

Good Church, Bad Church (Part 1) – Rev 2:1-11

Rev 2:1-11. We're a few weeks into our study of the book of Revelation, under the theme *Hold Fast*. One of the main *reasons* for the book of Revelation. And the next two chapters emphasize it, with 7 letters, or 7 messages, written to seven 1st century churches. Some of them good, some bad, and some both. Good church, bad church.

But the messages aren't just for *these* churches. Because every single one ends with the same exhortation. Like in v7 – *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*. The Holy Spirit; who takes the words of Jesus, and uniquely impresses them on our heart. But the crucial word is *churches*; plural. "Listen in," Jesus says. "What was written to one is written for all." *All churches*.

Not only that, but it's written to us *as* a church. So often we tend to think only about how the Bible applies to me, myself, and I. But here, it applies to us individually *and* corporately. So as we work our way through this little mini-series, keep that in mind.

➤ Rev 2:1. Jesus is still speaking, and says – "*To the angel of the church in Ephesus* [angel, most likely referring to the pastor, who *represents* the church; (**Map**) and Ephesus, a city located near the coast of ancient Asia Minor; the same Ephesus to whom Paul wrote 33 years earlier] *write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.* (ESV) It's a reference to his sovereignty and presence. He *holds* us, and *walks* among us.

Which is why he can say in 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. [3] I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.*

The first characteristic he addresses and commends, is patient endurance.

A good church patiently endures (v2a, 3)

Something *John* implied in ch1, but Jesus makes explicit. Twice. *I know your . . . toil and your patient endurance*, v2. And *I know you are enduring patiently* [v3] and . . . *have not grown weary*. He commends them. Because patience and endurance are *good* things.

And commends them all the more because they patiently endured for *Jesus'* sake. V3 again – *I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake*. For the *fame* of his name. They patiently endured as a church, so that people would think highly of *Jesus*. Seeing the *strength* he provides to not grow weary.

That's a *good* church. A group of people committed to God and one another, patiently enduring everything life throws at us; from monotony to mayhem. Everything *people* do; from hurting us to leaving us. Everything *God* does, to mold us and shape us. Everything yet to come. A good church patiently *endures* those things. *All* those things.

And I think we qualify. I think we've done pretty well at this. Staying the course when other churches have wandered. Or people have fallen away. Or hardship has struck. Not that we haven't felt like *quitting* at times. We have; every one of us. But we've endured.

➤ I remember one time, during some particularly difficult days in our church, when *Becky* and I were ready to quit. We were "this close." Flat-out discouraged and done. In fact, we

were going to a ministry conference, and on the way, we prayed, "Lord, if you present us with a different opportunity, ministry or otherwise, we'll take it. We can't do this anymore."

Thankfully, we received some great encouragement at the conference from others who had been through difficulty, and walked out of there resolving to stay the course. To keep on, and patiently endure.

I say thankfully, because a few weeks later, I received a call one evening from a former business partner. "Hey, we could really use somebody like you. Would you ever think about coming back?" "Funny you should ask. But no. I'm flattered by the offer, but I can do no other."

How about you? Are you patiently enduring? Are you *adding* to the perseverance of our church, or detracting from it? We're not perfect, but I praise God for our patient endurance; *your* patient endurance. Bless you. It's a massive encouragement to me.

Second . . .

A good church is high on truth (v2b, 6)

As in, it emphasizes the truth; values the truth; holds to the truth. From the facts of reality to the pages of Scripture. Instead of basing their lives and doctrine on what they *feel*, or their personal *experience*, or the experience of those close to them; they base it on truth.

V2 again. "*I know your works* [Jesus says], *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.* And then, after citing what the church *doesn't* do, what they *don't* have, in v4-5; he says in v6 – *Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*

The church in Ephesus was high on truth. Testing *those who call themselves apostles*, v2, and finding them *to be false*. How? How did they test them and determine that? By comparing what they said and did, to the Bible; the *source* of truth. The standard by which we should measure *everything* in life. *Every* statement. *Every* ideology. *Every* claim.

Just like today, self-proclaimed "apostles" were spouting off about this or that, in order to gain a following. Either because they wanted great money or great influence. Can you say Twitter? YouTube? TikTok? And far too many pastors? People both religious and secular say all *kinds* of things these days. Promote all *kinds* of philosophies.

