

Revelation 22:16-21

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 December 2015

Preacher: Chris Roberts

[0 : 00] And if you'd like to take your Bibles and turn back to that passage that we heard earlier, Revelation chapter 2. And as we do that, can I just apologise to the kids, to the children.

I'm really sorry that today you've not got a quiz sheet or something to fill in during the sermon. But what I'd like you to listen out for are the three things that Jesus says, the three things that Jesus asks for from this passage.

Okay, and we'll see if you can get those three things at the end. So take notes if you can. So Revelation chapter 2. It's a really tragic thing to confuse working and labouring with loving.

It's a tragic thing to confuse toil with tenderness. And just imagine for a moment a close relationship where the relationship was once full of love.

And slowly over the years it's changed into a relationship full of works. Where perhaps a marriage is no longer about love, but it's just about sharing in a list of chores.

[1 : 17] It's slidden into mediocrity. It's not a good change, is it? But it's easy to slip into that in relationships. There's something desperately sad about that.

There's something tragic about a hard-working husband. He spends every hour in the office, but never speaks to or listens to his wife. Never spends time with her and enjoys her company. Sometimes that's unavoidable in life, isn't it? But it would be really tragic if the hard-working husband thought that actually he was doing the right thing. He would be thinking that working is the same as loving, wouldn't he?

When that's not always the case. It's not that the work he does is unhelpful or wrong. But his work for his wife may actually be the greatest obstacle in the way to loving his wife.

When relationships start to go down that road, it's never a good thing, is it? It can lead to disaster. And if that's true in human relationships, just think how much more tragic it would be if a church could treat God like that.

[2 : 35] To confuse working for God with loving God, doing stuff for him. It would be desperately sad. Well, actually, that is the picture here in Exodus, isn't it?

In Revelation chapter 2. So it's been about 30 years since this church sprung up in Ephesus. 30 years since it sprung up to when John writes this vision down in Revelation.

30 years of marriage, if you like, between the church and her bridegroom Jesus. And you might wonder what's going on in the marriage now, 30 years on.

30 years after the excitement of the wedding day. 30 years after the honeymoon period. 30 years after the wedding day. What does the bridegroom think of his bride now?

And what does she think of him after 30 years? Well, one thing is absolutely clear. This church works really, really hard for her bridegroom, for Jesus.

[3 : 38] Look at verse 2 and 3. Jesus says, I know your works, your toil, your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil.

You've tested them. You've tested them, and those who call themselves apostles and are not. I know you're enduring patiently for my name, and you've not grown weary.

This church is working really, really hard for her bridegroom. But despite all of this talk about work and perseverance, the point is that working for Jesus is not always the same as loving Jesus.

Just look at verse 4. But I have this against you, that you've abandoned the love that you had at first. This is a church deluding itself into thinking that if it's a busy church, then it must be loving Jesus as a church.

And this is really serious, isn't it? Because he says to them in verse 5, that they have fallen. It's a word there that John uses to describe falling into complete ruin.

[4 : 58] This church, it looks great on the outside, there's lots going on there. But Jesus says you have almost imploded in on yourselves. You've fallen from a great pipe.

You've confused labour for me with love for me. And it's almost ruined you. Notice too how in Ephesus they can't abide with those who are evil in verse 2.

So their work ethic is good, isn't it? Their moral compass is good. And they also, in verse 6, hate the works of these Nicolaitans.

We're not sure who they are. But clearly this church has got their doctrinal compass working too, hasn't it? But hating error is not the same as loving Jesus.

Loving doctrine isn't always the same as loving Jesus. And working for him isn't always the same as loving Jesus.

[6 : 07] And they're getting all of those things confused. They're on the way to complete ruin here. And there are three things here that Jesus says to them. So kids, listen up.

Three things that Jesus says to them. Firstly, it's not all bad in this church. Because first of all, Jesus commends their work.

