

Building the Vision, Leaving a Legacy

The Loving Compassion of an Urban Church (Revelation 2:1-7)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on September 11, 2022

Introduction

- ❖ For those of you out of town last weekend, you should know that we started a new series that's focused on our church's new vision statement. Which you can find written inside your bulletin. Let me restate it once more: ***HCC seeks to be an urban Chinese-heritage church in central Houston that reaches all those in our lives, Chinese or otherwise, through equipping, sending, and planting.***

- ❖ For us leaders, as we were going through our vision-casting process, we talked a lot about our church's identity and reputation. Which forced us to ask some tough questions. **What is our church's reputation? What are we known for?**
 - ▶ Last week we talked about our identity as a Chinese-heritage church. We said how that way of describing us honors our history in the past; describes important ministries in the present; but also leaves open the future. Since we don't know what the future holds for ministry to the first-generation Chinese diaspora here in Houston. So that's one advantage of using this terminology.
 - But, if you noticed, in our vision statement we actually describe ourselves as an *urban Chinese-heritage church in central Houston*. So this morning our focus is on the particular locale of our local church – where God has situated us. **And the question is – what is our reputation in the eyes of those who live, work, and play in the neighborhoods and key institutions around us?**

- ❖ What are we known for? **Now I know some might argue that churches shouldn't care about their reputation.** That we shouldn't care about being known for something. Who cares what others think about us? We should only care about what God thinks.
 - ▶ Well, it's definitely true that our greatest concern ought to be what God thinks. His view of us should hold the greatest sway over us. **But does that mean his opinion is the *only* opinion that matters?** I agree that we should care most of all what God thinks. But *only* about what God thinks?
 - Because as his witnesses on earth, as God's ambassadors, the Church is called to represent him. **So we should care what others think of us because that reflects on the One who sent us.** The church's reputation shapes how the general public views God and *his* reputation. Which is our concern. **We only want a good reputation because we want others to know and love our great God.** That's why this is important.

- ❖ But I think I understand why some people bristle at the idea of focusing so much on our church's reputation or worrying about how the world perceives us. **Because, to them, it sounds too much like a marketing strategy.** There's a legitimate concern over using our reputation as a brand to market ourselves to the world. It's not uncommon. Churches do that.
 - ▶ “*Come to our church. We're a teaching church.*” (Meaning they're really into bible study or theology.) Or “*Visit us. We're a seeker-sensitive church.*” (Meaning they're focused on outreach and creating an inviting space for non-Christians.) Or “*Join us. We're a family-friendly church.*” (Meaning they're targeting a specific demographic)

- ❖ And it's not wrong to care about teaching or being seeker-sensitive or family-friendly. That's not the concern. The concern is when churches try to position themselves over against other churches by emphasizing their uniquenesses or strengths.
 - ▶ **I'd argue that the most prominently featured aspects of a church should *not* be what makes them stand out from others – but what they share in common with all other churches.** That they preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and make disciples of all nations who love God and love their neighbors as themselves. You'd hope that every church would be most known for that.
 - So I agree we shouldn't talk about our reputation in the context of identifying uniquenesses we can market and use to convince you to drive past those other good churches to come to us. That's not what this conversation is about.

- ❖ What this conversation is about – is about being aware of where God has placed us in this city – in central Houston near so many key institutions that draw together so many people who need Jesus. **And the question is whether lost people around us even know we exist as church or know that we are here for them.** What good is a lighthouse if ships lost at sea can't see its light? What good is a shelter in a winter storm if travelers don't even know its there or know its doors are open – that warmth and refuge are available inside? **Do we have a reputation in our community as a place where rescue and salvation can be found?**

- ❖ For example, I wonder what all those new neighbors and new families moving into that community of newly constructed homes across the street – I wonder what they think of us. What's our reputation in their eyes? Do they even know we're here for them? Do they know what kind of message or ministries or community they can find here? You could ask the same of those who work in the Med Center or those who study at Rice or UH. **Do they know who we are, what we stand for, and how they could be blessed with gospel and gospel community if they joined us?**
 - ▶ That's why we're raising questions of identity and reputation. **We want to be a local church that makes a gospel impact on its locale.** That's the vision of our church as it pertains to where God has placed us and the kind of reputation we hope to develop in our community.

