

Ephesus: The Church that Lost its Way

Revelation 2:1-7

A couple was on vacation enjoying the beautiful beach and warm sunshine that Florida had to offer by floating in the ocean on inflatable rafts. The husband decided to head into the shore but his wife wanted to stay out on the raft and continue to catch some rays. After a short time the woman lost herself in floating along on the raft.

What the woman failed to realize was that she was slowly drifting out to sea. As she simply relaxed and let the gentle current take her with it, her situation became more and more dangerous. By the time she noticed what was happening, it was almost too late. She saw that the shore was much farther away than she expected and she began to panic.

Fortunately the lifeguards were able to rescue her but the whole situation was created just by being careless. **How many people today are just coasting along in their spiritual walk? How many of us are simply being careless with our spiritual life?**

Hebrews 2:1 gives us a direct warning for just this type of spiritual situation. **“We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.”**

Let me begin with a summary statement about our passage in Revelation. If you can remember a time when you were closer to Christ than you are right now; you’re spiritually drifting.

Such was the case for the church at Ephesus. This church is the first that is addressed by the glorified Christ and serves as a stern warning to us to be careful not to drift. This is an especially important message when we notice that they were a very active church.

Stand with me please to honor the reading of God’s Word as we turn our attention to **Revelation 2:1-7**.

In this passage let’s note the following:

It is a singled out church

There is a solid commendation

There is a shameful criticism

There is a simple correction

There is a secure confirmation

I. IT IS A SINGLED OUT CHURCH – v.1a

The opening words of our passage identify for us the location and recipient of the letter. It is addressed **“to the angel of the church in Ephesus.”**

First of all we see that it is written to an angel. The Greek word here is angelos and can mean one of the created beings who reside in heaven and continually serve and praise God. The word can also have a more general meaning and is at times translated messenger. Most Bible scholars agree that the intended meaning used in this passage is to the messenger or leader of the church.

Notice also that the letter is addressed to the church at Ephesus. This church had a rich heritage. We see from Acts that Paul visited Ephesus on his second missionary journey where after a brief visit when the church was begun left his friends Aquila and Priscilla to teach them. Apollos also taught there as well. On his return visit to Ephesus during his third missionary journey he stayed about three years teaching and leading them. For several hours each day he rented a facility to teach them and so built a strong church. The gospel’s proclamation by Paul during this time had such a tremendous impact that it began to affect the silversmith business which made the statues to Artemis the great goddess of Ephesus. Their business had been so tremendously impacted that Demetrius started a riot and for hours the frenzied mob shouted in the amphitheater **“great is Diana of the Ephesians.”** Paul left the city for his safety and Timothy became the bishop of the church. After him it is said that the apostle John became its bishop.

It was here that the seven sons of Sceva tried to emulate Paul's miracles only to be soundly beaten by a demon when they tried to cast it out.

It was here that people brought hankies so that just by Paul's touch those hankies would heal others.

As we can see, the church in Ephesus had a strong list of great Bible teachers and leaders.

That was the church, what about the city? When it was founded, the city of Ephesus was a coastal city with a major river that emptied into the Sea. The river carried rich deposits of silt that over time left the city without a harbor. Eventually it became an inland city. At the time of Paul historians estimate that the city's population was anywhere between 250-500,000 people. Though not the capital of Asia Minor it was the most influential of the region. With major trade routes by both land and sea, Ephesus became a very cosmopolitan city much like what we would consider New York City or Paris or Beijing today.

Ephesus was so important that by law anyone coming to govern Asia Minor had to enter the region by first going through Ephesus.

As we stated earlier, Ephesus was home of the Temple of Artemis. The temple was huge. To put it in perspective, it was much larger than a football field. Massive columns supported the structure. Artemis was the goddess of fertility. People sacrificed to her in order to get pregnant or for their crops to be bountiful or their flocks to flourish. Men and women dedicated themselves to Artemis by becoming shrine prostitutes. The temple itself was so ornate that it was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Every month there was a festival held in the city in honor of the goddess Artemis. It not only served as the place of pagan worship, it was the center for banking and commerce. **John MacArthur describes the Temple grounds as a "chaotic, cacophony of priests,**

prostitutes, bankers, criminals, musicians, dancers and frenzied, hysterical worshippers."