Jesus commends their work. In these letters to the churches at the beginning of Revelation, there's a kind of repeated phrase that keeps coming back again and again.

It's the phrase, I know. Just look at verse 2. I know your works. Verse 3. I know you're enduring patiently.

Chapter 2, verse 9. I know your tribulation. Chapter 2, verse 13. I know where you dwell. This phrase keeps coming back time and time and again.

[7 : 03] You see, Jesus here says to them, I know every single little detail about you. About your church in Ephesus. He knows, most importantly, their work.

And this church is a church that works, isn't it? It works really hard. I know your work. The word for work there, it means labour, toil.

It's a strong word. It's to be weary with exertion. To be wobbling with tiredness. I wonder if some of us feel like that at the end of this year of church activity.

And they're a persecuted church too, aren't they? In verse 3. They bear up for Jesus' name. And even though they are at breaking point, they have not stopped.

They just keep going and going and going, working for Jesus. And the good thing is that Jesus knows that.

[8 : 12] Jesus knows it all. Your unseen work behind the scenes. He says, I know. Your gruelling labour. I know. Your tiring struggle with evil.

I know. The violence you suffered in Ephesus. I know. How does he know? Well, in verse 1 we get the picture of Jesus walking amongst these golden lampstands.

It's a picture language, isn't it? To say to us that Jesus walks amongst us, his church. Just imagine that this morning. Those double doors swing open.

And Jesus himself, he walks in and he walks down the aisle. I'd sit down, wouldn't I? For a start. He walks down the aisle. He walks down the roads.

He walks in front of you and behind you. And around you. He walks with his church. And he knows down to the letter what is going on in his church.

[9 : 16] He knows his bride. And he walks with her. And many of us, we feel that we want someone to notice all the work that we do in the work of the church.

And in this church kneeling, there's plenty of work going on, isn't there? And it's great. Lots of work going on. And lots of us doing plenty of work. And Jesus knows down to the letter.

Down to every last detail what goes on. And it's good that he knows. And it's good that he knows all of that work doesn't go unnoticed. It's good work.

And the one who is in charge of his church sees all that you do. And he knows it. It's good that, isn't it? It's good that we don't have to do work to impress other people in the church.

Or to prove something. Or to crave the high profile jobs. To work hard to be known by others. Because we are known.

[10 : 16] We are known by Jesus. And this is commendable. This evening, if you come and worship with us, we're going to think a bit more about good works in the Christian life.

But to this hard working church in Ephesus here, Jesus knows all of their hard work. But, but, working for Jesus is not always the same as loving Jesus.

And perhaps there are those of us here, and we've been Christians for a number of years, maybe decades, which is a glorious thing, isn't it? You've been married for Jesus, to Jesus for years. And God knows that's been hard for you. At many times. You've stood up for him, haven't you? You've not stopped. You're still here.

Aren't you? Jesus sees that, and he knows that, and commends you for it. But, perhaps that change in the relationship has happened. Or you can see it happening over the horizon.

[11 : 23] And working for him has actually become an obstacle to loving him. Have you started to see Jesus less as the bridegroom lover, and more as the kind of boss?

Well, he commends their work. But secondly, secondly, Jesus calls for their love. Jesus calls for their love. Have a look at the second half of verse 4 there.

You have abandoned the love that you had at first. I've heard this passage being described as a sort of appraisal day at the end of a year, where a boss calls his employees into his office, and tells them how hard they've been working, or what they've been doing, right or wrong.

There's some truth in that here, isn't there? It's Jesus' appraisal. But I don't want you to think about a room in an office block, but rather a room in a family home.

And rather than a boss calling people into his office, I think this is the picture of a husband sitting with his wife for a long-needed, serious conversation about the marriage.

[12 : 38] There's a lot of work going on in this church in Ephesus. It's not a laziness problem, but it's a love problem. The romance has gone, if we can put it that way.

They've abandoned, or they've lost, the love they had at first. And it's become a relationship of functionality, of mediocrity.