The Context

- ❖ That's why we're in Revelation 2:1-7. **Because here we find a letter, written by Jesus, to an urban church situated in a major city in one of the most prosperous of provinces in the Roman Empire.** We're talking about Ephesus. It boasted a large population. It housed the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Ancient Wonders of the World. The city also had a huge seaport, so that any trade and goods going to or from Asia had to go through Ephesus.
 - ▶ Sounds a lot like Houston in many ways. Major city. In a prosperous state. Large population. Some of the biggest houses of worship in the whole world are located here. And with a huge seaport, shaping much of its economy and global influence.

- ❖ Now we know **Paul** spent three years in Ephesus building up the church. By the time he left, they had elders in place who were to shepherd the flock of God, looking out for wolves – false teachers (Acts 20:28-30). Paul left his trusted disciple **Timothy** in Ephesus to help shepherd the church. And tradition says **John** eventually pastored there. Tradition also says that **Mother Mary** was a member of the church since she was under John’s care.
 - ▶ So this is a church with a legacy of godly leaders. So what would Jesus have to say to this most distinguished of churches? Let’s read v1 again, *“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.’”*
- ❖ Now some suggest that the angel being addressed is a reference to the preaching pastor of the church. Because word for *angel* can also be translated as *messenger*. That’s a possibility. It’s also possible that John is using the word metaphorically. A church’s “angel” would be its ethos – its reputation. That’s another option.
 - ▶ But considering how every other use of *angel* in the book of Revelation is clearly talking about supernatural, heavenly beings, then it’s safer to interpret it the same here. There’s not enough to develop a full doctrine on this, but in some sense God has assigned angels to each of his churches.
- ❖ Now Jesus describes himself as holding the seven stars (representing the angels) and walking among the seven lampstands (representing the seven churches he’s writing to, cf. 1:20). **Now this imagery of Jesus walking among them implies that he’s well aware of what’s going on in these churches.** He’s not oblivious to their current state. He’s in their midst. So when it comes to the Ephesian church, he’s in a good position to evaluate their health and reputation.
 - ▶ In what follows, Jesus does three things: (1) He **commends** the church for four things that they’re known for. (2) He **condemns** the church for one thing they’ve abandoned. And (3) He **charges** the church to rightly respond and recover what they lost.

Commending an Urban Church

- ❖ So let’s first see how Jesus commends the Ephesian church. **He says four positive things about this church and its reputation.** Look at v2, *“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.”*
- ❖ **First, the Ephesians were known for their good works.** Jesus says in v2 that he knows their works and toil. In light of vv4-5, it’s most likely that he’s referring to a reputation they had for doing good works of love and compassion for others. But as we’ll see, this was a reputation more descriptive of their past than their present. Something has been lost.
 - ▶ **Second, they were known for their patient endurance.** Jesus says something similar in v3, *“I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary.”* Now what were they patiently enduring? They were enduring the increasing pressure brought about by the godless culture around them and false teaching within them. Which relates to the next two commendations.

- ❖ **Third, they were known for their hate of evil.** Jesus says in v2 that he knows how they cannot bear with evildoers, and in v6 he mentions how they hate the works of the Nicolaitans. We don't know much about the Nicolaitans. The only other mention is later in v15 when Jesus addresses the church in Pergamum. There, the context mentions idolatry and sexual immorality (v14), so it's likely their teaching and practice endorsed a godless, moral permissiveness. Well, the Ephesians were having none of that. They weren't caving in to any cultural pressures. They were enduring patiently.
- ❖ And that leads to the fourth thing the church was known for – their orthodoxy. **They were known for their sound doctrine.** Their works, their toil, their effort was primarily directed at maintaining doctrinal purity in the church. V2 says that instead of bearing with false teachers, they “*tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.*” These teachers claimed to be apostles – to be sent from God – but the Ephesians had a keen ability to detect false teaching and false teachers.
 - ▶ As we mentioned earlier, Paul had exhorted them to watch out for these wolves (Acts 20:28-30), and it's clear that they took him seriously. **This was a church known for its vigilant attitude towards maintaining doctrinal purity.**
 - Decades later, **Ignatius**, an early church father, wrote a letter to the Ephesians where he expressed encouragement over a report he heard about them. About how certain heretics passed through Ephesus but were unsuccessful in gaining a hearing among their members. **These Ephesians had a nose for doctrine – for smelling out bad theology and preserving what is good and sound.**
- ❖ Friends, I think the same could be said of us. **I think we have a reputation for being a church that cares about theology.** Some of you, on your own initiative, formed a book club to read through Calvin's *Institutes*! That only happens in a church known for its doctrine. **And on top of that, our theology would be viewed as conservative in relation to many of the permissive teachings and trends regarding human sexuality that's prevalent today.**
 - ▶ So like the Ephesian church, we're known for standing firm on sound, orthodox doctrine and rejecting Nicolaitian teachings and practices that are sexually and morally permissive. Now whether people think that's a good reputation or not is another matter. But it's a fair description. So I see a lot of parallels between us and the first-century Ephesian church.

