

SERMON GUIDE

Christ's Charge to the Church

Revelation 2:1-7



SERMON NOTES

After the vote, Pastor Erik asked me when I thought my last Sunday would be at TJC. I said, I think this Sunday because I want to start meeting with the people right away. He said do you want to preach this Sunday? I said of course. When I went into my office, I told Morgan that I am preaching this Sunday, and he said, “oh really! Will that give you enough time to prepare?” The truth is: I have been preparing for this message for fourteen years. What our church accomplished on Sunday was not only the highest point in my ministry career, but it is also something I have been dreaming of for four years! In 2011, I read a book entitled 9 Marks of a Healthy Church by Mark Dever. In that book, Dever outlines 9 essential marks healthy churches demonstrate. Basically, he showed me what the Bible says a church should be. I was blown away. For the first time in my life, I was able to see, from Scripture, how God designed His local church. It was an exciting time. It also created an immediate crisis for me. At the time, I was a youth pastor at a little Baptist church in Indiana. As I read the book, I began to realize that my church was unhealthy and unbiblical. This really bothered me. The problem became worse when I began to look at the churches around me, and they were in the same condition. That’s when a whole new door opened for me because I began to see the reality of church decline in our nation. Back then, 4000-6000 churches shut their doors every year. Today it’s more like 5000-10,000 churches that close annually. I was very burdened.

I always knew I wanted to pastor my own church, but this made me desire something specific. I wanted to become the pastor of a local church that was struggling and by God’s grace turn it around. That’s when I became the pastor of Blue Ridge CU Church in January 2013. Blue Ridge was once a thriving church. But over the years, like so many other local churches, it declined. And though they weren’t facing closure at the time, the problem was getting serious. I pastored that church for 8 years, and God did amazing things. The church not only turned around, but it also thrived. And to this day, they are doing well. Because of the success we were having, and because of my continued burden for local churches, I continued pastoring my church, but I also began to branch out to help other local churches with coaching and consulting. I don’t want to say it was all bad experiences. A few churches were grateful for the help and took some advice, but for the most part I was met with pride, stubbornness and opposition. Dying churches are like a wounded animal. You try to help, and they bite you. Or you

could say, they're like a drug addict. Everyone can see the problem except them, and until they're willing to admit they have a problem and seek outside help, they're only going to get worse.

This wasn't just true in Indiana. I have been at TJC for four years now. For at least 3 of those years, we have been actively reaching out to local churches to provide assistance, and we have been met with very similar responses—pride, stubbornness and resistance. Not just from churches but denominational workers who should be for us. I wasn't exaggerating in the video you watched. There have been many times when I wanted to quit trying to help churches. It's been that discouraging. Until we met Grace Point Church in Gallatin. From the moment I began to talk with their leaders I could sense the Lord's leading. These men were humble. They weren't in denial about their church's condition and need for help. They were willing to change and be led. Then we began to meet their congregation, and they are some of the sweetest people I've met. They love each other and they love their church. Sunday's vote wasn't just a win for our vision. It was a reminder for me that Jesus loves His Church far more than any of us. Jesus hasn't given up on His Church. In fact, it's our Lord's desire to rescue dying churches.

Exegesis

1. Jesus Walks Among His Churches

V1 – “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.’”

Christ's love for His church is evident from verse 1. I won't get into a lot of the background of this book, but Revelation is a vision that the apostle John received from Jesus about the future. John is immersed in a world of images designed to convey truth. But before John gets into the details of this vision, he is given seven unique messages from Jesus to the seven churches in Asia Minor. The letter we're studying today is to the church in Ephesus.

Notice how Jesus describes Himself. "The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands." The seven stars are the seven angels of the churches. The word angel can also mean messenger; so, I take this to mean Jesus holds the church's leaders in His hands. But what I really want you to focus your attention on is the fact that Jesus "walks among the seven golden lampstands." We're told in chapter 1:20, the lampstands are the seven

churches. Jesus walks among the church. And not just the Big C Church. He walks among each local church. Jesus is here today. He's at Grace Point. He loves His church. He loves His church enough to encourage and rebuke. Look at the verse. Jesus begins with encouragement.

2. Jesus Encourages His Church (V.2-3)

V2-3 – “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. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.”

He gives them four encouragements.

1. Hard Working

This is a busy church. They're hard at work for Jesus. And they've been doing this for a while. Paul pastored here. As did Timothy. Even John ministered in this congregation. The church Ephesus has been serving Jesus faithfully for 40-50 years.

2. Morally Pure

This is a church that hasn't conformed to the world. The culture hasn't successfully catechized them. In fact, they hate evil. Look at verse 6. “Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” We're not exactly sure who the Nicolaitans were, but most believe they promoted idolatry and sexually immorality, and the church in Ephesus wouldn't stand for it. This is a hardworking, morally pure church. They're also theologically sound.

