

The Lampstands

Last week we examined the vision of the exalted, risen Christ. But we need to take a close look at those lampstands.

Why are they there? Why lampstands? What are they?

12 I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me.

John was the only one of the 12 who recognized Jesus voice shouting from 100 yd. over the water after the resurrection. Now 60 years have passed since the last time he heard that voice.

He hears it again now, and **And when I turned I saw...**

John draws this out to make it dramatic. Instead of just saying that he saw what he saw, he says I turned around to see the voice...and...then...having turned, I saw...

...seven golden lampstands

You expect to see the one speaking, and instead you see something else. This is a technique John uses to highlight the fact that something in the vision takes him by surprise.

He does the same thing in ch.4 when the angel says, “Hey, look at the Lion!” and John turns and sees...a Lamb.

The point is to draw attention to the lampstands.

We see in v.20 exactly what these 7 golden lampstands represent – the local churches in the area.

The Lord wants the presence of the churches to play a very prominent role in this vision.

The KJV says “candlesticks” but these were lampstands. Candles were not in use at this time. They are stands to hold oil lamps.

And they were gold. Throughout the OT, gold lampstands were part of the furniture in the Holy Place in the Temple, and their purpose was to provide light at night in the Holy Place.

So right away this image transports us right inside the dwelling place of God.

13 and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man

Jesus is there in the High Priestly service of the Father, and we, the Creekside Evangelical Free Lampstand, are involved in that service.

I don't know what you think about when you are in your car driving here on Sunday morning, but one idea would be to give a little thought to the role you are about to play in God's Holy Place.

How would it effect you if tomorrow you were invited to the White House for some important event, and you were to play some significant role in the Oval Office?

How would it effect you if you were asked to be there, simply because the President wanted your presence there to reflect and enhance his regal presence?

That's the role of a local church in the throne room of God – not in the future, but right now.

The fact that those Temple lampstands were to be made of pure gold, and that Scripture gave very precise specifications regarding how they were to look implies a symbolic meaning.

Light is associated with perception and righteousness.

God is light. He is the source of all perception and the one who grants all enlightenment and understanding. He is the sole source of truth, and He alone makes things known.

And the lamps in the Holy Place illustrate that.

And God is perfectly righteous and the source of all righteousness. In Him there is no darkness at all – nothing evil of any kind.

The lamps illustrate that as well.

And so it doesn't come as any surprise to us that when God gave the specifications for His dwelling place – His throne room on earth – the Holy Place, it would be a place that was well lit and never got dark.

And as we found in our study of Gn.1, the earliest references to Holy Place lamps in Scripture are not those of the Tabernacle. They appear in the creation account.

Remember, “**And God created lamps in the expanse of the sky...**”?

The creation account describes the universe in terms that portray it as the Temple of God, and the sun and moon are the lampstand in the holy place.

They represent God's glory, and the lampstands are the bearers of that glory.

The function of a church

And of all the possible images God could have used to describe churches, He chooses this. What is a church? A church is like a lampstand in the Holy Place.

The function of a church is to illustrate God's righteousness, and to be a medium of revelation and enlightenment *before God*.

Sometimes people think the role of the church has only to do with reaching the world. Being a light to the world is indeed a very important part of what we do, but notice here that these churches are described as implements inside the Holy Place.

The world never saw the lampstands in the Temple. For that matter, neither did the Jews (except for the priests). They were for God.

Ex.27:21 **Aaron and his sons are to keep the lamps burning before the LORD**

Lev.24:1 **Aaron is to tend the lamps before the LORD from evening till morning, continually.**

The existence of the Church right now is not primarily for the benefit of the world. It is for the pleasure of God.

One thing we will learn in this study is the importance of the Church. The Church is not just a club, or a social gathering.

It's much, much more than a society or fraternity or a community of like-minded people.

It is an institution that has significance in heaven.

What we do here on Sunday mornings, the decisions the leadership makes in their meetings, the various ministries that are carried out by all of you during the week – all the functions of Creekside Church...

Do you realize those things are felt in heaven – they have significance in the ministry of Christ in heaven as High Priest?

So our job as a church is to be holy and pure and righteous, and to reveal God's truth – to make what has been given to us in Scripture plain and clear to the world and to one another.

So the great Revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ begins with a vision about the local churches as bearers of His glory.

Local churches play an absolutely vital role in God's plan for this age and for end of the age and the age to come.