And we need to test them. Just like the church in Ephesus. We need to measure what *they* say, against the truth of what *God* says. It's the first characteristic of a church that's high on truth.

1. They test what is said. Comparing it to the Bible. They search the Scriptures to see if it lines up with what God says. If we're going to continue as a church high on truth, we have to *scrutinize* what's said, and test it. Not that we should be perpetual skeptics, or self-appointed judges; but that we should so value the truth, we don't tolerate lies.

Second, churches high on truth reject those who are evil.

2. They reject those who are evil. You say, "Oh my goodness pastor, shouldn't we

accept *everyone*?” No. Jesus didn’t; when *he* walked the earth. And that’s not what he commends here. Saying in v2 – I know *how you cannot bear with those who are evil*. How you can’t be in relationship with them; connected to them. He’s not talking about those who sin and struggle to stop; or those who stumble and repent. We should *absolutely* embrace *them*. Otherwise we’d disqualify ourselves. He’s talking about those who sin, and influence others to do the same. Those who reject God, and push wicked narratives.

Like the professor at State University of New York last week, who said pedophilia, sex with a minor, isn’t necessarily wrong; even with a 1-year-old. No. We can’t and won’t tolerate people who advocate such things. (<https://thefederalist.com/2022/02/03/another-unhinged-professor-has-been-exposed-as-a-pedophilia-apologist/>) Or how about those who argue for the virtue of LGBTQ lifestyles? Celebrating and promoting them. Or those who condemn people for their “whiteness” in the name of social “justice.” Good churches reject those things. And the evil people who peddle them. They reject those who are evil.

3. They hate what God hates. That’s v6 – You *hate* the works of the Nicolaitans [Jesus says], *which I also hate*. We don’t know much about the Nicolaitans, but most commentators think they were early Gnostics; people who claimed knowledge of secret teachings, contrary to the Scripture; contrary to holiness. All of which God *hates*; from sinful acts to sinful religions. And so do churches who are high on truth. *They* hate what God hates. 3 characteristics.

Characteristics I trust are true of you. Because it’s hard to be a *church* that’s high on truth, if *you’re* not. It’s hard to be a pillar and *buttress* of the truth, if you’re not supportive. It’s hard to *preach* it, if you don’t want it. There’s a lot of grace in church these days, but less and less truth. May we always be high on both.

➤ That bring us to v4-5, and the first “good church, bad church” contrast. I know you’re patiently enduring, Jesus says – *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.*

A good church is high on truth . . .
A bad church is low on love (v4-5)

V4 – *You have abandoned the love you had at first.* Probably referring to their love for *one another*. Their sweet fellowship. Something the Apostle *Paul* addressed in the book of Ephesians. Praying they would be rooted and *grounded* in love, urging them to *grow* in love, and commanding them to *walk* in love. It’s all there. And they obviously took it to heart because v4 says they *had* it. They *had* love *at first*.

But somewhere along the line, they lost it. They *stopped* loving each other. A tendency for *every* church. We start great, but slowly fade. Almost imperceptibly. First with our neighbors, then the person sitting next to us, then our small group. We get so busy or so focused on the truth, we forget about love. Just like a marriage.

➤ The solution for which, is to remember, repent, and return. Straight from v5.
Remember your love. Remember *from where you have fallen*. Remember what you *had*. And then **repent**. *Confess* your lack of love. *Confess* your lack of concern. Confess your lack of *involvement*; with no *opportunity* to give and receive love. Repent Jesus said.

And then **return**. *Do the works you did at first* (5). Like clothing yourself with compassion and kindness. Extend forgiveness (Col 3:12-14). Practice hospitality. Show brotherly affection (Rom 12:10ff). Remember, repent, and return.

If not [Jesus said; v5b], *I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place*. Their *lampstand*, as in their light. Their testimony for him, their status as a true church, their usefulness in the kingdom. No love, no lamp. No lamp, no light; no light no use. That’s the alternative. And you don’t have to look very far to see churches for whom that’s happened. Churches in name only.

