is part of Paul’s plan in his missionary journeys—and we see this in the book of Acts—that as he travels to various places, including, as I said, three journeys here to Ephesus, he, for the most part, visited the major cities and bypassed the suburban and rural areas. That is because God loves all people, and he loves all places, but cities are of strategic importance, because if you reach a city, then the good news of Jesus can ring out from that city. As the people travel, they take the news of Jesus with them.

Rodney Stark and Wayne Meeks, historians of early Christian history, tell us that early on in the days of Christianity, upwards of 60 percent of those who lived in major Roman cities were Christian, and the majority, upwards of 90 percent, who lived in the rural areas were non-Christians. They were

pagans, and pagan literally meant the one who lives on the farm. And so early on, Christianity was an urban movement, primarily targeting cities, primarily targeting cities, and one of those chief cities was right here, the great city of Ephesus.

We read in Acts 19 that from here the good news of Jesus rang out through the whole region of Asia Minor, as this was the premier city in Asia Minor in its day, and that included the other locations in Revelation 2 and 3. In Revelation 2 and 3, there are seven letters that are delivered by John, and they are to seven churches, and the first of those is a letter to the church at Ephesus, which we will read momentarily in Revelation 2:1–7. The other six letters are actually in succession from Ephesus, because this was the premier city, and the news of the gospel went from this place forward.

REVELATION: JESUS VISITS JOHN

And the story of Revelation is this. Jesus picked twelve disciples to spend particular time with him when he was on the earth. One of them was a young man named John. John was there when Jesus died, John was there when Jesus was buried, and John was there when Jesus rose from death. And he never, as a devout Jew, would've worshiped Jesus as God, unless he had seen him risen from death. He saw Jesus rise, and he spent forty days with him, and he saw Jesus preaching and teaching, and continuing his ministry, and proclaiming his resurrection, and John was there when he ascended back into heaven.

John then became a powerful leader in early Christianity. And John was preaching and teaching, and he saw, over the course of some decades, all of the other apostles die brutal, bloody, martyrs' deaths. And they tried repeatedly to kill John, but he did not die. In fact, on one occasion, they tried to boil him alive in a vat of oil. And you can imagine what the condition of his skin and his appearance and his well-being was, but he did not die.

So, they exiled him to the island of Patmos, and it's about perhaps a three- to four-hour boat ride, something of that nature, from here. We actually took the film crew there, and we captured it all for you. And there's a cave up on top of a hill that legend, history, tradition tells us is where he was visited by Jesus in Revelation 1.

And in Revelation 1, we read that it was the Lord's Day, so it was Sunday, the day of the resurrection of Jesus. And John was alone, and he was away from fellowship. All the other apostles are dead. He alone is the remaining disciple of Jesus from the original twelve. He's probably lonely. He's in a very lonely place, exiled on an island, and Jesus comes down to visit with him from heaven.

And then Jesus gives to John seven letters to deliver to seven churches, and they begin with the letter to the church here at Ephesus and proceed forward, and we find those in Revelation 2 and 3. And so the letter comes to the city of Ephesus.

THE CHURCH IN EPHEBUS

Now, there probably was not just one church meeting in this city. There were probably homes that were being used for the gathering of Christians. They've excavated up on the terraces some of the homes. Some of them are quite large with open courts and large meeting areas. So, there could've been a large number of Christians residing in this city at the time, roughly around 100 AD. Perhaps they gathered together, as well.

We do not know all of the details, but we do know that this became a place where the gospel was brought after Pentecost in Acts 2, and so they would've brought the news of Jesus back to their homes and back to their hometowns, as they departed Jerusalem, and their pilgrimage had come to an end, and their return home began. And so that's how the good news of Jesus got here. And then it continued with three missionary journeys from Paul.

We are told in Acts 19 that Paul actually set up in the Hall of Tyrannus and lectured for a few hours a day over the course of two years. I did the math, and if it's correct, he lectured for 3,120 hours, preaching, teaching, training, and this became the epicenter of Christianity, particularly after the fall of the temple in Jerusalem. The center of Christianity then moved, in large part, to Ephesus. And so this is a magnificently important city for those of us who believe the Scriptures and love Jesus.