Much of the purpose of this opening vision of Christ is to give comfort and inspiration to the churches.

I hope this vision gives you comfort as well. In order for that to happen, you would have to think of yourselves as a church.

I hope that's the way you all think. Our culture is such an individualistic culture that we tend to think of ourselves only as individuals. We're concerned about what comfort the Lord offers to me and my own private world.

And it's not uncommon to hear someone, when they talk about Creekside, use the third person instead of the first.

People will talk about the church and say "They" or "you" but not as often "we." You don't go to Creekside – you are Creekside.

You are Creekside, and Creekside is a lampstand in God's Holy place!

The Centrality of the Church

It's hard to overstate the importance of the Church. It's absolutely the centerpiece of everything God is doing in this age.

- It's significant that we appear in this vision as a menorah.

The Church is the only people of God. By John's time, the lampstand (menorah) had become the most common symbol for Israel – God's people (Keener). Now we are the lampstands. We are true Israel (while ethnic Israel is temporarily hardened).

* In Mt.16 Jesus announced that He intended to build His Church, and it would never die.

Jesus devoted His ministry to training 12 men. He came to build His church, but He didn't spend His time putting up the massive walls or making the rooms or the roof...

During His earthly ministry He just laid the foundation – so important to Him was the stability of the structure.

(Eph.2:19-21)

* After Christ ascended into heaven, a lot of people did a lot of terrible things, but when a particular Pharisee began to ravage the *Church*, Jesus confronted him personally, blinded him, smacked him to the ground, and demanded an explanation, saying “**Why are you persecuting Me?**” (Acts 9:4)

* Throughout Acts we read over and over about the Church. 18 times in that book we see the word “church.” For comparison, according to my concordance the word “parachurch” occurs a whopping zero times.

* The vast majority of the Epistles were written to local churches. And the book of Revelation, which tells about **the great hour of trial that is about to come upon the whole world** (3:10), is not written to the world, but is intended for, addressed to, written for, and delivered only to the Church.

* In 1 Cor.12-14 we find that all spiritual gifts are designed for ministry in the Church, by the Church, to the Church for the edification of the Church.

* When you think about what level of involvement you want to have in the Church, ask yourself how involved you would like to be in God's family (In 1 Pe.4:17 we are called **the family of God**).

* In Eph.5 and 2 Co.11:2 we are described as Christ's wife.

* In 1 Pe.2 and Eph.2:21 and 1 Co.6 the church is described as God's Temple – the very dwelling place of God on earth (literally heaven on earth). And 1 Co.3 says God will destroy anyone who harms that temple.

* The Church is a priesthood, branches on a vine, an olive tree, a field of crops, a building, a harvest... it's tough to find anything God is doing in this age that He is not doing through the Church.

So we're not surprised when the book of Revelation is written, and in the description of the consummation of all things, right at the outset our attention is directed at the local churches.

Another interesting observation is to study the fate of these seven cities.

- The two churches that receive the harshest rebuke – those cities are completely gone from the face of the earth today (Sardis & Laodicea).
- The two cities that receive all praise from Christ and no rebuke ended up being the last two cities to be conquered in Asia minor in the Turkish conquest (Smyrna & Philadelphia)
- And Ephesus, the city in danger of the removal of the lampstand, went from being the most important city in Asia Minor to being nothing, because their access to the sea dried up. The city has been removed from that site and is now in a different place. (Keener)

Those might just be historical coincidences, but it may also reflect the fact that no matter how marginalized the Church becomes, it serves as a guardian of its culture.

Just as in Gn.18 the only thing that could have saved Sodom would have been the presence of 10 righteous men, so the fate of any culture may depend in large part upon the behavior of the believers in that place.

If we want to avert God's judgment upon America, we would do more toward that end by nurturing the godliness of the Christians then by getting moral laws passed.

* In Eph.3:10-12 we read some pretty grandiose language. It tells us about God's **eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

That's the whole ball of wax – the grand, sweeping, **eternal purpose** of God.

Verse 10 explains that part of that **eternal purpose** is to make something **known to all the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.**

God wants to reveal something of His own greatness to the great, awesome beings who are in positions of authority in the heavenly realms.

Specifically, He wants to reveal to them the extent of His wisdom and the many different forms it takes.

So how is He going to accomplish that grand purpose? V.10 tells us –

10 His intent was that now, by means of the church, the multifaceted wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, 11 according to his eternal purpose

We have a cosmic role to play.