3. Theologically Sound

Apparently false teachers entered the church claiming to be apostles, but the church was theologically equipped enough to discern they weren't from the Lord. This is a church who loved the truth and taught sound doctrine. Finally, this is a church who patiently endured for the Lord.

4. Faithfully Enduring

The church was experiencing persecution for the sake of Jesus, while some professing Christians defected, the church in Ephesus maintained their faithfulness to our Lord. They were dedicated even in the face of hostility. I would argue that the church in Ephesus is not much different than 80-90 percent of the churches in the SBC. There's no question that liberalism and bad theology have captured many of our churches, but in my experience, most SBC churches are like the church in Ephesus—hardworking, faithful, morally pure, doctrinally sound, faithful during times of difficulty. But if that's the case, why are 85% percent of SBC plateaued or declining. Why do nearly 900 SBC churches close every year? Why will 5000—10,000 churches in America close this year? That brings us to Jesus' rebuke.

3. Jesus Rebukes His Church

V4 – But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

“You have abandoned the love you had at first.” What does Jesus mean by that? Love for each other. Love for the gospel. Love for the truth. It's probably all of those, but ultimately the church has lost its love for Christ. Do you remember when you first became a Christian? How on fire were you for Jesus? You wanted to do everything you can to serve Him. You couldn't help but tell others about Him. Let me ask you: has that passion waned? Has that love diminished? This is what happened in Ephesus, and it seems this is what happens in dying churches. One of the clearest indicators that the church has abandoned its love for Christ is they lose a sense of urgency to share the gospel with the world. The evidence you have lost passion for Jesus is that you are longer burdened for the lost to be saved. Instead, churches settle in routines and programs. They care more about tradition and comfort than missions and obedience. Consequently, they fail to reach their community and disciple the next generation. As a result, they decline and eventually close. That's the problem. The church lost its first love. But Jesus provides a solution.

V5a – Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.

How does a dying church get back their passion for Jesus? By warming their hearts to the gospel. Jesus remember where you came from. Remember when you were lost in sin and darkness.

Remember the misery of your sin. And remember how the Lord saved you. Remember when you were filled the Spirit and the chains of sin broke. Remember when you first felt true joy, hope, peace and love. I tell people all the time. It's true: dying churches need a new vision. New strategies. New approach to ministry. But the main problem is never about strategy or systems. The main problem is always spiritual. The church must recover its first love. Otherwise, Jesus will shut the church down.

1. The Ultimatum

V5b – If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Remember the lampstands represent the seven churches. Jesus says unless you, church in Ephesus, unless you repent and turn back to the Lord, I will remove your lampstand. In other, I will shut the church down. Jesus shuts down thousands of churches every year. Today 17 SBC churches will hold their last worship service and then close their doors for good. Next week another 17 will shut. And the week after that 17 more.

Application

1. TJC is replanting dying churches

A church replant is a total restart of the church. We are not sending money and resources so the church can prolong its days. We're investing our dollars and sending our best people to lead with new mission, vision and values. What about the people there? How do they fit into all this? The message I sent Grace Point from day one is: we're going to lead, but we're not going to ministry in front of your face. We're going to do ministry side by side. A replant is not a hostile takeover. The message we have communicated to the people at Grace Point is that you're the heroes of this partnership. You 30-40 stayed when everyone else left. You held the line and now help has come. The church has been faithful but they're tired. They lived in discouragement for years as they watched their friends leave and their church shrink week after week. Replanting a dying church is not just about new programs and logos. It's about loving the existing members. It's about encouraging them in their faith and seeing them become rejuvenated in their love for Christ and one another. And we want this replant to be the first of many. That brings me to my second point.

2. TJC is creating a church network

TJC doesn't just want to replant a dozen disconnected churches. Our desire is to replant autonomous local churches that share mission, vision, values, people and resources. Let me unpack that a bit. First of all, we want our replants to be autonomous local churches. What that means is that each church is self-governing. It has its own elders and makes its own decisions. TJC will influence Grace Point, but it won't govern Grace Point. Grace Point will be its own church. But we don't want to be disconnected. One of the problems with the local church today is that we are too competitive. Churches don't like to work together because they're fearful they're helping the competition or there are petty differences. We want to create a network of churches that share ministry philosophies, teaching curriculum, ministries, coaching and accountability. Our goal is to build a network of replanted churches in Middle Tennessee that storm the gates of Hell for Jesus. Which means we need people to join us in the fight. That brings me to my last point.

3. TJC is building up and sending out

A couple years ago, our elders asked the question: what does faithfulness at TJC look like in this season? Erik brought up the Parable of the Talents. That's the parable where Jesus gives one man 5 talents, another 2, and another 1. He expects these men to take the resources they've been given and multiply them. Of course, you know how the story ends. The man with 5 talents made 5 more. The man with 2 made 2 more, but the man 1 buried his talent in the ground. When the master returns he commends the first two men for their good stewardship.

