

SERIES: Letters from Jesus to Eight Churches

SERMON: The Eighth Letter: To First Evangelical Free Church of Wichita

SCRIPTURE: Various

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Have you enjoyed our study of the letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor this summer? Maybe “enjoy” is the wrong word to use. Have you “profited” from it? I know I have. For the sake of those who may be visiting with us this morning, for the past two months we have been reading someone else’s mail. We have been reading and studying seven letters dictated by Jesus Christ to the Apostle John and then sent to the guardian angels of seven little churches in western Turkey in the last decade of the first century. These letters have been preserved for us in the book of Revelation, chapters 2 and 3. They are profound, convicting, and encouraging—all at the same time, for it is obvious that churches today, including our own, have a lot in common with those first-century churches.

But reading someone else’s mail has its limitations. One can see parallels and applications, but it’s not like reading a letter addressed *just to you*, is it? Well, I’m happy to report that we have received a letter addressed to the angel of First Evangelical Free Church in Wichita, Kansas. I suppose it ended up on my desk because my name is Michael.

This letter is a lot like the ones in Revelation, only it’s quite a bit longer. I don’t know if that’s because we’re a larger church than those of ancient Turkey, or because we have more issues to deal with. I suspect it may be because those other letters were destined for the whole church over the past 2000 years (so they had to be fairly general), while this one is just for us and, therefore, can be much more specific.

By the way, one man in the church wanted to know if Jesus names any names in this letter. If so, he didn’t want to come. Well, no, I sneaked a peak and He graciously doesn’t name any names. (Fortunately it is written in English. I know Jim Gustavson is disappointed, because he claims the heavenly language is Swedish). Please listen carefully as I read this letter:

To the angel of First Evangelical Free Church in Wichita, Kansas, write:

These are the words of the Awesome God who said, “I will build My church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” I am the Head of the Body. I am the One who looks not on the outside as man sees, but on the inside, searching human hearts and looking deeply into their souls. I am the One who loves you and gave Himself for you.

I know your deeds quite well, for you have been a well-known congregation in north-east Wichita for a number of decades now. I know you love my Word, are biblical in your teaching, and very thoughtful about your faith. There is little chance that heresy is going to get by your Elders. After all, you often urge your people to be like the Bereans who “received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11). Not much can slip by people who have their Bibles open.

My children, you have also been a haven of grace for refugees from many churches. It’s good to see people who grew up in both mainline churches and fundamentalist churches enjoying

fellowship together in the same family. This has been possible because you have maintained an uncompromising commitment to the essentials of the faith while at the same time allowing freedom and tolerance on the non-essentials. In other words, you have majored on the major and minored on the minor. In the process you have pursued both balance and excellence.

I commend you also for your strong lay leadership—committed individuals serving as church officers, youth leaders, children's workers, Women's Bible study leaders, musicians, ushers, sound booth technicians, and volunteers of all sorts. Most of your people consider it an honor to serve Me in the church, year after year after year. Many do so behind the scenes with little public praise; yet I know each of their names.

You have loved and respected the little children, as I urged my disciples to do, teaching them creatively and well—on Sunday mornings, at mid-week, at camp, and in special creative programs. The children at First Free grow up memorizing my Word and, for the most part, look forward to coming to church. Scores of your youth and college students have gone on various mission projects, sharing their faith in Me while developing a compassion for those who are less fortunate.

You have commissioned sizeable groups of people from your own congregation to start new churches. You have also supported church planting and church planters all around your state. The fact that there were only two Free Churches in your whole state in 1975 and today there are about 35 is due in large part to your vision and generosity. You have also supported missionaries across the world and have sent many from your own church to reach those who have never heard the Gospel of grace.

You have demonstrated remarkable peace and harmony at a time when many churches have split apart over personalities or methodology or minor doctrinal differences, and some of those churches have even ended up in court. When you have had conflicts, you have generally been able to resolve them through biblical peacemaking.

Yes, you have done many good things and have a reputation as one of the most solid, dependable lighthouses in your area. But I have a few concerns I would like to share with you.