Condemning an Urban Church

- ❖ We're talking about churches known for the soundness of their doctrine and their resistance to conform to the culture around them. That was their reputation in Ephesus. **But if we keep reading in our text, we see that this church – which was known for its love of God's truth – was no longer known for its love of God or of others.** That's convicting. Let's hear what Jesus has to say in v4 as he condemns the Ephesian church for abandoning their first love, “*But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.*”

- ❖ **So this church started off in love with Jesus.** Their hearts were filled with joy as they received the grace of his gospel. They knew Jesus as the One who died for their sins to reconcile them to God. And that love for Jesus initially translated into love and good deeds for those around them. They had that reputation – in the past.
 - ▶ But at some point, they abandoned that love they had at first. Likely, all the pressures they were enduring – coming from the culture on the outside and from false teaching on the inside – those pressures forced them into a more defensive posture.
 - They were building a reputation as defenders of the truth, which is good. **But now the Ephesians were more known for what they hate (the works of the Nicolaitans) rather than for *what* – or better yet for *who* – they love.** They had abandoned the love they had at first.

- ❖ Church, we need to ask ourselves some tough questions. **Have we abandoned the love we had at first?** Have we lost our love for God and for those made in the image of God? Have we lost the wonder of his grace? Has the thought of Jesus dying for your sins and rising again to give you new life – has that message grown too familiar? **Have all the cultural changes and pressures around us forced us into a more defensive posture, so that we’re becoming more known for what we’re against than for who we love?** Is that happening?
 - ▶ Keep in mind the image of Jesus walking among his churches. He knows what’s going on. He can see right through us – past all of our sound doctrine. **And he can see if, at the center, we’re empty – if a deep abiding love for God and others is conspicuously absent.** He knows if we’ve lost our first love. We can’t hide it under a veil of good theology.
 - This is where I’m convicted. You can probably tell that I love theology. **But if I’m not careful, I could easily end up loving the doctrine of God more than God.** Loving the doctrine of the church more than my church. Loving the doctrine of salvation more than I love seeing lost people saved.

- ❖ What about you? What about us? It’s great to be known as a faithful lampstand that shines truth into our city with conviction and clarity. **But remember, a lampstand’s job is not just to give off light – but to give off heat as well.** Light *and* heat. Truth *and* love.
 - ▶ Go back to that image of a lost traveller looking for shelter in a winter storm. He’s cold, tired, and disoriented. It’s so dark that he can’t see two steps ahead of him. But then suddenly he sees a storm shelter lit up like a beacon. But imagine if he were to walk into that shelter to discover no fireplace, no lampstand – merely a LED lamp.
 - I’m sure he’d appreciate the light it gives off. But at the same time, this traveller is shivering cold, and he might freeze to death without any warmth. He needs a fire. He needs light *and* heat.

- ❖ **In the same way, the spiritually lost need churches that are on fire for God and the gospel.** They need gospel light to help them see. But also gospel love to warm and melt their hearts. They need churches to be full-functioning lampstands and their members to be well-balanced lamps that emanate light *and* heat – truth *and* love.

- ❖ So what kind of a lampstand are we? Are we a church known to take a stand for the truth? That's great. **But are we also known for being gracious and patient towards those with whom we disagree?** Towards those who hold a position or point of doctrine that we consider wrong and harmful? Do they sense that we still love them? **Or are we just giving off lots of light but little heat? Lots of truth but little love?**
- ❖ We have to realize that – because of our urban location in central Houston – as we carry out our ministry, we will continue to cross paths with friends, neighbors, classmates, or colleagues who hold to values or viewpoints much more liberal than what is taught in this church – much more permissive over issues of morality and sexuality. That's the nature of ministry in an urban context. **The closer you get to a city center or the closer you get to a college campus, the greater the concentration of people who are shaped by secular values.** That's the reality. That's the challenge we face. So how are we going to respond?
 - ▶ Knowing our church, I'm honestly not worried about us ever compromising our convictions. I don't foresee us bending to the pressure to change our doctrine. But I am worried that we'll pat ourselves on the back for that. That we'll settle into a self-righteous, defensive posture towards the culture and community around us.
 - **I think we're more likely to abandon love than truth.** I'm afraid we might lose our fire as the church. That we might end up loving to defend God's truth more than we love God or the people made in God's image.