This affluent metropolitan city with its gross idolatry, steeped in paganism and materialism is where Paul took the gospel and it is the first Church Christ addresses. **What is it that Jesus has to say to them?** Notice first that there is a solid commendation.

II. THERE IS A SOLID COMMENDATION – v. 1b-3, 6

There is something that you need to notice in each of these letters. Each letter begins with a personal description of Christ taken from the opening vision John received about Christ. To the Ephesians Christ is the One **"who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands."**

Just because the Church can boast excellent Bible teachers and leaders, never forget that it is Christ who is in control of the Church and that only Christ can give an accurate assessment of the Church. He is in its midst accurately assessing all that goes on and is now going to give His assessment.

When I was in college I took a course on coaching. I thought one day I might like to coach cross country. There was a principle we learned called the sandwich approach to coaching. Tell them what they did right. Tell them what they did wrong. Then tell them what they did right again.

In a sense that is what Jesus is doing here. He commends them for some wonderful characteristics. He tells them **"I know your deeds."** In the Greek the choice of words is revelatory. He does not use the general term for know which is ginowsko and means a progressive knowledge about someone or something. **When Robyn and I were dating it was over a period of time that I got to know her and I am still getting to know her. I didn't know**

everything there was about her on the first date. In school you progressively learn math by first learning numbers then addition and subtraction so that over the course of school knew math concepts are added.

Instead of a progressive knowledge Christ says He knows their deeds in the sense that He has a complete and full knowledge, a perfect knowledge of the Church, both the good and the bad things it does. He completely knows everything about the church. That understanding of Christ should motivate us to consider what we do and how we do it so that we make the appropriate changes in how we do ministry.

Christ knows how much effort we put in to preparing to teach a class or to prepare a sermon. Christ knows how much preparation we put in when we do special music.

Christ knows the real reason we may or may not want to serve on a ministry team or be involved in other ministry opportunities.

I'm tired or don't feel like it today.

I've got other things I'd rather do or need to do.

I don't have time.

I've done my bit for King and Church.

So what is it He knows about this church in particular? What are the good things He commends them for?

He knew their deeds. Everything they did as a church. He knew their activities and efforts. He not only knew what they did, He knew why they did them – their motivation.

Specifically Christ knew their hard work. They were actively serving each other and the community. They had a full calendar of ministry opportunities. Maybe they had a growing Sunday school program and Junior church. They had a full choir and orchestra. Home Bible study groups, visitation, midweek programs, missions outreach.

You name, they had it. They were an active and energetic church.

It also says that He knew their perseverance. The word perseverance means endurance under trial. They were steadfast in their faith and in their service even when times were difficult. They were hard workers and when things were tough they dug in their heels and put their shoulder to the work and worked even harder. The idea conveyed is that they labored to the point of exhaustion, but they kept going. They refused to give up. After all, idle hands are the devil's workshop. In the 40 years that the church had been in existence they continued to diligently serve the Lord. They did not ease up.

Christ commended them for their labor.

Christ also commended them because they wouldn't tolerate wicked men, especially those who claimed to be apostles but weren't because they found them to be imposters. This means they retained doctrinal purity. They did not waiver in staying on course doctrinally.

That was an important principle the early church learned to practice. They tested teachers for correct doctrine.

Acts 17:11

I Corinthians 14:29

I Thessalonians 5:21

I John 4:1-3

If we want to be commended by Christ, examine carefully the things that are taught from this pulpit no matter who it is. Don't take for granted that just because the pastor says so, it must be right. Make certain by studying for yourselves.

The church in Ephesus had a desire to retain a pure doctrine, to remain steadfast in its desire never to deviate from the tenets of the Bible. Many in the modern church want peace over doctrinal purity. Unlike the church of Ephesus who couldn't tolerate sin, many in the church today don't hate sin as they

should. They are persuaded by every wind of doctrine that comes along. Christ commends the Ephesian church for their steadfastness to the Word.