JESUS' WORD TO THE CHURCH IN EPHEBUS

And that brings us to his word for the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2:1–7. And in this, we see that Jesus is exalted, and he is all-knowing, and he is all-seeing, as sovereign Lord and God, and he sees exactly what's happening in Ephesus, as well as the other locations of the seven churches of Revelation. And as a great missionary, he speaks with great specificity, telling them where they are succeeding, where they are failing, and what he commands them to do, because ultimately Jesus is the head of the church. He's the senior pastor. And so these are his words to those living in Ephesus in that day.

Revelation 2:1–7: "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write—" And, again, as we read of the seven letters to the seven churches, there are a few things that are consistent. One is that every church has an angel that is appointed by God as a spirit being to guard and oversee the well-being of that church and those people. So, every church has physical human leadership and has angelic supernatural leadership.

It goes on to say, "The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand." And this may have been by the Lord Jesus a criticism of the Roman emperor Domitian. He declared himself to be lord, god, and savior. The Christians oftentimes referred to him as the beast, and he may be the beast mentioned in Revelation 13, though Bible commentators debate that point.

He named a few months of the year after himself. It was customary, after an emperor died, that then they would declare him to be a god, because he had gone on to the spirit realm. Well, Domitian declared himself to be god at the beginning of his reign, which was unprecedented.

One of the things he did to demonstrate that is he minted coins with his own face on it. You think of this. We have coins, for example, in the United

States of America with dead presidents, but it would be a bit pretentious for a living president to begin his presidency by minting money with his face on it. He hasn't even done anything yet, but he's just declared himself to be god, so the expectations were assumedly high.

And one of the coins that was minted, that I was able to find in my archaeological investigation, was him sitting on the globe with seven stars. And so the people in Ephesus were walking around with coins in their pocket that had their Roman emperor, who's worshiped as a god, sitting as a god, ruling and reigning as the sovereign with seven stars. And I think this is Jesus making a little fun of Domitian, saying, "That guy makes coins, but I'm actually the one who sits among the seven stars. I'm the one who rules over all of creation. And Domitian is a counterfeit god, and he is not a king, and I am the King of kings."

"... who walks among the seven gold lampstands." And I think that might refer to the churches mentioned in the ensuing chapters. The church here is typified like a lamp. And you think of it in a place that is filled with demonic activity, and darkness, and paganism. Christianity is to come like a light, and Jesus says he is the light of the world, and the church is to be like a lampstand. We are to talk about Jesus and love and serve like Jesus, so that others living in spiritual darkness might be attracted to him and transformed by him. And this is his imagery of the church.

And so on other occasions where Jesus says that if the church does not repent of its sin and correct its ways, he will come and take their lampstand away, he is essentially saying, "If you will not burn brightly for me, I will come and blow out what remains, and you will no longer be a church. I will, in fact, shut you down."

COMMENDATIONS

And he goes on then, and he has commendations and criticisms. Verse 2, "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 you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you."

Here's the criticism. "You have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place—" shut your church down—"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."

And so he begins with encouragements, and then he moves to criticisms. And his encouragements are many.

He says, number one, they serve faithfully. These are people who work hard. These are people who volunteer their hours. These are people who day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, people are coming here for training. Christians are coming in from around the region. Classes are being held. Pastors need to be housed. Missionaries need to be fed. Funds need to be raised. People need to be commissioned, and they are serving faithfully. They are absolutely devoted to the cause.

Jesus says, "I don't have any criticism of your service." Because of their service, this became the epicenter for missionary activity in the entire region. Again, to quote Paul in Acts 19, the gospel rang out from this place in all of Asia Minor because of these people. We don't know their names. They weren't pastors. Some of them probably weren't elders and deacons. They were just faithful Christians.

