

A Tale of Seven Churches: Ephesus Revelation 2:1-7

Slide 1

Have you ever wondered why each church singled out to receive the message of Revelation had a personal salutation from Jesus?

Why not just jump in with all the weird and wonderful stuff that Revelation has to offer? Well, this was a form letter, so the least Jesus could do was to personalize it.

Also, 2000 years ago, there was no mail merge. If John wanted to send a separate letter to each church telling them about his vision, he would've had to hand write it seven times. Not only would that have been time prohibitive but also expensive.

Remember this letter wasn't written on paper. It was probably written on parchment or leather scrolls made from tanned animal skin.

But I don't think it was a matter of courtesy or practicality that caused Jesus to include these personal notes to the seven churches. I think it was a spiritual issue.

Before these churches could hear from God, they had to make sure there were no issues standing in the way.

It's the same today. Before we can hear from God collectively or individually, we need to make sure there's nothing that's going to get in our way.

Sometimes, not always, but sometimes I hear people say, "*When I pray it's like God doesn't hear me.*" or "*My prayers don't seem to go any further than the ceiling.*"

And I think, *“What do you expect when you’re living in disobedience to God’s law?”* Sin puts a barrier between us and God? We can’t have it both ways!

You can’t flaunt God’s laws and have a relationship with Him. So, Jesus was saying, *“Okay boys and girls let’s get things straightened out; then we can talk.”*

Slide 2

Now, the city of Ephesus was located along the western coastline of present-day Turkey. It was the most important city in the area. Even though Pergamum was the actual capital of the Roman Province of Asia Minor, Ephesus was its greatest city.

Acts 18 tells us that the church in Ephesus was started by Apollos but it was Paul who shaped it. You can see the influence he had on the original group of believers by reading Acts 19 and 20, and the book of Ephesians.

It was also home of the largest harbor in the Asia Minor. Because of this, Ephesus was known as *“The Gateway to Asia.”* But 2000 years later the ocean is over 6 miles away.

What was once a proud harbor is now just beach and marsh. The silt from the sea gradually washed in, eventually destroying the one thing that made Ephesus so important. When the city’s connection to the sea disappeared so did the city.

Ephesus was also home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world: The Temple of Artemis, or Diana the Greek goddess of the Hunt and nature.

The building was 425 feet long by 220 feet wide, covering about 2 acres.

It was made up of 127, 60 feet high, columns and housed hundreds of priestesses who were nothing more than prostitutes. That wonder of the world is nothing more than rubble today.

But, not only was Ephesus a city of commerce and culture, it was a corrupted city. It's funny how those three "C"s so often go together.

It was in this, the greatest and perhaps most immoral city of Asia Minor, that we find the church of Ephesus.

Slide 3

Revelation 2:1, "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."

Remember last week, we analyzed some of the different meanings that could be ascribed to this term "angel."

We decided that, for the purpose of these letters, the term "angel" and the phrase "the seven stars" referred to the overseer or pastor of these particular churches, and that the seven gold lampstands were their churches.

Since the stars are held in Jesus' right hand, this tells us that the pastor's primary responsibility isn't to please the local church or even its congregation, the primary responsibility of the pastor is to please God.

Hopefully, when the pastor makes God happy, he'll make the people of the church happy, but that isn't always true.

Another thing we need to see is that Jesus is walking among the lampstands or the churches. He doesn't just watch what's happening in our church from a distance; He's an active part of the daily life of our church.

If Grace Fellowship is to be the church that it's supposed to be, then Jesus needs to be, not just a symbolic presence in our church, but a very real presence in the lives of the believers who make up our church.

Slide 4

Some theologians have theorized that these letters also represent a period of church history. In other words, they believe the Ephesian church is representative of the early church which existed from Pentecost until around 90AD when this letter was written.

Now, when the believers in these churches heard John's letter, they probably weren't thinking, "*Someday these letters will apply to various stages in Church history.*"

But there are lessons in them for us today. These letters apply to who we are and where we are as believers in 2020. There are lessons here for us as a church.

Another thing to remember is that when Jesus was speaking to an individual church, He was also speaking to the congregation of that church.

Dr. Joseph Kanzlemer in his book "*The End of the Age and Beyond*" said, "*The reference to any of these seven churches is to the average of its constituency. And we find that the Lord still deals with the local congregation on this basis.*"

Under Kanzelmar's theory, the local church won't be judged on the basis of a few "*on fire*" Christians nor on the basis of the unsaved in a church.

Instead, the local church will be judged on the spiritual temperature of the majority of members in that church. So, let's see what Jesus has to say to the church in Ephesus.

Slide 5

Revelation 2:2-3, *"I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary."*

This commendation may sound great, but the scary part is those first four words. Did you catch them: *"I know your deeds."* When you are doing something good, or maybe something a little shady, do you ever stop and think, *"Jesus knows what I am doing?"*

Do you stop and think: *"Jesus knows that I did this."* We need to stop and realize that He knows what we say, what we do, what we read, and what we watch.

Now don't think that, as He sees what we do and hears what we say, He's standing there with a rod of correction at the ready. That's not the picture we should have.

We need to picture Him standing there with a broken heart, disappointed in us. He knows that if we would only allow the Holy Spirit to control us, that our lives could and would be so different.