What an honor to be a member of a church! What an eternally, transcendent honor!

That truth is glorious beyond words, which is why Rev.2:5 is frightening beyond words. There we face the sobering reality that our privilege of serving as a lampstand can be removed if we lose our first love.

Have you ever just sat and thought about the wonder of how the Church functions or contemplated the entire organization?

It's the most powerful, astonishing organization in the world, and it's run completely on people's spare time.

The point of these letters is for Christ to evaluate our works. What are the works of the Church? What are they supposed to be like?

We know that God wants you to be a good employee, right? So that takes up a good 40, 50 or 60 hours a week.

We also know God wants you to be a good husband or wife, and a good father or mother.

He wants you to spend adequate time with your family.

He wants you to fulfill your responsibilities, to do your taxes, to spend some time talking to your neighbor...

He wants you to be a good citizen, and to get proper rest.

He wants you to get the garbage disposal for your wife, and to help your kids with their math homework.

And so the question occurred to me, if God wants all of you to do all that, how much time does He want you to spend on your ministry at church?

There is no question He demands that you do work – everyone has a spiritual gift – everyone has a role to play – every Christian has a calling within the Church.

And yet He wants you to fulfill that calling just in that tiny little fragment of time!

The amazing thing is that this incredible institution, the Church, is operated completely by people's leftover fragments of time.

And what's even more astonishing is that it is that way *by design!*

You might think as a pastor I would stand up here and say, "It's too bad people don't give more time to the church..."

I'm sure there are some of you who are not giving as much time as you should, but I don't sit around ringing my hands about the lack of time people put in.

I spend more time in wonder and awe of what God does with our tiny, minute, leftover, tired, fragments of time and energy!

It's that way by God's design. He *wants* to feed the multitudes with a tiny little boy's lunch.

He *wants* to defeat the vast Assyrian army with Gideon's little unarmed group.

He *wants* the one who kills the giant champion to be a little shepherd boy.

He wants **this treasure** to be **in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.** (2 Cor 4:7)

And He wants to turn the world upside down not by a lot of powerful, brilliant people all working full time, but by the leftover scraps of time of ordinary people.

It's incredible!

Think of the most impressive organization you know of to compare the Church to.

General Motors is a huge corporation. They accomplish a lot. But what they accomplish is nothing compared to what the Church accomplishes worldwide.

Microsoft is a big company, but compared to the Church it's a Popsicle stand.

Think of the complexity of the Church worldwide – the millions of gifts and how they fit together in all the places everywhere in the world.

The reason General Motors is able to function as it does is because they have a headquarters and an organizational chart...

And all the people at General Motors work there full time – and they all have specific job descriptions.

But the far greater organization – the Church has no worldly headquarters, and it is run completely by leftover time fragments of people who get no salary – in fact they put money in the plate!

It's true those who have the job of teaching are full time, because that's a task that requires a man's full time.

But don't think the pastors are the Church. We could never do the work of the Church – we just equip the people to use their time fragments to do the work of the Church.

The work of the Church is not just Chuck Swindol or Billy Graham.

The incalculable, amazing wondrous work of the Church is made up of all the countless little wonderful things the Holy Spirit does through all of you – bringing each other meals, helping, encouraging...you know the list.

If all Creekside were were me standing up here running off at the mouth it would be nothing.

Creekside is all the amazing, wonderful things you all do with your little fragments.

That's why it's so important that we are faithful with our time fragment.

People think, "If I don't give my little 2 hours, so what? What difference will it make?"

It will make all the difference, because that's all the Church is!

The Church is designed to run completely on time fragments, and so if people are not faithful with their little fragment, there is no Church!

Isn't it amazing what God does with a little?

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! (Ro.11:33)

Structure of the Letters

Jesus follows the same pattern in all 7 letters. Each letter begins with a commission to write and ends with a call to listen (**He who has ears to hear...**)

The body of each letter has 4 parts:

- The **these are the words** section -
- The **I know** section (commendations, rebukes and comforts) -
- The imperative section (commands), -
- The **to him who overcomes** section –

IDENTIFICATION

EVALUATION

EXHORTATION

MOTIVATION

You may read these letters and wonder why the Lord praises the things He praises, and leaves other things out. He doesn't mention a lot of the things we would think to be very important:

Nothing is said, for example, about church unity, evangelism, elders, deacons, ministry to widows, helping the poor or spiritual gifts.