Number two, he says, "You have endured hardship." And truth be told, this was a difficult place to minister, people coming through all the time, spiritual opposition of all sorts and kinds. There were some fifty gods and goddesses that were worshiped here. Prostitution was legalized. It was a very difficult place. In fact, just across from us, it is presumed that there was a brothel. And just alongside of us, there is a tunnel that goes from the library to the brothel, and it is presumed that a lot of men would go to "the library."

It was a hard place to raise a family. It was a hard place to be a Christian. Domitian was worshiped as a god, and if you didn't worship him as a god, you could be put to death. The only exception was if you were a Jew, and there was a large number of Jews here, but they had rejected the message of Jesus; and as the Christians were kicked out of the synagogue, they were now exposed to potentially being put to death, because they were not exempt from emperor worship through Judaism. They, in fact, were now in rebellion against the state, saying Jesus is Lord, not the emperor.

Here, as well, they had one of the seven great wonders of the world just around the corner, and that was the Temple of Artemis. And as we've examined it, perhaps you'll remember, columns 8 feet around, made of marble, 67 feet high, 127 columns, three to four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens, Greece, roughly the size of a soccer field. It was declared to be one of the seven great wonders of the world, and people would come there to worship the goddess. And various people groups in the region, from Anatolia, and Greece, and Rome, they had Cybele, they had Diana, they had Artemis, they had the mother goddess, and this all culminated together in one chief female deity, a pagan demon god who was powerful and worshiped, called Artemis.

We read in Acts 19 that what presumably was a meteor fell from the sky, and they believed it was a gift from Artemis, declaring that place to be her residence for the construction of the temple to her honor, and that was in Ephesus. So, then people came from all over to visit the Temple of Artemis. It was also a banking center, and so it was tied financially. It was connected to emperor worship, so it was connected politically. Furthermore, it had legalized prostitution, and it was a place that those seeking refuge from the law could, in fact, find amnesty, so it was a place for common criminals, as well. And he says, "You've endured hardship."

Number three, "You have sound doctrine." They're not heretics. They don't have false doctrine. They're not reading crazy books. They're not believing new myths and fables and folklores. They're not chasing crazy misquoted Scripture and false teaching, and he says, "There are those who say they're

false apostles, and they have spiritual authority, and I'm going to tell you what the Bible says." He says, "You guys are smart, and humble, and you open the Bible, and you see what it actually says, and you test everything by the Scriptures, and you've rejected all the false teachers."

And even think of this in our day, how popular it is, false teachers, false doctrine, crazy instruction. Imagine how powerful it was here in Ephesus, because Christianity had a root here. And here's what the cults do. The cults always come in behind the Christians. I mean, historically, after, let's say, a Billy Graham crusade, the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses, they're part of the cleanup crew. They roll into town right after, and they wait for people to hear about Jesus, and then they come in and twist the truth.

Same thing was happening here in Ephesus. Lots of false teachers, false spiritual leaders, lots of crazy new books and strange new ideas, in the name of being biblical, were here. And he says, "You know what? You've not followed that. You guys are Bible-believing, truth-telling, heart-following people of God." And he commends them for that.

Number four, he also says that they hate heretics. And that seems like a strong word, but heretics are those who are intentionally leading people astray, and you need to know this. There are sheep, there are shepherds, and there are wolves. You need to know that. And sometimes the sheep read all the verses in the Bible about love, and they say, "Well, we're just supposed to love everybody." Not the wolves. Sheep should love sheep. Sheep should love shepherds. Sheep should hate wolves. Wolves are false teachers, false apostles, false leaders who dishonor Christ and lead people astray.

And so what happens is sometimes, when Christians are faced with false teaching, they say, "Can't we love them?" Yes, we can love them, but we have to hate what they are teaching. And what happens is that wolves love sheep, but they love them differently than shepherds, okay? So, the Bible uses the language of a Christian is like a sheep, and a leader is like a shepherd who loves and cares for the sheep, and a wolf is one who is very dangerous and comes to lead them astray.

