

The Church in Ephesus Revelation 2:1-7

Slide 1

One of the privileges we have as a church, and it's God's gift to us, is to see the Bible as a book of letters. Letters written to others. Letters which help us to learn more about ourselves and God.

For the next few weeks, we're going to take a deeper look at Bible mail. We're going to examine seven letters which were postmarked to seven different churches in the book of Revelation.

We'll see what was happening and how we can learn from these early churches.

Think about it, if Jesus was to write a personal letter to you, what do you think it would say? Would He be praising you, warning you, or a little of both?

What if He wrote a letter to our church? What might He say we're doing right or doing wrong? What should we be doing and what, if any, is our reward?

That's the gist of these letters found in the second and third chapters of Revelation.

Would Jesus be impressed by the things that impress others? Would He mention the size of our congregation? Would He notice how much money was given? Would He feel like an outsider?

Let me give you a couple of quick points, then we'll jump in. These letters were written by the disciple John while on the small Mediterranean island of Patmos where he was banished by the Romans.

Slide 2 - Map

Here's a map of where the letters were sent and where John was in relation to the churches.

He's on the isle of Patmos there in the bottom left corner. Each letter was written regarding specific situations each church was facing.

These churches were filled with real people struggling with real problems. Though 2000 years separate us, their issues aren't much different from ours.

The first letter went to Ephesus. It was a city with a population of about 250,000, making it the second largest city in the known world.

Slide 3 – Ephesus Then

Ephesus was an important trade and religious center. They had the best harbors in Asia Minor. I want you to notice the boats tied up in the harbor. This next slide shows what it looks like today.

Slide 4 – Ephesus Today

Remember that harbor I pointed out in the last slide? Where is it?? The Mediterranean is over 10K away. You'd never know Ephesus was a harbor city when you visit it today.

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But during Biblical times, Ephesus had built a temple to Artemis or Diana, one of their central gods. This temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Paul spent two years in Ephesus and eventually was run out of town because he was causing those who sold idols to lose sales.

Slide 6

Over the years the Ephesian church was taught by Paul, Apollos, Timothy, and eventually by John.

Not a bad group of pastors and teachers. So, in Revelation 2, John starts writing his letters to the seven church as God directs.

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.”*

Right off the bat you may be thinking, *“What’s going on here. You’ve just read 1 verse and I’m already lost.”* Now don’t worry, you see Jesus was nice to us, because in the verse right before this, He told us what this means.

In Revelation 1:20, *“The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”*

Jesus is saying, *“I’m 100% qualified, I have the power and authority to tell you what’s going on in your churches, because I am always with you. In fact, I’m the author of the church. I see all that’s going on, I know you, I see you, and I have not forgotten you.”*

Just as Jesus loved these churches, He also loves Grace Fellowship. He wants us to be the church we’re called to be.

Every letter follows the same general pattern, so let’s continue and find out what was going on in the Church at Ephesus.

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.”*

Isn't that great to hear?! Any church would love to hear those words. You're hard working, you don't tolerate wicked people, you make sure theology is correct. You're persevering.

In fact, John says that 2 times. They've endured hardships and haven't grown weary! WOW!! That's great news!!

The phrase "*hard work*" literally means "*intense labor, coupled with toil and trouble.*" It can also mean great sorrow.

Therefore, we know their hard work was also brutal. Yet, they were persevering. It was a labor of love. If you love who you serve and what you're doing, intense, hard work isn't a problem.

Remember, Ephesus was a religious capitol and Christianity flew right in the face of idol worship. Because of their "*hard work*," the church faced fierce opposition.

The end of Acts 19 tells us that Paul was run out of Ephesus for threatening the livelihood of the silversmiths who made false idols for the people to worship.

Yet, the church patiently endured, serving the Lord. Even though it wasn't easy, the church didn't grow weary of serving Jesus.

They also resisted sin, which wasn't easy in a city like Ephesus noted for their immoral practices associated with the worship of the goddess Diana.

The church was loyal to correct doctrine which was important since, in order for a church to be able to tell if a person is a false teacher, they must know the truth so they can spot false teaching.