It's not that those things are unimportant. They are emphasized heavily elsewhere in Scripture. But the point here is that Christ is concerned specifically with evaluating His Church in light of what is coming in ch.4-22.

Next week I'll show you the significance of the structure of these letters, but for now let me just point out that they are designed to be read in light of the rest of the book.

The way you view the rest of the book of Revelation depends upon which shoe fits in ch.2-3.

Jesus gives rebukes and commendations, warnings and promises, and depending on which of them apply to you, you will read the rest of the book in one way or another.

If you find more than anything the warnings apply to you, the rest of the book will come as a fearful, frightening threat – and a call to repentance.

If you find all the commendations applying to you, your heart will be filled with hope and anticipation in the rest of the book.

And those of us in the middle, who identify with many of the rebukes as well as many of the commendations, we will read the rest of the book with both a healthy concern and motivation to repent, and a hopeful expectation of final victory and the full exaltation of Christ.

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands:

2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and

have found them false. 3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

Jesus' first letter is addressed to the assembly at Ephesus.

Ephesus was the most famous and largest city in Asia minor, and it ranked right up there with Rome, Corinth, Antioch and Alexandria as the most important cities in the entire Roman Empire.

It was the gateway to Asia and the marketplace of Asia. It had a port and became an intersection of major trade routes, and so it was a very influential city. Things that happened there tended to spread around Asia minor.

Perhaps that's why Ephesus received more NT letters than any other place (not only Ephesians, 1&2 Timothy and Revelation, but also most likely 1,2 and 3rd John and the Gospel of John).

It also had one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world – the Temple of Artemis (Diana). Diana was a grotesque fertility goddess – a big, ugly, black statue with a whole bunch of paps hanging down.

That temple was a place of unbelievable debauchery, which was all considered sacred.

It was also a refuge for criminals, since no one could be arrested there.

You can read about how the church got started there in Acts 18-20.

Paul went to Ephesus in Acts 18 and spoke to the Jews in the synogogue, and they asked him to stay, but he declined, promising to return if it was God's will.

Aquilla and Priscilla were there.

Then Apollos came. He was a very educated Jew who had a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament.

He was also a very powerful speaker, and he spoke boldly in the synogogue, and **vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.**

Later Paul did come back Acts 19:8-10

8 Paul entered the synogogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. 9 But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. (That doesn't mean he left Ephesus. He left the Jews – the synogogue). **He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. 10 This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.**

Paul stayed longer in Ephesus than any other city during his journeys.

Their initial conversion to Christ was very dramatic. Paul did mighty miracles there, and the people held Jesus' name in high honor, and burned all their witchcraft paraphernalia (which amounted to 50,000 day's wages – 5 or 6 million dollars for us).

So the impact on Ephesus was huge. So many were converted, it began to destroy the idol manufacturing industry, and so those people stirred up a riot, which took place in the theater, which seated 25,000 people.

A huge crowd gathered to be part of the riot – most of the people didn't even know why they were there, but they all joined in and for two hours shouted "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians."

Some time later, on his way back to Jerusalem, Paul sent for the elders of the church in Ephesus. They came to him and he said, "None of you will ever see me again, so I've got to tell you this:

Acts 20:28-38 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. 31 So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

...36 When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. 37 They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. 38 ...Then they accompanied him to the ship.

All that was in the mid 50s. About 3 or 4 years later, about 60 AD, Paul wrote this church a letter from prison – that letter is the book of Ephesians.

They must have been doing pretty well, because you don't see any rebukes in that letter.

If you wanted to sum up what the book of Ephesians is about in one word, it would be ecclesiology – the doctrine of the Church.

When he got out a couple years later, he went on his 4th journey, and by that time the leadership in Ephesus had gone way south. Paul's prophecy in Acts 20 proved true, and Paul ended up having to send Timothy there to put those men out and re-establish good leadership there.

And according to Eusebius, the Apostle John lived there in the years prior to his exile to Patmos.

So this church had had some heritage – Apollos, Paul, Timothy, and John.

These are the words...

Each letter starts out with this phrase. This is the exact phrase used over 300 times in the OT that you know as the famous, "Thus says the LORD" claim to divine authorship. (Actually, a better translation would be "Thus says Yahweh.")

So Jesus begins each letter with that same phrase, but in place of "Yahweh" He puts something from the vision in ch.1 (which was a vision of Him as Yahweh).

Each letter starts out with a reminder of the vision of the exalted Christ. In order for these letters to have the proper impact, the reader must have that vision in mind.