And so a good shepherd will fight against the wolves for the love of the sheep. That's why Jesus himself says, "I am the good shepherd," and 1 Peter 5 says he's the chief shepherd. Those who are leaders in his church are to just be following in his example. And what he says is, "False teachers have come; and like good shepherds, out of love for the sheep and the chief shepherd, you have opposed them, and that's good."

Some of you need to hear this, because you think the answer is to love everyone and to consider everything. Some people are deceptive. Some people are in it for the money. Some people are working for the enemy. You could pray for them and want good for them, but you should not accommodate them or tolerate them, because they are leading you astray, and that's not for your good.

And so all of this is commendation. Would you agree with me? If you were to get this in your church on a Sunday—let's say the pastor gathered everyone together and said, "We have a letter from Jesus. We know it's from him, because it's all written in red ink. It's amazing. We got a letter from Jesus." And then you read this—the pastor read this aloud, and that's what would've happened in the congregation. Can you imagine reading that, hearing that? "He knows what we're doing. He knows how we're serving, and he knows that we're biblical and steadfast and committed and devoted." And that would be fantastic, if that was the end of the letter, but he has some criticisms, as well.

CRITICISMS

And his big criticism is this: "You're not very loving." Now, he's commended them for hating wolves, but he's criticizing them for not loving shepherds and sheep and not loving himself, the good shepherd. And let me say this. This is very common.

As I've been studying the seven churches of Revelation, I would have to say of the seven churches—and I would say this is important for us all to do: as we read the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, we've got to ask, Which letter, if Jesus was going to send me one, would probably be the letter that I'd be most likely to get? And for me, personally, I would say the biggest proclivity, propensity, possibility would be for me to get this letter, in that the longer you study and the more you persevere, and achieve, and accomplish, and serve, and give, and pour yourself out, over time, you can become unloving. You can become unloving, and that's what happened to these people.

They didn't have the wrong books on the shelf. They didn't have the wrong teachers in the pulpit. He wasn't criticizing them because they weren't generous givers, or faithful servants, or patient endurers, or overcomers. He says, you know what? If we just put together a list like you would for a child, let's say a chore list, he's saying, "You know, we check every box. Your church is absolutely dutiful and faithful, but I know your heart, and it's gotten a little calloused, it's gotten a little hard, and it's not very loving. The result is," he says, "you've fallen from where you started. When you started, there was a lot of love in your church, love for each other, love for the leaders, love for non-Christians and lost people, love for the Lord." And it's not that they hate and despise. They're just sort of done being very loving, being patient, and kind, and gracious, and understanding.

And what oftentimes happens—and let me say this. In our day, this is just classic fundamentalism. You know, "We're Bible believing." Okay, but are you nice? Because the Bible says "love," a lot. "Well, we speak the truth." But do you speak the truth in love? Because the Bible says that we are to speak the truth in love. And what could happen for those who are like the Ephesians, it's truth and works and perseverance, but not love and grace and kindness. And so it becomes heavy handed, authoritarian, a little bit cold.

How many of you—and you don't need to raise a hand—but this could be you? You're not a heretic. You're not a false teacher. You've not gone apostate. You've not walked away from God. You've not stopped giving, serving, reading, caring, trying, but you have seen a decrease in loving. That's Jesus' word, and it's interesting, because it's really hard for us to judge someone's heart, right? We don't know. I mean, one of the most subjective things in the world is whether or not somebody is loving. And Jesus says, "I know your heart, and I don't see it filled with love."

And let me say that there are some excuses that the Ephesians could've had, and they're the same kind of excuses that, quite frankly, we could have. It's

a hard city to live in. How many of you live in a hard city? All right, that's a redundant statement, "hard city." See, the closer you get to major cities in our day, the less likely they are to be filled with Christians.

And people come and go, when they live in cities. So, as soon as you meet somebody, they go. You can start to be unloving and say, "I'm tired of trying to meet the neighbors. They keep changing. They're all renting, not buying. It's hard to love them. They keep moving." And after a while, you just stop pursuing people for relationship.