The word for love in verse 4, it's the word agape. It's the fellowship love word. It's not that they've lost the love of work in the church.

It's great. They're almost workaholics, aren't they? But they've lost the love of relationship with Jesus. And also with each other.

It's the kind of love of concern, of kindness, and of devotion to others. So I want to say that this love is an emotional kind of love. It's not just emotional, but it must include emotions.

[13 : 42] This really is a call to love from Jesus in the way that we feel about God, and about him, and each other. Jesus is not just looking to our hands in our work, but to our hearts.

It's about a relationship. So are we more worried about the jobs and the tasks which are really important in church life, or are we more worried about the people in the church?

Working for Jesus is not always the same as loving Jesus. And this love for him, this call to love, is not an optional extra. And if they don't change this, Jesus gives them a warning in verse 5.

If not, I will remove your lampstand from its place. It's as if, isn't it, in the church in Ephesus, they're sitting in a meeting like this on a grey winter morning maybe, or in the evening.

And it's full of people, full of activity, a bustling church. But Jesus then walks into the back of the room and he flicks the lights off. And all the lights go out.

[14 : 56] He removes the lampstand from its place. And the church is sitting there in all of their busyness but they're sitting in darkness. And they'd be completely unaffected as a church.

It would be pretty pointless going to that church. Visitors would go to that church and it would be a bit of a waste of time in the long term. Because to lose love for Jesus is to fall into ruin as a church. It is to have the light switched off. And so this call to love is so central to who we are as the church. The function of the church is to love a person more than it is to do a work. I'm really fickle when it comes to loving Jesus.

So fickle. I can go from hot when I perhaps come to church and I hear the gospel again and I'm warmed up and I'm hot again.

[16 : 05] But then I go cold so quickly. That is how God speaks about his people in Hosea isn't it? Which we've been studying in house groups. He says to them what shall I do with you?

Your love is like a morning cloud. Like dew that goes away early. It's what it can be like isn't it? Our love for Jesus. It's just like a vapor and it's gone.

But he is the divine lover who is hurt when his love for us goes unanswered when we love him superficially or fancifully.

So he is looking at us at our works isn't he? At the things we do at our worship at our singing. Has our singing slid into mediocrity? Are we just sharing in an incantation?

He is looking at our praying. Has it become formulaic? This is Jesus' call for love where we don't begrudge time spent with him. There is almost a sense that every sermon that you hear has the application read your Bible and pray more isn't it?

[17:16] That's what all preachers can go to. But I wonder whether actually that is particularly relevant for this passage. Jesus calls us to want him.

Knowing you, Jesus, is the greatest thing. Sitting down with his word and in prayer is so hard work. It's the last thing we want to do at times.

But maybe we should switch our thinking and think of Jesus as our bridegroom more than our boss. David says that the Bible is like honey. It's sweeter than honey.

If you want to think about it in food terms maybe think of sitting with the Bible like sitting in an armchair with a cup of tea and a slab of chocolate cake. It is a wonderful, joyous thing, isn't it? To spend time with the person that we love the most. Jesus calls us to love him. So, what is the church supposed to do about this?

[18:16] What can they do? I mean, when the romance is dead, there's not a lot you can do, is there? Once you fall out of love with somebody, can that really be changed?

Well, Jesus does give them a response in verse 5 if you look there. Remember therefore from where you have fallen. Repent and do the works you did at first.

So, he commends them for their work. Secondly, he calls them to love. And the last thing, Jesus cautions them to repent. Cautions them to repent.

And there are three parts of this caution, aren't there? Remember, repent, and do. Remember, repent, and do. Remember the height from which you have fallen.

I always like to think about when Emma and I started going out. The first meal that she cooked me was a tuna steak. It was fantastic. And it was one of these flambé dishes. So the flames were leaping up out of the pan.