They weren't afraid to challenge false teachers. If you weren't teaching Christ, they let you know it.

Verse 6 holds one more praise Jesus gave the church, *“But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”*

The Nicolaitans were a strange sect in the early church that taught that *“freedom in Christ”* meant you had the freedom to sin with impunity. In other words, there were no consequences for your sin.

You could do whatever you wanted. Sin all you want, because if Jesus forgave you of your sins, then you could do whatever you wanted and you’d be forgiven without question.

Note that Jesus actually said He “hates” the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. In today’s environment, He would be considered politically incorrect.

You see, we’ve made the Jesus of today to be One who loves everyone, someone who would never hate anyone or anything.

But that isn’t the Jesus of the New Testament. If something was wrong, Jesus let it be known.

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When you look at the praise heaped on the church at Ephesus, one would have to ask themselves, *“What’s wrong with this church?”* The church was a hardworking, doctrinally sound church.

They carried on in the face of persecution; they hated sin and didn’t grow tired of working for the Lord. What could the Lord possibly say was wrong with these people?

Now, when Jesus looks at a church, He looks under the rugs, inside the closets, and gets a look at what’s really happening. In this case all the good the church was doing was overshadowed by a sad reality.

Revelation 2:4, *“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.”* Christ knew they were simply going through the motions.

They left their first love. It’s not that they didn’t love Jesus, they did. But Jesus wasn’t their first love anymore.

Jesus said we need to love Him first, then every other love relationship flows from His love. When Jesus isn’t number one, everything else suffers. It’s true in the church and true at home.

Because Jesus was no longer number one in their lives, it was impacting everything they did. Decisions would be made without Jesus in sight.

Somehow, in the midst of all their godly busyness and all their standing for the truth, somehow, somewhere along the way, they left Christ out of their church. How is that possible?

Their passion for Christ had become cold and a kind of mechanical orthodoxy. Yes, they had outstanding doctrine and a desire for purity, but it was probably more out of obligation, than love.

I’ve seen people get excited to serve Jesus, then the flame fades away. It’s like when you start a new job. You’re filled with excitement, and before you know it, you’re not too excited about work any longer.

Relationships and marriages start out with passion and excitement. It’s exciting and romantic. You’re always thinking about each other. But after a while, we begin to take our loved ones for granted.

Yes, they’re important, but we begin to place other things before them. Maybe it’s work, school, hobbies, or whatever. It’s not a conscious decision, but it happens.

We find ourselves busy with life, and we slowly pull away from our spouse. We don't realize it at first, but slowly we move further and further away.

When we come to that realization, we're shocked, we're in denial, but we're caught!

The church in Ephesus was called out by Jesus. They were so busy, they lost Christ. They were too busy serving, a good thing, but doing it for all the wrong reasons.

The church calendar was filled. There was constant activity, but the heart, the passion, the fire was gone and so was Christ.

They were doing things in a perfunctory manner. They were going through the motions. Doing great good in Ephesus. Standing for the Word of God, but the passion, was slowly draining from them.

I've seen Christians who do and say all of the right things, but they've lost the love that once motivated them. I believe "*why we do what we do*" is more important than "*what we do*."

Getting results is always nice, but what's the motivation, what's the heart behind everything. That's the question to ask. Sometimes that's a tough one to take, but where's our heart in anything we do?

This may be one of the greatest problems in the church world today. We've lost our love of Jesus in order to dot the i's and cross the t's. God does not accept compromise. So, what's Jesus' solution?

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Revelation 2:5, "*Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.*"

This applies not just to the universal church, but it applies to us individually as well.

It's easy for all of us to worship Jesus on Sunday. We say Jesus is first... on Sunday, then comes Monday, other things get in the way, and Jesus is no longer number one. He's no longer our first love.

Jesus gives three simple, yet challenging steps to draw us back. We are to:

- Remember how it used to be.
- Repent – change our mind and our heart. Take action!
- Repeat the first works.

We don't regain our first love overnight. Ask any couple that's gone through a marital crisis.