After a while, too, it gets hard to love your city, because most cities don't have a lot of families. It's very expensive and very complicated, and it's not the kind of place you really want to raise kids, living in the city. What was true in Ephesus is true in our day. So, after a while, you start to get a little frustrated with the city, because all the parks are dog parks. I don't know if that was an issue in Ephesus, but it is in Seattle. You take your kids to the park, and they can't really do anything, because it's not for them.

All of a sudden, you see that the city is open with its sexuality, and open with its idolatry, and it has a tolerance and diversity of a lot of people, but not you, because you're narrow-minded, because you believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, because that's what he said. And after a while, you could just get a little sick of it all, get sick of all the religious people who are so committed to their false gods, sick of the politics.

Do you know that taxes here were terrible? One of the ways Domitian ruled is he increased taxes very stringently to fund all of his work, and then he used much of the money to give significant pay increases to the military, so that the soldiers would enforce his rule of law. Now, how difficult is that? You're a Christian. Jesus says to pay your taxes, so you pay your taxes to a guy who says he's god, who hires soldiers to burden you. If you're going to get persecuted, you shouldn't have to pay for it. That should be a freebie, right?

They have lots of legitimate reasons that could've been excuses for them. They could've gotten together and said, "Here's all the reasons why we don't like Ephesus. Here's why we're sick of Ephesus. We've been here for decades. We've already given, we've served, we sent out missionaries, we planted churches, we wrote books." I mean, within a few generations, they had major councils down the hill. I mean, this place stayed faithful, at least theologically, for hundreds of years.

So, for hundreds of years, generation after generation, your kids, your grandkids, your great-grandkids, your great-great-great-grandkids, they're giving, serving, trying, caring, reading, praying, suffering, enduring. And at some point, they're sick of it. No need to raise your hand, but how many of you have been there? It's like, that's enough. Jesus is saying you're still alive. We're not at the finish line yet. Keep going, keep going.

HOW COULD WE BECOME LIKE THE EPHESIANS?

How do we become Ephesians? My fear is if we go to the text, and we just read it historically, then it's an interesting number of archaeological facts. If we just read it theologically, then it allows us to criticize these people. But if we read it humbly, then we come under the Scriptures and we say, "I may be a lot like the Ephesians and/or I could become a lot like the Ephesians." And so this word is not just for them. It's for all the churches, and it's for me and my church, as well. And I'll give you a couple of ways that I think it is possible for us to become like the Ephesians.

1. Truth Versus Love

Number one, I think we can become like the Ephesians if we pit truth and love against one another. Right? Jesus came full of grace and truth. Some people are grace people. Some people are truth people. And here Jesus is saying, "I want you to put truth, wrapped in grace. I want there to be love around the truth." All right?

Some of you are grace people. You're love people. Your answer to everything is be nice, love, patiently endure. Some of you are truth people, right? The Bible to you is like a series of bullets called verses, and you've always got one in the chamber. You're ready to go, right? "No, no, no, Leviticus, Ephesians, Corinthians, Romans, boom, boom, boom." And Jesus is saying, "Good verses. You hit the bull's eye, but that person didn't feel like they were really loved, because they're bleeding," right? They didn't feel like that encouraged them toward repentance. It just crushed them toward shame, and guilt, and condemnation, when the Bible says there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ.

So what we don't want to do is pit love or grace and truth against one another. We want to say that the truth must be communicated from someone who is loving. But what can happen is we could become like the Ephesians when we elevate the truth, and we devalue love, or we devalue love for non-Christians, or other religions, or people who annoy us, people who oppose us, people who criticize us, people who mock us.

Jesus says, basically, we need to say the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, with the right motives. Truth, yes, with the airbag of love; otherwise, we're just going to decimate people. And certain churches do this, and certain pastors do this, and I know I've done this, and certain Christians do this. They just breathe fire on people and incinerate them, rather than speaking the truth to them in such a way that invites them to turn from sin, to meet with God and his people, and have a change of life through the power of the Holy Spirit.