While no one questions your commitment to My Word, I wonder how much of your Bible study gets past your heads to reach your hearts. Are you just getting into My Word, or is My Word getting into you? You know something? I'm not nearly as interested in your knowing *about* Me as I am in your *knowing* Me. It's good to be very thoughtful about your faith, but I also want to engage your heart and your emotions. I want you to convert all that biblical information into application!

Yes, you have been a haven of grace for people from many denominational backgrounds, but you have not done so well with those who are unchurched. You know, my Kingdom is not really expanded when the sheep just move from one pen to another where the feed may be a little better. I also love those who are not yet My sheep.

You also have a rather mixed record when it comes to reaching those from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. You have lacked vision for reaching out to and sharing the love of Christ with the poor, the helpless, the physically and mentally challenged, and people of color. I died for them, too, you know. Due to the faithful ministry of several families over a period of many years, you have a vibrant and strong ministry to the Asian community, and that I commend; but while many African American families live within blocks of your church, very few have found a home at First Free. Have you gone out of your way to make people of color welcome when they visit? Is it possible that some of you find it easier to send missionaries to Africa than to worship and fellowship with an African American? I would really like to see My church looking more like heaven will look—with people from every tribe, language, people, and nation. And please don't forget the international students whom I have brought to your city. It costs nothing but time and effort to reach out to them and show them the love of Christ, and it can pay huge dividends. Many of them will be leaders in their home countries in the future, and if they go home as Christians they can take the Gospel to places you would never be allowed to go.

Sometimes when I listen in on your conversations at work or at home I hear disdain for the poor. Terms like “lazy,” “welfare cheats,” “illegals,” and even racial epithets cross your lips. Some of you are proud of your entrepreneurial successes and you wonder why anyone willing to take a little risk and work hard can't do what you have done. You don't stop to realize how much of what you enjoy—opportunity, talent, education, personality, appearance, etc.—is a gift for which you really cannot take any credit. These are gifts I have given you.

I commend you for the high value you place on balance, but if you're not careful, being balanced can become an excuse for not taking a stand on issues of critical importance. Don't forget my warning that in the last days “false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect—if that were possible. So be on your guard” (Mark 13:22,23). Be sure your concern is for *biblical* balance.

Let me comment as well on another core value of yours—excellence. I'm all for excellence; in fact, when we finished creating the heavens and the earth, My Father said, “It is good, excellent, perfect.” But if you're not careful the drive for excellence can become just another form of perfectionism and pride, which I hate. If your goal is to give me your best, I say “amen,” but if your goal is to appear the best, I'm not interested.

And please don't ever let your striving for excellence cause you to look down upon or discourage the person whose best is not as good as yours. A child probably cannot play a violin as well as a member of the Symphony Orchestra, but I may receive more glory from the child. I've even been known on occasion to make something beautiful out of dirt. The first human being comes to mind. I also specialize in making something beautiful out of broken lives.

In the past you have indeed sent messengers to start new churches, but I haven't seen any new daughter churches for quite a while. Is it possible you are enjoying your comfortable facilities so much that you have lost your desire to start churches around your city? You continue to send

missionaries across the world and they are doing great work, but many of you seem to have forgotten them in your prayers and daily lives. My ambassadors need your encouragement because they are often on the front lines of the spiritual battle, and they are separated from the support systems the rest of you enjoy.

Speaking of missions, please remember, dear children, that every time you walk out your door you are entering the mission field—of Wichita, of Bel Air, of Derby, of Boeing, of McConnell, of the public school system, of the medical office. You know, it wasn't I who separated ministry from vocation. Through My servant Paul I made it clear that, "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31), and "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men" (Colossians 3:23). I've always viewed secular work as full-time Christian service.

The most important motive behind church planting and missions is, of course, evangelism, sharing the Good News. The goal of establishing a new church is not to relocate the saints; *it's to reach the lost with the Gospel*. And the goal of sending missionaries to Mexico or Tatarstan or Hungary is not to export American ideals; *it's to reach the lost with the Gospel*. And the goal of reaching out to international students is not to convince them that Americans are nice people; *it's to reach the lost with the Gospel*. I know there are a few in your fellowship who regularly share their faith, but there are many who never do.