➤ I love the love in our church. The love I hear about, and see, and feel. I love it and treasure it; and hope you do too. Because if we don’t; if we don’t protect it and cultivate it, we’re sunk. And there’s no doubt that it’s getting harder. Jesus himself said that in the last days *the love of many will grow cold* (Mt 24:12). Many.

So if you need to repent, please do. If you’re not extending love to others, please start. If you’re walking in and walking out, please don’t. Reach out. Get involved. Make connections. Because a loving church doesn’t just happen.

Last . . .

A good church is faithful to the end (v7b-11)

V7 – *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.* It’s a format Jesus uses in *each* of the 7 messages. First, reminding us to listen and heed his words, and then assuring us of our future if we *conquer*. If we’re faithful to the end. Faithful to him, and faithful to his word. That’s what it means to conquer. Never stop believing. Hold fast.

The reward for which, is eternal life. Symbolized here by eating *of the tree of life*. The tree Adam and Eve were *prevented* from eating; after they sinned in the paradise of Eden. If we’re faithful to the end, we stand to receive eternal life, in a new Garden of Eden so to speak; the new heavens and earth. That’s the point.

And just to make sure we get it, Jesus assures us in v11, that we will be *spared* from eternal *death*. Take a look. [11] *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.* The second death referring to the lake of fire; Rev 20:14. The eternal state of those who *reject* Jesus. Those who are *unfaithful*.

So a *good* church is populated by people who are faithful to the end, and therefore receive eternal life, while avoiding eternal death. Count me in.

➤ Now, in between those two bookends of verses 7 and 11, Jesus tells the church in Smyrna how *their* faithfulness will be tried; tested.

V8 – *“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. [Jesus is preeminent, and he lives.] [9] ‘I know your tribulation and your poverty [a comfort in tribulation; God knows] (but you are rich) [a quick reminder that though poor in possessions, they’re rich in spirit; rich in God; rich in joy; rich in love] and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*

Smyrna had a large Jewish population, whom Rome gave special permission to practice Judaism. Except Christianity upset the apple cart, because the Roman authorities lumped them all together. So when believers refused to *condone* the cults, or turn a blind eye, the government punished them both. Jews and Christians.

Which led some of the Jews to *slander* the church. Falsely accusing them of cannibalism, incest, atheism, and treason. Which at the core, is the work of Satan; the false accuser himself. Hence the phrase, *synagogue of Satan*. They weren't just *unbelievers*, they were *anti-believers*. And the worst was yet to come.

V10 – *Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison* [obviously implying that Satan was behind it all], *that you may be tested* [tested to see if you remain faithful], *and for ten days you will have tribulation* [probably referring to a prolonged but limited period of time]. *Be faithful unto death* [Jesus says], *and I will give you the crown of life* [the wreath of victory; the medal of honor; assuring us of *eternal* life].

A *good* church is comprised of people who are faithful to the end. Whether the end comes naturally, and we breath our last; or prematurely, at the end of a sword.

➤ History tells us that a guy named **Polycarp** was the Bishop of Smyrna, the pastor, as John wrote. Born in AD69, he was a direct disciple of the Apostle John, having spent time with him in Ephesus. And John eventually *ordained* Polycarp to go north and lead the church in Smyrna. So these words, from the mouth of Jesus and pen of John, must have been near and dear to his heart.

But never more so I imagine, than on Saturday, February 23, AD155. 60 years after they were written. Polycarp had been charged with refusing to burn incense to the Roman emperor, and after sitting in prison, he was tied to a stake to burn. But not before he said this:

“Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked.”

And then, just before he was pierced with a spear and set aflame, he said:

“I bless you Father, for judging me worthy of this hour, so that in the company of the martyrs I may share the cup of Christ.”

Surely the words of Jesus were ringing in his head. *Do not fear what you are about to suffer . . . Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.* (10)

Whether Jesus comes in our lifetime or not; whether we die by the sword or not; may *we* be so faithful. Faithful to the end. Hold fast.

Prayer – Lord, we want to be a *good* church. Worthy of your commendation. Patiently enduring, high on truth, full of love, and faithful to the end. Help us. Burn bright among us, so that we neither kneel nor faint in our testimony for you.

You Are Loved