Charging an Urban Church

- ❖ If that ever describes us – if that ever fits our reputation as a church – then we deserve the same condemnation as the Ephesians. But thank God that Jesus never simply condemns a church and walks away. No, he leaves us with a charge to fulfill and with hope to hold on to.
 - ▶ Let's see what he says in v5, *“Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lamps and from its place, unless you repent.”* **Notice how Jesus charges the church in Ephesus to remember, to repent, and to recover the works they did at first.**
- ❖ **First, they are to remember.** To remember from where they have fallen. That means remembering the heights of love they once had for God and for others. That love they experienced at the first – at their conversion. Remember those loving, good deeds you used to be known for. Remember the love you had for your Savior and for the salvation of others.
 - ▶ The whole point of remembering the heights from where you've fallen is so you can recognize the sad state you're in. Not so you can fall further into despair and just beat yourself up over it. But so you can return to your first love.
- ❖ **And that leads to the second charge – to repent.** To repent simply means *to turn*. Whatever led you to abandon the love you had at first – turn away from it. Turn away from whatever is stoking your fears or stirring your anger towards the larger culture – whatever is making you more defensive and less compassionate. Turn away from the pride that makes you more concerned with being right than being a loving friend or neighbor.

- ❖ **And the third charge is to recover.** Jesus says to recover the works you did at first. For the Ephesians, that would mean re-doing those good works of love that they were previously known for. For us, what that would mean recovering and re-doing the kind of works that we've engaged in, in the past, that displayed loving compassion to our community.
 - ▶ Just consider how, over the past two years, the pandemic has significantly disrupted our ministry to the kids and families at Shearn Elementary. We haven't completely abandoned ministry there, but it's been diminished. So we have an opportunity to recover our good works of love there. Or consider how we've stewarded our building, in the past, to serve our community. We've opened it up for ministries that serve families – like our former childcare program. And even presently, we host outside ministries like *Community Bible Study*.

- ❖ **So as we roll out our plans for the upcoming building project, on the forefront of our minds is how we can use any new or renovated facilities to bless the community around us.** Creating new space for recreational (sports) ministries open to the public. Creating more space to host outside ministries or even smaller church plants. We've batted around ideas like designing space to serve as a food pantry site for the needy or a resource pantry for foster-care families. They're all great ideas for showing love and compassion to our community. **There are so many new possibilities for serving our community because of this upcoming building project.** Whatever we build, we want it to reflect well – not just on us – but on God and his reputation in the eyes of our community.

- ❖ Now notice Jesus's warning at the end of v5. "*If not [if they don't recover these works], I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.*" If they don't restore love to its central place in the life of their church – if they don't repent and begin functioning like a lampstand that bears light *and* heat (truth *and* love) – then Jesus warns that he'll come and remove their lampstand.
 - ▶ He'll exert his right, as Lord of the churches, to remove a church. He's done it before. There are plenty of buildings that have all the trappings of a church – that once shone light and emanated heat – but no more.
 - Let's heed this warning. **A lampstand that no longer gives off heat – that cannot warm or melt a heart – is a lampstand that will soon be cast aside.** That doesn't mean individual members of a church will lose their salvation, but it does mean that a church's doors could easily close.

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

- ▶ That's an obvious reference to the tree of life found in Genesis 2 in the middle of Eden. It's mentioned again at the end of Revelation in chapter 22. We're told there that it will be located right in the center of the new City of God in the New Creation.
- ❖ In the first Creation we're told that the way to the tree of life was blocked because of Adam's Fall. Because of human sin. **But in the New Creation, the barrier is gone. How? Because a conqueror called Christ has torn down the barrier through his death and resurrection.**
 - ▶ If you don't know the love of Jesus, if you've never experienced a love for him, then I urge you to come to Jesus in repentance. Receive him as your Savior and discover that, in him, you're called a conquerer (more than a conquerer!), and you'll be granted to eat of the tree of life in the paradise of God. That's the good news of the gospel – the message that we ultimately want to be known for.
- ❖ Let me end with the question I began with: *What is our church's reputation?* May we be known for a deep love for our Savior, a genuine love for people, and a fiery passion to emanate truth *and* love as an urban Chinese-heritage church in central Houston.