I would like to see your passion to spread the Gospel increase dramatically. I would like to see each one of you praying for your neighbors or fellow-workers or fellow-students by name, and then looking for opportunities to share the good news that I died for them. You don't have to be a street preacher to do this effectively; you don't have to paint your car chartreuse and cover it with bumper stickers; it can be done in very natural and unforced ways, based on relationships and the common ground you all have with unbelievers around you.

After evangelism, discipleship is very close to My heart. Most of you have memorized Matthew 28:18-20 and you talk a lot about "making disciples" and "the Great Commission." But your leaders need to be more intentional in equipping My people for service and good works so that the unique gifts and talents I have given them can be discovered, developed, and used to My glory. You've got some great pastors and ministry leaders—gifted, competent people who minister faithfully—but the task of making disciples is huge, and you can't hire enough people to keep up with it. From here on out, you simply must hire trainers, not just doers.

The lead pastor must pour himself into young men called to preach the Gospel, and encourage them. The worship pastor must train and multiply worship leaders, the Youth Pastor must multiply himself in lay youth leaders and in the youth themselves, the Elders must train up the next generation of Elders, the Deacons the same, and every ABF leader must be developing his successor. The older men and women need to share their life experiences with the younger men and women and mentor them. I know some of this is going on now, but it has to increase exponentially if you are going to impact Wichita, to say nothing of this world, for the Gospel.

I have a concern about the worship wars that are breaking out in many churches, and I see evidence of some skirmishes at First Free. I actually see some frowns at worship, believe it or not, and I've overheard a number of people (don't forget that I hear all conversations, even ones you have with yourself) express frustration with the music selections. Some who prefer a more traditional style of church music think their hymns are being mutilated whenever a new arrangement is tried, and they write off most of the contemporary songs as emotional, mindless repetition. But many of the great Psalms are cries from the heart, and *they* contain a fair amount of repetition.

On the other hand, some of you prefer a more contemporary style and often view the hymns as songs from the dark ages that embrace only the head and not the heart. You need to realize that many of these hymns were written after sustained reflection on the Scriptures and thus as you sing them, you renew your minds with the powerful truths of the Word of God. These truths are life-giving as you live by them. The head is as important as the heart; thinking is as important as feeling. Paul writes twice (in Ephesians and Colossians) that believers are to speak to one another with Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16). All three have a place in your worship of Me. Let me say to all of you: I like Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and I'm supposed to be the audience—not you. You're going to have to sing together in heaven some day. It'll be easier if you learn your parts now.

My dear friends, I mentioned that you have a good reputation, at least among conservative Christians. But I think you have that reputation in part because you play it safe. You've abandoned some issues to the liberal churches, issues that are actually very close to my heart—like justice and racial equality and concern for the environment. I hear more talk in your circles about lower taxes and the Second Amendment than I do about health care for the elderly and the quality of public education. I'd like to have My children focusing more on the needs of others than on what's-in-it-for-me issues.

I know this letter is getting long, but I must address the issue of prayer. I am pleased that you still have corporate prayer meetings (many churches have given up completely on those), but attendance is minimal—less than 1 % of the congregation. I hear people saying things like, “I don't know how to pray eloquent prayers.” Don't you realize that I hate pompous prayers? But I love it when My children gather together and pour out their hearts to me. I wish you would learn how to be “on line” with me 24/7. I wish you would worry less and consult Me more. I wish you would bathe every decision in prayer. I wish you would become totally dependent upon Me, for “apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

And frankly that brings up My biggest concern, which is very similar to my concern for the churches of Asia Minor nearly 2000 years ago. You are in grave danger of becoming the very opposite of dependent upon me—self-sufficient. You are actually a pretty wealthy, gifted, and competent congregation, at least when compared with the average church. If you need a building, you figure out a way to build it; if you need new staff, you appoint a search committee and hire them; if you need a program for some new ministry, you develop it and find someone to run it. But sometimes you have a tendency to over-plan, leaving little room for My Spirit to work

through you. I wonder if you would even realize it if I didn't show up!