Thus saith him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands:

We will examine that next week.

Holding the 7 stars showed His sovereign control, and His presence among the lampstands showed His work tending to them and making them fit for service in the Holy place.

Here both elements are accentuated even more. Instead of just having (e;cwn) the stars in His hand, here it says He's the one who *grasps* (kratw/n) the stars (same word as in Php.2 – He did not think of equality with God as a thing to be grasped).

And instead of just being among the lampstands, His movement is emphasized – He is walking around among them. His constant vigil among the local assemblies is an active one.

So at the outset of this letter the Ephesians are reminded that the Speaker is the one who is tenaciously sovereign over the fate of the churches, and who is actively moving among them to make them fit for service.

That's significant given the threat of the possibility of their lampstand being removed.

I know Your Deeds...

2 I know your deeds

5 of the 7 letters start this way. It's a sobering thought.

No one else can really say that. We are so good at marketing ourselves to each other, we can fool each other, and we can fool the world, and we can even fool ourselves.

For that reason it's very difficult for us to make an accurate assessment of ourselves as a church.

But Christ begins by reminding us that He – the one with all knowledge and the penetrating eyes like flames of fire, He knows the exact story about our deeds.

Deeds e;rgon (*ergon*)

This is the common word for work (I remember learning this word in 1st year Greek. It was easy to memorize. e;rgon means “work” because when you work hard your air is gone).

Christ begins with their works. Our works are very, very important.

Very often people will come out of some false religion that taught salvation by human works, and so when they learn about God's grace in Christianity, they almost become anti-good works or anti-effort in general.

Good works are not a bad thing (that's why they are called good works). They are only bad if someone elevates them to the status of Savior.

Our works and deeds – the actions of our lives, play a very important role in Christ's evaluation of us. The word appears 12 times in the 7 letters.

In fact, in Rev.2:23 there is a striking statement about works, and it is the only statement in the body of one of these letters that mentions all the churches (plural).

It appears right at the center of this whole vision – in the middle of the letter to the fourth church, and it really is a central thought for the whole vision:

Rev.2:23 **Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.**

Christ wants all the churches to know that. That’s why He gave this vision.

Jesus goes on to list their deeds. He first commends them in three areas: Their effort, their purity, and their perseverance.

Their Effort
your hard work

They were hard workers. The word **work** here is a strong term that means to work to the point of exhaustion (lit “to become exhausted”).

When they did their ministries, they really rolled up their sleeves and put their backs into it.

And Christ liked that about them. This is a genuine commendation. They will be rewarded for that, because that is the appropriate way to serve Christ, and many churches fail to do it.

And not only did they work hard, but they did it long term.
and your perseverance

Their Purity
I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men

Wicked is just a general word that means “bad.” It is used of a lazy student or a cowardly soldier – people who fall short of their responsibilities.

He doesn’t just say they refused to tolerate wicked men, but they were actually unable to. This is a tremendous commendation.

They were so knowledgeable about the truth, and were so passionate about the truth, that they didn’t have the ability to tolerate a wicked man even if they wanted to.

6 you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

What were the practices of the Nicolaitans? The Bible doesn’t say, so we don’t know for sure.

In the letter to Pergamum they appear along side the teaching of Balaam (which had to do with idolatry and immorality), and the names are similar in meaning (Nicolas means “conquer of the people” and Balaam means “devourer of the people”).

I can tell you that the early church fathers were in close to unanimous agreement about this group. Irenaeus was born just 20 to 40 years after John wrote this, and he said that the Nicolaitans were followers of Nicholas of Antioch, who was one of the Seven in Acts 6.

He said Nicholas apostatized, and began promoting antinomianism (we're not under the law, so don't worry about obeying the law – it doesn't matter what you do).

Tertullian, Hippolytus, Dorotheus, Jerome, Augustine, Eusebius and other church fathers all agreed.

Clement defended Nicholas and said he was misunderstood. He said that Nicolas' statement was that "the flesh must be abused." And what he meant was that the flesh must be kept under control.

But the Nicolaitans took it to mean that the flesh can be used however one wishes.

It seems to me the evidence is a little too much to ignore. It's hard to imagine why the early Church would invent a story like that about one of their very important men.

Whatever you make of all that, one thing that almost everyone agrees with is that the Nicolaitan error involved idolatry and sexual immorality.