So you will understand verses 2-3 more clearly, let me paraphrase it, *"It looks like you've got it all together, you work really hard as a church, and you do all the right things. You don't take your faith lightly. You work hard at being Christians and you have stick-with-it-ness. No matter what happens you just keep going and going. You're the Energizer Bunny of Churches. You know the truth; there's no compromise in you."*

You have all the “i”s dotted and all the “t”s crossed. When false teachers show up, you know your Bible inside out and aren’t afraid to show them the door. In a city as corrupt as Ephesus you have held the truth high and not wavered from it.”

I don’t know about you, but if I was the church in Ephesus and heard all this, I’d be feeling pretty good about myself. Thinking: “Yes! We’ve done good.”

What a church. They worked hard at being the ideal church. They didn’t lack in good deeds and moral integrity.

They rejected sin from their midst, tested teachers and knew how to separate the true ones from the false ones. They persevered to the end.

What was it the Toyota ads used to ask, “*Who could ask for anything more?*” Well, apparently Jesus could! He says, “*Whoa, not so fast guys, there’s something else. You’ve worked hard, you’ve persevered, and you’ve not tolerated evil but...*”

One of the rules of Biblical interpretation of text is that after the “But” (Yet) comes the “Truth.” Which is a rule of life. Don’t you just love that word “but.”

You know... like when you hear “*That was a great meal, but...*” or “*That’s a nice-looking dress, but...*” or the one I hear a lot, “*I really liked the sermon, but...*”

Slide 6

So here it comes, Revelation 2:4, “*Yet (But) I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.*” In other words, “*You don’t love me or each other as you did at first!*”

Have you ever heard those words in a personal relationship, *“You don’t love me like you used to?”* Sometimes they’re right, sometimes love fades and disappears. Maybe because of neglect or apathy, or maybe the person just isn’t as lovable as they once were.

Sometimes first love can disappear, but not necessarily because we want it too. We don’t plan on falling out of love.

When we get married, we don’t say, *“Well this will be good for a few years then I’ll fall out of love and move on.”* No! In most cases we take seriously our oath: *“Till death do us part.”*

We believe that our first love will never change. That’s why Benjamin Disraeli, the Prime Minister of England in the 1800s said, *“The magic of first love is our ignorance that it can never end.”*

We don’t know what love changed in the church of Ephesus. Some suggest the love that was lost was their enthusiasm for the Lord. In other words, Jesus looking at His church and saying, *“You don’t love me like you used to.”*

A similar analogy is used in the Old Testament, in Jeremiah 2:2, *“Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: ‘This is what the LORD says: ‘I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown.’”*

Often there’s a honeymoon period in a relationship but then the enthusiasm fades. Perhaps Jesus is insinuating that the joy and enthusiasm the Ephesian Church had for Him had disappeared.

How many of us can look back at the hunger with which we devoured the Word of God right after our conversion. The urgency and conviction as we shared the Gospel with our lost family and friends.

But then everything got ordinary. We just drifted along until we lost our first love.

Our relationship with Christ is like a marriage in that it's not self-sustaining. It requires effort and work if we're going to keep the fire burning as bright as it was in the courtship faze.

Our Christian walk isn't evidence of perpetual motion. Christ doesn't give us a push at conversion and expect that one touch to keep us moving forever. We must keep going back to the source of our power and that's Jesus.

Not only does Jesus tell the Ephesians that they don't love Him like they used to, He says they don't love each other the way they used to.

Do you remember the descriptions given of the early church in the book of Acts? They had everything in common. Nobody wanted for anything. It appears this is no longer the case.

It may be that, in an attempt to achieve the things that Christ had commended them for, in their quest for perfect orthodoxy that they had killed the brotherly love that they once shared.

These are churches that have the rules down pat. They can quote doctrine inside out, they cross each theological "T" just right, and nobody can dot those "I's" the way they can.

But there doesn't seem to be much love or compassion in their fellowship. They may be theologically right but at the same time they are so wrong.

When the price of being theologically right is the loss of love then orthodoxy has cost too much. William Barclay stated, "*All the orthodoxy in the world will never take the place of love.*"

Jesus then finishes the introduction by telling these Christians that if they don't change their ways, and I quote from Revelation 2:5b, *"I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."*

That simply means that if we, as a church, don't maintain our initial love for Christ, and each other, then we'll be marked off that heavenly list of Christian churches.

A church isn't a church just because it's called a church! A church is a church because of its relationship with Christ and believers.

There are too many churches that have a cross on their roof and Christ in their name, but they're no more a Christian church than the Lions Club or Kiwanis. They're just one more social club.

That can happen to any church when they forget who they are and why they're here, regardless of the name on the door. But that's not the way it has to be.

Listen to the advice Jesus gave to the church in Ephesus, Revelation 2:5a, *"Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first."*

Slide 7

Conclusion

His advice can be summed up in three words: Remember, Repent, Return.

There's a story about an old farm couple who were driving along in their pickup and she looks at him and says, *"We never sit all snuggled up in the truck like we used to."* He looks over at her and replies *"I haven't moved."*

When we discover, as a church or as individual believers, that we aren't as close to God as we once were, understand this He didn't move! It's up to us to move back.

So where are you this morning? Have you lost your first love? If so, you can get it back. All you have to do is remember what it was like in the beginning, then ask for forgiveness for moving, and return to where you should be.