There is a grave danger that in all your activities as a full-service church you will forget to keep the main thing the main thing. I am the main thing! Please don't forget that! Perhaps you recall the true story about the time My disciples and I showed up unannounced in Bethany at the home of Martha. Martha was such a loving servant; she didn't hesitate to invite us in and began immediately to set in motion all that was necessary to feed 13 hungry men. She reminds me of many of the believers at First Free—willing to give or serve at a moment's notice—whether to provide a funeral meal for a grieving family or sending a crew to New Orleans to help rebuild a house. Here's how Luke told the story (Luke 10:39-42):

Martha had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

Do you remember what I said to her?

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

I didn't say Martha had made *bad* choices; I said Mary has chosen what is *better*. You see, the good is often the enemy of the best. You seem so susceptible to the tyranny of the urgent, i.e. allowing the urgent to crowd out the important. Please don't interpret your incredible busy-ness as automatic evidence that you are spiritual dynamos!

And that brings me to one last concern. What is the condition of your heart? If you went to a spiritual cardiologist for a checkup, what would the diagnosis be? I want to "open the eyes of your heart." You have a song by that title, and it makes the correct assumption that opening your eyes is something I must do. But I will not force your eyes open. I will help by removing the scales from your eyes, but you have to be willing to open them.

I implore you to pour out your hearts to me as did a woman who interrupted a dinner party I once attended at Simon the Pharisee's house. This woman anointed My feet with a precious perfume, mixed with her own tears. Simon muttered to himself that a rabbi who considers himself a prophet (meaning Me) ought to know what kind of a woman this was who was touching him—a street walker, of all things. But I said to him,

"Do you see this woman? (Obviously he didn't. He saw only her sin; he didn't see her) I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet" (Luke 7:44-46).

That's the kind of love and devotion I long for from My people.

I talked about overcomers in the conclusion to every one of my letters to the Asian churches. I want to share the bottom line with you: The way to be a true overcomer is by the power of *My* blood and by the word of *your* testimony. These two phrases come from Revelation 12, which depicts a scene in heaven at the time of the great battle of Armageddon.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers (i.e. Satan), who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They (faithful believers, including martyrs) overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death" (Revelation 12:11).

I provided for your salvation through the shedding of my blood on the Cross, but you must also have a testimony; i.e. you must have a personal experience of forgiveness from sins and you must have stories about My working in your life. Christianity is not a religion you subscribe to; it's a relationship you must experience, a relationship with Me. That's the long and the short of being an overcomer.

Finally, I just want to say, "I love you. I really love you!" Would I have ever endured the rejection and pain and suffering I experienced on Calvary if I didn't love you? I wouldn't love you one whit more if you were absolutely perfect, nor would I love you one whit less if you were the lowest scoundrel on earth. But if you think of yourself as the latter, or even close to the latter, I want you to know that I don't want to leave you in that condition. I love you so much that I want to make something beautiful out of your life, and out of your church. Will you let me?

Let those who have ears listen carefully to what the Spirit says to First Evangelical Free Church!

Now, having read this letter, let me be very honest with you. I feel very inadequate to even suppose what Christ might say to this church. I have written this, not presumptuously but rather to help all of us take a hard inward look. It is possible Jesus might be even more pointed in His evaluation than I have been. On the other hand, perhaps He would be more gracious and encouraging. Probably both. Sometimes one can be too close to the trees to see the forest. I have asked Him for guidance as I worked on this sermon, and I asked a number of you to share with me what you thought Christ would write to us, but I would not pretend to have an authoritative answer.

But a letter has been written to us that *is* authoritative and true and relevant and practical, and this is it—the Bible, God's love letter to us. The written Word of God reveals the Living Word of God, and the Holy Spirit of God is available to drive the truth home to your heart. If you seriously want to know who Jesus is and what Jesus is saying to you, devour this Book! And remember, when you read a love letter you are always interested in the words ...But what is of even greater import than the words is the heart of the writer. What does the author of this Book

mean to you today? Have you accepted the love He has poured out toward you? Are you ready to be a fully-devoted follower of His? Are you sold out to Jesus?

I challenge us as a church to fall in love with Jesus all over again and become a community of truly contagious Christians.