2. Doctrine Versus the Holy Spirit

Number two, we could become like the Ephesians when we listen only to our doctrines and stop listening to the Holy Spirit. What can happen is you read the Bible so long and so many books, and you're under so much teaching and education that all of a sudden you've got most of your questions answered, and you've got all your verses in categories, and all your systemization is essentially completed, or at least functionally operative, and then all of a sudden, you don't need to pray much anymore, because you have a theology that tells you what to do. You don't need to listen to the Holy Spirit anymore, because you have a theology that directs all of your steps.

I'm not saying that we avoid our doctrinal distinctives and our theological clarity, but we still need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. We still need to be led by the Holy Spirit. We still need to listen to the Holy Spirit, and we need to remain teachable. And that's why one of the things that he says to each of the seven churches is, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit has to say to the churches." What he's saying is, "You're not listening to the Holy Spirit."

Now, the Holy Spirit did inspire the writing of Scripture, and that is perfect, true, and good. And the Holy Spirit is God, and he also dwells in the believer, and he will guide us in the truth, Jesus says in John's gospel. And what that means is he'll take the truth of the Bible and then use it to lead us, to shape us, to guide us, to inform us and direct us; but you can't live by the Word of God without yielding to the Spirit of God.

There are even certain theologies, and one is called cessationism, that essentially say that the Holy Spirit does not operate today like he once did. It's a clever way of saying we don't need him like we used to. That's not true. We need him every moment of every day, and every Christian always has. We need him to lead us and guide us, convict us and instruct us.

And one of the ways we can become like the Ephesians is we get so consumed with our studies and our systematics, that we forget that Jesus is alive, and we're supposed to have a relationship with him, and the Holy Spirit dwells in us, and we're supposed to follow him. And so then Christianity goes from a relationship that we enjoy to a belief system we adhere to. And let me submit to you it's both. Christianity is a belief system we adhere to, and it's a relationship we enjoy, but it has to be both. And when it says that they lack love, they were weak on the relational enjoyment of Jesus, his people, and lost people.

3. Annoyance or Mission?

Number three, we can become like the Ephesians when the people in cities that are our mission simply become annoying to us, instead of a mission for us. How many of you are annoyed by where you live? Okay, I am. I am. Taxes are high, traffic is bad, schools are poor, parks are horrible, and people are weird. That's my estimation, okay? That's my estimation.

And he's not saying here that you need to "like." There's a difference between love and like. I don't have to like my city. You don't have to like your city. The Ephesians didn't have to like their city. They had to love it. You can love people you don't like. You can love places you don't like. You can love people groups you don't like. You don't have to enjoy someone to have affection for them, because it says in Romans 5:5 that God has poured out his love in our hearts, through the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Love comes from God, love comes through the people of God, and we are able to love people even if we don't like them. We're able to love cities and cultures and groups, even if they annoy us, because it is God's love through us, even for those people, times, and places that we don't like.

And so what can happen is sometimes we look at a people group or a place, and we say, "It just annoys me. The way they act, the way they think, the way they spend our tax money, the way they operate, the self-righteousness, the idolatry, the insanity, the stupidity, it's annoying. It frustrates me. I'm sick of this." And Jesus says love them. You say, "How can I do that?" The love of God needs to come to you and through you.

Here's the gospel: we're like that to God. See, it always comes back to the gospel. Do any of you think that you annoy God? I'm very settled on the answer for my own life. I think of all the people who are annoying to God, I might make some sort of special list. I'm sure that God gets annoyed with me, that God gets tired with me, God gets frustrated with me. But do you know what he does? He continues to love me.

And we can't receive love from God, as annoying people, without sharing God's love with annoying people, because that's hypocrisy. And what can happen is the longer you're a Christian and the more Bible you read, and the more doctrine you know, you can think that you're less annoying to God than other people are to you. And humility says, "No, God's loving to me, even though I'm annoying, so I'm going to love others with the love that he gives me, because it's a demonstration of the gospel."