Conclusion

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.'



- How was your week? What is one thing you're grateful for and one thing that challenged you?
- How did you grow in obedience to Christ over the last week?

- Where did you go to share the gospel or have a spiritual conversation with someone?
- What is a sin you have been struggling with that you need to repent of?



LOOK UP

- **REVIEW**

- Read Revelation 2:1-7 from the sermon and then have someone else in the group read it again, preferably from a different version.
- Additional Scripture:
 - 1 John 4:1
 - John 15:21
 - Hebrews 12:3-5
 - Jeremiah 2:2
 - Hebrews 10:32
- What big takeaways did you have from the sermon?
 - What did this teach you about God?
 - What did this teach you about man?
 - What did this teach you about salvation?

- **REFLECT**

- What does it look like to be sent out in your life right now?
- In what ways does TJC reflect the qualities of Ephesus? Are there things we are strong in? Are there areas we need to grow in?
- Does Jesus shut down churches? How does this affect your theology of the church?
- Based on this text, what are the biggest issues in the church today?

- **RESPOND**

- What is a practical step you can take as a result of this sermon?
- Would you ever consider joining a replant team?

- **MEMORIZE**

- **Psalm 46:10** – *“Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”*



- **BUILD UP:** How will you grow in your love and knowledge of the Lord this week? We have several discipleship opportunities for you to participate in.
 - **MDWK** is a time of education and growth in order to build up the Journey Church body. We offer a handful of intentionally chosen classes that cover a broad range of topics and

are taught by quality teachers from within our congregation. Classes are at 6:30p every Wednesday. Contact Morgan Cates (morgan@tjclive.com) for more information.

- **TJC Women** seeks to equip women to be rooted in the Word of God and bold in their faith. Our events and small groups focus on letting the gospel shape all spheres of our lives. Gather is the first Saturday of every month. Contact Laura DiLeonardi (laura@tjclive.com) for more information.
- **TJC Men** exists to build up men for the glory of God, the growth of the Kingdom, and the good of the world. The men's ministry meets on the 2nd Saturday of every month at 8:00a. Contact Morgan Cates (morgan@tjclive.com) for more information.
- **TJC Students** is passionate to see every parent equipped, every leader developed, and every student disciplined into baptized, self-feeding, disciple making followers of Jesus who are letting the gospel shape every sphere of their lives. Our student ministry meets on Wednesday nights from 6:00p-7:30p for MDWK worship and Sunday mornings at 8:30a and 10:00a for small group. Contact Larry Davis (larry@tjclive.com) for more information.
- **TJC Kids** believes that the Gospel saves, sanctifies, gathers and sends. It is our desire to see our kids understand that the Gospel truly does change everything and we will do this primarily by teaching our kids to love Jesus, showing them they can have fun in the process, and making sure they stay safe. Contact Nick Judd (nick@tjclive.com) for more information.
- **TJC Young Adults** exists to equip young adults ages 18 to 29 in becoming passionate followers of Jesus who enter their life in Christ. We do this through intentional relationships, fellowship, and worship centered around the gospel. The Fount meets Tuesdays at 7:00p. Contact Hunter Christian (hunter@tjclive.com) for more information.
- **SEND OUT:** Who in your sphere of influence needs to hear this story, your story, or the gospel? We have several opportunities for local and overseas missions.
 - **For the City:** Acts 1:8 calls us to be engaged where we live and among the nations. The people of TJC seek to bring truth, grace, and hope to Lebanon and the surrounding area by mobilizing the church to be salt and light, not only for the city, but for your city. Take part in faithfully and obediently using your gifts to declare God's glory among those who are hopeless living among you today. Contact Jeff Long (jeff@tjclive.com) for more information.
 - **For the Nations:** At TJC we exist to show Jesus as incomparably glorious to Lebanon and beyond. We are ambitious and passionate about strategically taking an active role in finishing the Great Commission as we actively pursue the unreached peoples of the world by mobilizing the entire church to pray, send, go and welcome international friends among us. Contact Shawn Casto (shawn@tjclive.com) for more information.
- **PRAYER**
 - Pray over any request from your group members.
 - **Pray for our directional elders:** Chris Townson (lay elder)
 - **Pray for our replanters:** Gracepoint Church

- **Pray for our short-term teams:**
 - Central Asia Team departing on March 7, 2025
 - Southeast Asia Team departing on March 7, 2025
 - Europe Team departing on March 21, 2025
 - Southeast Asia Team #2 departing on April 25, 2025
- **Pray for our long-term units on the field:**
 - The Wilsons
 - The Grays
 - The Starks
- **Pray for the unreached.** Want to keep up with Unreached People Groups? Download the Unreached of the Day App <https://joshuaproject.net/pray/unreachedoftheday/app>