[19:20] I was so impressed. I thought, this is really romantic. And I found out later that that wasn't part of the pan at all. And she was inwardly panicking because she was burning this tuna. But it was great.

I remember those times back when we first started going out. To remember back to the beginning of the relationship. And that's what Jesus is saying, isn't it?

The love that you had at first. Going back to the start or to a time when our devotion to Jesus was more passionate. Go back to those times when you wanted to spend time with him and think about those times.

Spend time with new Christians. New Christians are often so excited, aren't they? And you can see it in their lives and watch how they love Jesus.

Remember, think about those times. Really think about those times. I like to think about when I was a teenager and I went on camp and I heard the gospel really explain for the first time or there was just something that I understood about it.

[20:30] and there was so much that I didn't understand and I didn't know but that didn't matter. So I was so excited to hear about this Saviour, this Lord who loves me and so I remember that.

But don't stop there. Remember but do something about it. Repent, Jesus says. Make some changes. It's no good is it just waiting to fall in love with Jesus again.

Don't just wait. That's a very dangerous thing to do. Sometimes we do that, don't we? We wait for some event to come up in our lives that's going to make us wake up or we wait for some huge emotional upheaval that is going to help us reset our kind of spiritual clock if you like.

We are like a child, aren't we? When they land in a puddle and they look down and they're all wet and they just sort of sit there and wait for Mom or Dad to pick them out of the puddle.

But you can't just wait in hope until you might happen to fall in love with Jesus again. Jesus called us to love him now. To remember and to repent.

[21:43] To put things in place. So what do we need to do about that? Well I guess it's like any relationship, isn't it? Think of ways of bringing that passion back for Jesus.

Think of ways of hearing God's word. Look over the service sheets during the week. Sing a hymn in the shower. Whatever it is, write a prayer in a journal to Jesus.

Use the means of grace. Come and share in the Lord's Supper. Don't just turn up to church. Think about it beforehand. Wear something different on a Sunday.

whatever helps you. Put things in place. Work out how you might start reading the Bible again. If you want help with that, chat to other Christians about it.

Do it together. Come on the week of prayer. What a great thing it is to come to pray together. To meet with our lover, the Lord Jesus.

[22 : 43] Come to monthly prayer meetings. They are so heartwarming. Remember, repent, and make some changes. And thirdly, do.

Do the works you did at first. As Jesus calls them to love, notice he doesn't say to them, cancel the church program. Stop all the work and just sort of sit and think about me.

No, he doesn't do that, does he? Verse 5, do the works you did at first. I think he wants us to step away from work, from the work of the church for a moment, but then to re-enter into it as a labour of love.

To love Jesus, after all, is to obey him, isn't it? To do his commands. If you love me, you will keep my commandments, he says. It's not about stopping the work, but re-thinking why we're doing it. So this love for Jesus, it's not an abstract thing sort of floating around in our emotions, but it's concrete. It involves work.

[23 : 52] Jesus says that when lawlessness increases in the world around us, the love of many will grow cold.

And perhaps that is the picture of this Ephesian church here. They are a church that works really hard and Jesus commends them for that. But working hard for Jesus is not always the same as loving Jesus.

And the warnings are real here, aren't they? Unless you remember, repent and do, I will remove this lampstand from you. In other words, this church will disappear in a couple of generations time in Ephesus.

And we in Ealing should take that seriously as well, shouldn't we? the church here will remain as long as we love Jesus.

And we should pray that future generations of this church, they'll look back by God's grace and they'll be thankful and they'll say of us, they must have loved Jesus. If not, there could be an almighty fall at Ealing IPC.

[25 : 01] might our work for Jesus in 2016 be the biggest obstacle we have to loving Jesus? Well, Jesus knows.

Jesus knows. He knows all about us and he walks among us. He knows all that goes on here and he commends us for it. And we do love him, don't we?

We do love him. We really do. So let's hear this warning and not confuse working for him as loving him. And let's remember, repent and do the works that we did at first.

Let's pray.