We also see in verse three that they were commended for their perseverance in hardship for the name of Christ and in so doing they had not grown weary. They chose to keep going in spite of the persecution they may have experienced because of their faith in Christ instead of giving up.

Galatians 6:9-10

One author put it this way: They may have been tired in their work, but they were not tired of their work. The present tense suggests that it was an ongoing and continuous attitude. During this period of Roman history many followers of Christ lost their jobs and income because they were unwilling to compromise their faith and embrace the pagan deities. They continued faithfully following the Lord even though it cost them dearly.

Would we be commended for such devotion to God's Word and active service?

There is one more thing they are commended for and it's found in **verse 6. "But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."**

There is a lot of speculation about who the Nicolaitans were even among Bible scholars. Some believe that Nicolaus was a native of Antioch who became a proselyte to Judaism and later converted to Christianity who was elected as one of the seven deacons in **Acts 6:5**. Later he developed this sect of the Nicolaitans whose teachings deviated from Scripture.

The name itself comes from two words meaning victory and people and so some believe that the Nicolaitans were a sect that first introduced the separation between the clergy and laity of the church so that the clergy ruled over the people.

Still others believe that the Nicolaitans were a sect which taught that if a person wanted to fully understand sin, you needed to embrace it. An offshoot of this is that they taught much like the Gnostics that the body is sinful and therefore nothing and that the soul is everything, therefore licentiousness is acceptable.

Whatever the case may be as to who this group was note that the church of Ephesus hated its practices just as much as Christ did. For that they are commended. **Do we hate sin with as much passion?**

These are solid reasons why the church was commended. But now the Lord has a word of rebuke.

III. THERE IS A SHAMEFUL CRITICISM – v. 4

"Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love."

To me that is a chilling rebuke. It's chilling because here is a church that was zealous of good works, eager to serve, doctrinally sound, hating what God hated, yet He says they didn't love Him like they used to. Something had happened along the way that caused their love for the Lord to diminish, to cool off.

I'm reminded of the judgment scene when the Lord tells one group to depart because He didn't know them. They ask how He couldn't know them when they had done so many wonderful things in His name. **(Matthew 25:41)**

There are those in the church today who think that God will accept them because of their service, but who do not have a heart for Him.

We are told in **Deuteronomy 6:5 "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."**

The church of Ephesus had forsaken their first love. It means they left, abandoned, even renounced that love even though they were still actively serving Him. Their service was out of duty not devotion. Their service was the habit of hands not from the heart. They had given Him their hands in service and their head in doctrinal purity, but they left loving Him with all their heart.

The condemnation in the Greek is emphatic. It literally reads: **“Your first love you have left.”** Earlier when Paul wrote to them, he commended them as a church that had deep love for the saints. In 40 years their hearts changed, their love cooled.

Folks, it is possible to hold deep convictions about Christ without a full understanding of why we hold them. It is possible to serve without love. **One author wrote that “orthodoxy and service are not enough. Christ wants the believers’ hearts as well as their hands and head.”**

The danger is that first generation Christians do not pass on the same love to the next generation. The next generation typically only sees the duty and not the devotion. How important it is for us to pass on a passionate love for Christ, a passion that is seen in our service and our commitment to His Word.

J. Vernon McGee notes that when church life becomes a burden, when it becomes a duty then there is something wrong with our relationship.

I hope it’s no secret that I love my wife. After a busy day of yard work or house chores Robyn will often say things like “thanks for cleaning up the kitchen” or “thanks for weeding the garden” or “thanks for picking up David” or “thanks for folding the laundry.” I will often respond with “I’m just trying to earn my keep.” I say that jokingly because I do those things not because I have to but because I want to. I do it because I love her.

The church that appeared to be perfect from the outside, the church that could have been up for ‘church of the year’ award had a heart problem.