(Which is no surprise, given the culture in Ephesus)

And I would like to pause just for a moment to think about how this happened. We shouldn't assume these people just walked in to the church one day and said, "We're teaching a class on the value and importance of sexual immorality and idolatry."

So how could something like that become an issue in a church? (They were accepted in Pergamum). It had to be something subtle.

Most likely it was a mix between a heavy emphasis on grace mixed with a suspicion of works. No doubt it started under a concern for reaching those Ephesians at the Temple.

"After all, if Jesus hung around with tax collectors and prostitutes, maybe we should have an outreach in the Temple of Artemis....It's just a building."

So they get in there around all that drunkenness and immoral activity they came out of, and next they decide that to reach those people, first they have to befriend them.

So they partake a little in this, and then in that – rationalizing all the way, and after a while they get to the point where they are promoting that in the church.

"Worrying about watching all your Ps and Qs is fruitless – the flesh is evil and no human effort can do anything about it. Besides, God's grace is so immense it can cover anything.

These are the kind of people who need to read Gal 5:13 **do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh**

Whatever the exact nature of the problem, the point here is that the Ephesians hated it just like Jesus hates it.

Heb.1:8-9 quotes Ps.45 about Christ:

God the Father says to God the Son: "**Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom. 9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness**

God the Father was especially pleased with Jesus, because He hated wickedness, and Jesus was especially pleased with the folks at Ephesus for the same reason.

I don't know how this church went over in Ephesus, but I can tell you they would be unpopular in the United States (In California they would probably be illegal).

Jesus praises them for their wonderful intolerance and their terrific hatred.

In our day those are two very underrated virtues: intolerance and hatred. It is a virtue to be unable to tolerate evil and to hate sin and false teaching.

How often do you hear churches even boast about the fact that they tolerate evil people. They say, "Come as you are," which is fine, but in many cases the sinner comes and finds that he is more than welcome not only to come as he is but to stay as he is.

But in Ephesus there was no toleration for unrepentant sin.

It's not that they were closed minded. They gave these men a chance.

2 ...that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.

They didn't just say, "We don't know you" and plug their ears. They put them through a process of testing.

If there was one thing the Ephesian church was not it was gullible. Even if you were a genuine Apostle of Jesus Christ, if you went there, you would have to pass their tests before they would listen to you.

Scripture gives us very clear instruction as to how to test spiritual leaders – examine their doctrine and their character.

The word means to test to approve. It's a positive word. It's not a test to prove someone false. It's a test to prove someone true. But obviously sometimes there are negative results.

...such as in this case. These are the wolves Paul warned their fathers about 30 years prior.

Christ commends them for this. Churches should have a testing process for leaders – a testing process that will actually expose problems.

Just having someone fill out an application, or having an interview, or a vote is not a testing process that will reveal whether a leader is qualified.

It's really not all that hard to get through a process like that. You can have just about any spiritual flaw and still pass a process like that with flying colors.

But the Ephesians had a testing process that worked. And these phonies were discovered and rejected.

Next Jesus expands on their perseverance by using three words he has already used in an interesting play on words.

Their Perseverance

3 You have perseverance

This is the word *hupomene* – to remain under (the same word used in James 1).

There are two basic kinds of patience. Longsuffering (*makrothumia*) is patience with people, and perseverance (*hupomene*) is patience with circumstances.

Patience with people means enduring the pain they inflict without becoming angry or retaliating.

Patience with circumstances basically means being tough – enduring difficulty and disappointment and pain and heartache without wavering in faith.

It's spiritual toughness – when you become more severe than your trials.

It's a little bit like the guy who walks in with a black eye and doesn't even know it, and you point it out and all he says is, "You should see the other guy."

If you can think of "the other guy" not as a guy but as your trials – difficulty busts into your life and gives you a black eye, but instead of being overwhelmed or overcome, you overcome your trials and leave them in the dust.

Perseverance is insistent faithfulness no matter how you feel.

No doubt some of these people got involved in ministry way back in Acts 19, and over the last three decades they just plugged away.

Trials came and went, challenges came and went. They had their ups and downs. They had their tough times and easy times. Some years they saw great fruit. Others seemed very dry...

But they just persevered through everything without growing weary in well doing.

We live in a culture where there is so much constant change, that hardly anyone ever does anything for any kind of long term.

Marathon runners will tell you that there is a wall they hit at some point, that makes it seem like they can't go on, and only after pushing through that do they get their second wind that enables them to continue on strong.