A marriage doesn't deteriorate overnight, and it isn't restored overnight. Healing takes time. The couple must remember why they fell in love in the first place.

The same is true about our spiritual life. Jesus tells us it all begins with a good memory, "*Consider how far you have fallen.*" That hurts, doesn't it?

Remembering what you once had can be a good thing if it leads you to action. In most of life, it's taking the small steps, the baby steps to return to God.

If you keep walking in the right direction, soon you will walk out of the darkness and into the blazing light of God's love.

Of course, in our quick fix world, we want a quick prayer which will make everything better. We don't want to have to go through the pain. We want everything to be instantly right.

We want immediate gratification with no pain. Yet, healing and renewal will begin, and when it occurs it will be where we need it most, in our heart, spirit, mind, and body.

God expects holiness and righteousness from us. Yet, the wonderful thing about God is that He'll allow us to repent. If we repent, He'll forgive and cleanse us.

God wants us to approach Him knowing, trusting, and believing that He's always extending His hand to us and doesn't hold grudges.

Yet, remembering isn't enough, action needs to occur, so we're called to turn from our self-centered living.

We look at ourselves and with the help of the Holy Spirit and possibly others, we realize our sinfulness, confess it, turn from our wicked ways, and ask God to forgive us.

Remember, repentance is all about a 180-degree turn, so that we do what's right and not what's wrong. Repenting is taking action.

If all we do is remember, then we aren't getting anywhere. It's like me thinking, "*I really want to study the Bible*" but never doing it.

There must be action along with the remembering, and for Jesus this is our repenting for falling away, from moving away from our first love.

Then we're to return to do the "*first works*" again. Do you remember those first works when you were first in love with your spouse?

Those notes, the hand holding, the quick kiss, the look into one another's eyes, the desire to serve. The care, the passion, the devotion.

That's what Jesus wants from us!! He wants us to remember what it was like to be fully, completely, in love with Him!!

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Conclusion

What should we do? I believe we're to serve, serve God and serve one another. We do that because God loves us. We've experienced that love and we've been changed by God.

If we love one another, and we do it regularly, and we demonstrate that love, I believe the love we once experienced will slowly start to come back.

It's intentionally drawing closer to God. It's taking those small steps. It's taking the time to pray, to simply talk to God and spend time listening.

It's reading the Bible. Maybe a chapter a day, maybe it's reading a devotion or talking to someone about faith. It's worshiping, but it must be intentional!! That's crucial.

Yet, there's a warning from Jesus, before the final victory. We're told that if we don't repent, He'll remove our lampstand from its place. The lampstand represents God's approval.

Let me ask a question, "*How does a church know when its lampstand is removed?*" Now here comes the tricky answer.

The church would never know, because nothing would change. God would take His hand off the church and everything would continue as usual.

The preacher would preach.
The choir would sing.
The lights would shine.
The sound system would work.
The Sunday School would meet.
The people would worship.

BUT God would not be there. It would be religion without reality, preaching without power, and church without Jesus.

It's a sad fact that the church at Ephesus eventually ceased to exist. Maybe that's better than to continue as a church when Jesus is absent.

And so, we come to the ultimate question, "*Are we listening to what God's saying?*" Each of the seven letters includes this command:

Revelation 2:7a, "*Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*"

Do we have ears to hear? Or are we already too distracted by the noise of the world? The message to the church at Ephesus ends with this promise:

Revelation 2:7b, "*To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*"

The word "*paradise*" speaks of the personal presence of Jesus. It's what Jesus promised to the thief on the cross, "*Today you will be with me in paradise.*" If we are faith-filled in this life, we will know Jesus intimately in the next life.

Do we love Jesus?! That's the question before us this morning. It's a simple one, but even more than that, how do we love Him?

Is it with lip service, is it a superficial kind of love? Or is it real, deep, filled with passion and power?!

Everything we do, we should be doing for the Lord. What we say and do ultimately is a reflection of our relationship with Jesus.

That's what He wants, and you know what? It's available for all of us! You just have to ask, and He's ready, able, and willing to give it to you.