One of my favorite scenes in the Wizard of Oz is when the Dorothy and the Scarecrow meet the Tin Man. After oiling his joints and getting him moving again the Scarecrow gleefully intones that he is perfect. The Tin Man retorts “Perfect, bang on my chest.” When the Scarecrow obliges and there is that echo from a hollow cavity he says it’s beautiful. The Tin Man says “hardly, I haven’t got a heart.”

First love is absolute devotion to Christ. It is fervent, personal, uninhibited, excited, passionate, openly displayed. Our love for Christ should deepen and become richer all the while never losing its excitement. When we begin to take the other person for granted, when things become routine we are in danger of losing our first love.

The Church at Ephesus had separation from the world but they had forsaken their first love. **John 14:21** tells us that if we love Christ we will keep His commandments.

In speaking to Peter in **John 21:14-17**, Jesus says that if Peter loved Him, he would feed His sheep. Peter writes in his first epistle that we should love Christ even though we don’t see Him. **(I Peter 1:8)** Jesus says that to love God is the first and greatest commandment. **(Matthew 22:37-38)** And then Jesus says in **Matthew 10:37-38** that our love for Christ must be greater than any love we might have for others, even our closest family.

How is your heart today? Do we really love Christ as we should or do we just give it lip service? Would Christ rebuke us in the same way?

A cooled heart leads to spiritual apathy. A cooled heart severely diminishes the influence of the church. A cooled heart for Christ leads to

compromise and spiritual decay. A cooled heart can eventually lead to a departure from the faith. Anything can cool our heart from loving Christ as we should. It doesn't have to be the pull of the world or the effects of the flesh. Just as it was in the case of the Church of Ephesus they were doing lots of good things. It was those good things that cooled their heart. They began to love the things, love the activity, love that they were doctrinally sound that ultimately pulled their heart away.

Bible teacher John Walvoord warns "Whatever the object of love, anything which hinders a true love for God may cause a Christian to lose his first love."

In his book *God is the Gospel*, John Piper essentially asks whether we are in love with God: "The critical question for our generation – and for every generation – is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ was not there?"

Francis Chan writes in his book *Crazy Love* "God wants of us – to crave this relationship with Him as we crave all genuine love relationships. Isn't that what brings Him glory – when believers desire Him and are not merely slaves who serve Him out of obligation?"

He continues by noting that we can really be in love with God and that it is more satisfying than anything else.

Psalm 18:1 "I love you, O Lord, my strength."

We sing this praise song:

I love you, Lord, and I lift my voice
To worship You, O my soul, rejoice!

Take joy, my King, in what You hear:
May it be a sweet, sweet sound in Your ear.

Is that from our head or from our heart?

Hymn #79 – My Jesus, I Love Thee

Do you remember the story in the Old Testament when Jacob left home and travelled to his Uncle Laban's home? When he saw Rachel, he loved her and worked for 14 years for her and the Bible says that his love for her was so great that all his labor was as if it were just a day.

How is our heart today, really? Do we love Christ or have we also forsaken our first love? Is our service out of duty or desire for Christ? If it seems like a chore, then you have lost your first love.

How do we renew a heart of love for Christ if it has cooled?

Jesus gives the answer in **verses 4-5** where we see there is a simple correction.

IV. THERE IS A SIMPLE CORRECTION – v. 5

The Lord gives us three key ingredients if we want to have a heart that truly loves and adores Him first and best of all.

A. Remember

It means to bring back to mind, to be careful not to forget. David one time prayed that God would restore to him the joy of his salvation. Jesus wants us to recall what it was like when we were first saved, to remember the joy of our salvation, to recall the vibrancy in our faith, the extra bounce in our step because of that salvation experience, the desire we had to share our faith with others, the desire to live in a way that would please the Lord and not make Him sad.

When the prodigal son was sitting in the pig sty it was then that he remembered home and longed for the days of running through the fields, remembering the love of his father and the joy they once shared. But his remembering moved him to action. He didn't just sit there, he got up and went home.