The same thing applies to mental exercises. You do something for a while, and then it gets hard. It gets old.

And our culture has trained people to call that feeling "burnout," and they tell you you need to make a change and get out of that.

And the result is very few people do anything in the church long term. People get burned out before they ever gain any expertise.

That's actually one reason why we have such a long process for someone to become an elder – to see if a man can persist at something. To see if he has perseverance.

Well, not only did the Ephesian elders have perseverance; the whole church was characterized by it.

The Ephesian church was not just a flash in the pan. They were able to maintain their zeal for decades after Paul left.

They had had their troubles, but they never retreated into a pattern of just existing – everybody showing up on Sunday, the full time staff running everything – just existing in an apathetic routine...

Spiritually they were like Tommy wants our youth group to be. There was a big spiritual ruckus in Ephesus from the moment this church began.

They faced a lot of hardships in that city with the opposition from the metal workers and idolaters. But they remained faithful over time.

That's another thing Jesus really liked about them. The Lord likes it when a local church perseveres.

and have tolerated hardships for my name,

This is the same word as v.2.

He praised their intolerance, and now He praises their tolerance.

“You can't tolerate evil, but you are more than willing to tolerate hardships for my name.”

Our culture exalts tolerance as if it were itself a virtue. But tolerance is no virtue – it depends on what you tolerate.

Our world is completely backward.

and have not grown weary.

The word **grown weary** is the same word (verb form) of the word **work** in v.2. So He praises them for doing that in v.2 and praises them for not doing it in v.3.

“I know you have labored to the point of exhaustion, but you have not become exhausted.”

and have tolerated hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

They not only worked hard, but their motives were right. They didn't do it for their own glory, they didn't do it to impress men, they didn't do it out of some effort to gain merit or deserve heaven...

Their motive was the highest possible motive for service: it was all for the name of Christ. They were concerned not with their reputation, but with His.

There is such a temptation for a church to be concerned with its own reputation with the world. We want to have a good image. We want the community to like us and appreciate what we are doing and to value us.

There is a huge, organized effort underway right now in Boulder county among the evangelical churches to try to unite in an effort to gain a more favorable reputation in the eyes of the world. A tremendous amount of time and effort and money is being expended toward this end.

And when I go to those meetings and hear them talk, they talk about doing some community service event, meeting a lot of people, and never bringing up the Gospel.

I pray for the day when those same churches are more concerned with Christ's reputation than theirs.

That's the way Ephesus was, and Jesus says to them, "I see that."

Only the one whose eyes are like fire can see that, because only God can see the motives. And Christ is pleased with that which we do out of the motive of exalting His name.

Conclusion:

Every Christian who has ever read Mt.25 has longed to someday hear the words "Well done, good and faithful servant" from the lips of Christ on Judgment Day.

The folks that made up the church in Ephesus around 100 AD got to hear Christ say all of that to them.

Every one of those points of commendation was Christ saying, "Well done."

And specifically, He considered them servants who were good servants (worked hard) and faithful servants (persevered and didn't grow weary).

Next week we will talk about their rebuke – and we don't ever want to hear that. But what can we do to receive this commendation from the Lord?

It's not very complicated:

1. Work hard!

Step up your efforts with your fragment.

Don't fail to take your part seriously just because it's only a little time fragment – that's all the more reason to work harder at it.

Whatever your role is, make sure it's not a weak link in the ministry of Creekside Evangelical Free Lampstand.

2. Be a Pure Church.

Become intolerant and hateful...toward sin.

Don't ever dabble in error. Don't listen to false teachers trying to extract a little good here and there.

Be a discerning church with a bias toward the truth and an aversion toward error.

And have the courage and the self-discipline to do the hard, scary work of confronting those in error.

3. Persevere

Realize that as a church it's crucial that we all learn perseverance. And for that reason, consider it pure joy whenever you face all different kinds of pain, and trouble and tests...because you know they produce perseverance.

Embrace your trials and let them do their work instead of only seeking relief.

We are off to a great start.

But at age three, we are still a baby church. We are still in Acts 20.

We haven't faced the problem of corrupt leadership yet.

We haven't been tested.

We are still on our first wind.

Take steps to prepare yourself personally for the long haul.

Learn to tolerate pain. Treat suffering like our world treats evil – look the other way.

Do that. And someday the Lord will say to us...

"I know your deeds Creekside – your hard work, your purity and your perseverance. Well done!"

Benediction: 1 Co.15:58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.