4. Contempt or Compassion?

We could become like the Ephesians when we replace compassion with contempt, number four. When you look at people, you say, "They are so stupid. They are so messed up. They are so rebellious. They're doing the same thing their parents did, and that was an absolute train wreck. Every generation in this city has acted like this, and it's never worked. When is anybody going to wake up?"

And, see, the Bible says that people are blind, that they're spiritually dead, and that is to give us compassion; but if we forget that apart from Christ we're dead and blind, what we end up with is contempt. "You are stupid. You are foolish. You get what you deserve. I'm sick of you. I'm done with you. I don't have any hope for you." That's contempt.

And compassion says, "And apart from the grace of God, I'm at least as bad as you. And if there's hope for me, there's hope for you, and I have compassion, because you are walking away from God and into death, and that is something that grieves me more than something that annoys me." And this gets really hard when it's your family, your friends, your coworkers, your neighbors.

But we know that we've lost sight of the gospel when we have contempt instead of compassion for people, and I think that was part of what was going on here in Ephesus. They'd been so faithful for so long, and after a while, you just get sick of the work that remains to be done.

5. Repent

Number five, I think we become Ephesians when we tell others to repent, but we don't do it. And this is classic religion. We tell other people to repent,

but we don't. We tell them everything that's wrong in their life, and we don't really examine our own, and the result is we get proud, and haughty, and self-righteous, and judgmental, critical, and difficult.

I know that this is something that happens in my own life, and it happens in all of our life, that we could see others' sin more clearly than our own. We could have a passion for them to stop sinning, but we give ourselves permission to continue in our own vices. And what happens is, sadly, even with some preaching and teaching, it only tells sinners to repent of their sin. It doesn't tell religious people to repent of their righteousness. The result is the church is filled with religious people who are self-righteous and have contempt for those who are non-Christians or those who are stuck in sin.

And so it is true that non-Christians need to repent of sin and that Christians need to repent of sin, and sometimes the sin that Christians need to repent of is religion, pride, legalism, judgmentalism, self-righteousness. It's works. It's this feeling that I'm better than you because I don't do what you're doing. And as soon as that happens, we feel free to tell everyone to stop sinning, but we stop repenting of our own sin, and the sin that sometimes we need to repent of is a lack of love, and those are Jesus' words. You're telling them all to stop, but you need to stop being so mean, so harsh, so cruel, so impatient, so selfish, so petty.

6. Jesus as Concept or Person?

We could become like the Ephesians, number six, when Jesus becomes more of a concept than a person. Let me say this. I love the Bible. I've been studying it for twenty-plus years. I love books. I think between my digital and my physical library, it's like seven or eight thousand books. I love books. I don't believe in the rapture, but if it happens, I'm grabbing my bookshelves. I'm just, I'm taking them with me. I love my books that much. I love to study. I love to think. I love to contemplate.

But you know what can happen is, over time, Jesus can become, for those who are most studious, more of a concept than a person, more of a concept than a person. He's like a philosophical construct, and a historical figure, and a moral example, but he's not a living Lord. So you don't really talk to him like you used to with a child-like faith, which is prayer. Sometimes you don't really just get silence and solitude, and be alone with him, and invite him to come and spend time with you, and enjoy his presence, and be with him as a living Lord. And sometimes we even have theologies that justify this. We have ways of caricaturizing Jesus into some manageable philosophical construct or historical ideal.

Let me say this. Jesus is a person. He's alive. He's ruling and reigning as Lord, God, Savior, King, and Christ, and he's happy to come meet with you, as he was happy to come meet with John. Some of us will not have that degree of supernatural revelation, but he's willing to be with you. This is time for solitude, silence, repentance, prayer, Bible reading, journaling, singing, worship. Turn your technology off. Get time with Jesus. He's alive, and he wants to be with you. And sometimes, he is, but we're so dominated by the gods of hurry, worry, and busy, that we miss those divine moments to be with the Savior.