I know it's been a while for some of you, but if you are or were married, do you remember the days of courting and wooing, the celebration of new love? Christ is calling us to remember those days. Our memories have a way of rekindling the fire that was there, it can cultivate that deep love we once had for Christ. He calls us to remember!

B. Repent

As you have heard many times repentance is a turning around or a change of mind. It's an acknowledgment that God is right and we are wrong and we admit that to God and turn to follow Him. It restores the original fellowship broken by sin.

The prodigal son in meeting his father on the road outside the farm repented of his actions and confessed them to his father.

Maybe right now you need to confess a heart that has been cooled toward Christ. Maybe you need to repent of a heart that doesn't love Christ like it once did when you were first saved. He is willing to forgive and to restore that relationship with you.

C. Repeat

Go back and do the things you did at the beginning.

David loves building Legos. In order for the thing he is building to come out right, there are some steps that have to be repeated. If he ignores that step not only will he have extra parts, it won't look like the picture. He has to go back and do that step over.

If you want to have a heart truly in love with Christ – remember, repent, repeat.

I believe the prodigal son once again enjoyed the fellowship of his father because his love for him was restored. He once again knew what it was like to have that close relationship.

I think it's a call to a continuous action, that we need to do those steps over and over again so that our love for Christ stays vibrant and active.

Some of the things we may have done in the early days were actively and regularly reading God's Word and studying it, spending time absorbed in it as we would in reading a love letter. It includes a regular time of prayer and worship both by yourself and with other Christians, not forsaking getting together. It also includes obedient service, not out of duty but out of adoration - just because we love Christ.

There is one final point I want to make from this passage: there is a secure confirmation.

V. THERE IS A SECURE CONFIRMATION

– v. 7

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

The first part of the verse is repeated in each of the letters sent to the seven churches. It is a reminder that God's Spirit is the one who teaches us what we need to know for godly living. It is a reminder that we need to heed what is being said because these words come from the One who is the head of the church and has authority and control over it.

I also want you to know that while the letter was written to the members of the church it is also a call to each individual to ponder His own relationship

with Christ. It is a call for each of us to remember, repent and repeat so that we can return to a loving relationship with Christ.

In the Garden of Eden there was the Tree of Life. After Adam and Eve sinned and were removed from the Garden God put angelic guards around the Garden to keep Adam and Eve from returning and eating of that tree. If they had done that they would have never been able to experience the forgiveness and grace of God. The tree of life reappears in the New Jerusalem where we will be able to eat freely from it. The confirmation from Christ is that He will give us the right to eat from it. It is His and it is His right to give to us.

John asks the question: **“Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” (I John 5:5)**

John tells us in **Revelation 2:7** that overcomers are given the right to eat of the tree of life, the tree that provides eternal life. It is only obtainable through faith in Christ and His finished work on the cross.

We passed over something important in **verse 5**. Christ says that if the church didn't repent, He would come and remove their lampstand from its place. This does not mean that they would lose their salvation, but rather that they would lose their influence for Christ in a lost world.

Letters that were later written in the second century reveal that they did repent for a time, but later their influence as a church began to wane. After the fifth century both the church and the city declined. By the 14th century the immediate area was uninhabited. Christ's words had come true. Their lampstand had been removed.

Our church just celebrated its 40th anniversary. It's about the same amount of time that the church of Ephesus had been in existence before Christ wrote to her with His criticism and rebuke. Fortunately

there was the opportunity to return to loving Him as they once did. **I wonder where we find ourselves today?** Warren Wiersbe writes that what Christ is telling them is that the church that loses its love will also lose its light no matter how doctrinally sound it may be. That's why I think it's so important to heed the words of Solomon who told us **“to guard our heart.”**

Christ is in the midst of His church. Only He has the right and authority to give an accurate assessment from His inspection of the heart of the church.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” If we don't we will find ourselves drifting further and further away from the Lord. Sometime during their 40 year history they had lost their way. Let's heed the warning given by Christ and if need be return to our first love, otherwise, He may remove our lampstand.