Is Jesus for you a living Lord, or is he an idea, a concept, a systematic, theological position, a historical ideal? Be careful. Be careful. Sometimes those who know the most about Jesus know Jesus the least. They could tell you all of the facts, but it's more like someone who is quoting a book they've read than a friend they've made.

Do you know what I'm talking about? Do you ever meet somebody, and you could say, "All of what you're saying is true, but it just feels like you're quoting a book you've read." You meet someone else who knows Jesus, and they may be saying the same thing, but it sounds like a friend they've made. There's joy in their heart. There's life in their voice. There's hope in their eyes. "Oh, let me tell you about Jesus. This is what he's done in my life. This is who he is." It's a friend they've made, not just an idea they believe.

7. Done Enough?

And, number seven, lastly, we become like the Ephesians when we feel like we've done enough. I see this oftentimes with older saints or those who grew up in Christian families. They reach a point where they're like, "I feel like I've done enough. I've given enough money. I've volunteered enough hours. I've led enough Bible studies. I've cooked enough casseroles. I have done, I have done my share. I have done plenty. I have done a whole life of work. I'm going to the bench. Somebody else can put the uniform on and take the field."

That may have been the case in Ephesus. And let me say this. What happened in Ephesus with the gospel was amazing. I mean, again, look at the roster. I mean, Paul—that's good. Luke, Timothy, Priscilla, Aquila, John, church councils and creeds—3,120 hours these people attended lectures at the Hall of Tyrannus during the noon nap hour. These people gave up two years of naps. That's devotion right there. I know martyrdom is hard, but you give up a nap every day, that is a significant sacrifice in a culture where—I don't know if you noticed today—it gets hot. So, when they would take their siesta, they would go listen to Paul teach for four hours a day.

They had read the books. They had taken the exams. They had been through the classes. They had entertained all of the missionaries. They had sent out all of the church planters. They had suffered all of the persecution, and some of them simply felt, "I believe that's enough." And Jesus says, "What about the love?"

What I appreciate about Jesus is he doesn't go to guilt. "You could do more." He doesn't go to condemnation. "Hell's hot. Keep going." You know, he doesn't go to threatening. "I'm going to drop a bigger meteor on the city of Ephesus, right on the church." Instead, what he says is, "What about the love? If you love me, and I love you, wouldn't we keep going? Because there are more people to reach, there's more truth to teach, there are more things to do."

WHAT ABOUT THE LOVE?

So, if you're struggling to remain motivated, to finish well—and Paul says this, you know, "I've kept the faith. I've finished my race." What he's talking about is, he ran through the tape at the end of his life, and that's what each of us should aspire to. And if along the way we find ourselves sort of slowing down or stopping altogether, it may be that people aren't saying thank you, and they're not as appreciative as they should be, and they don't pat us on the back and give us the, "Atta boy," but the truth is if that's what causes us to stop, we're doing it for the praise of men, not for the glory of God in the first place, and rather than excusing our lethargy, we should repent of our idolatry.

I appreciate the fact that Jesus comes, and he tells them, "I see what you're doing. You guys are working hard, I'm proud of you. You've opposed false teaching. You've endured patiently. You've served faithfully. You've given generously. There's your 'Atta boy.' I do see it. I do know it. I do love you. If you don't feel appreciated, I know how it feels. I love you. I need you to love me. I love people we haven't gotten to yet, so I need you to love them. Let's keep going."

That being said, the revelation of Jesus then is that he is in all authority, and he shows up to the Ephesian church, and he reminds them that he has patiently suffered, that he has endured, that he has poured his life out, not just as an example for them, but as their Savior, so that they might follow in his footsteps, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and it's a supernatural life that he's calling them to, something they cannot do without the power and presence of God.

And so Christianity here is ultimately not something we do for God. It's something that God does for us in Jesus Christ; it's something that God does in us through Jesus Christ; and it's God working out from that relationship to impact others. And that's what it means to love: to love God, and to love others, and to be a conduit of God's love to others.

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.