

Revelation 2:1-7

Have you ever had a piece of fruit that look great on the outside but when you cut it open it was rotten? Revelation shows us that individuals and churches can be like that as well. Some of the churches addressed in the next two chapters are in better shape than others, but we can learn something from all of them – either what TO DO, OR NOT TO DO.

In a moment we'll dive into the first of the seven letters to the seven churches. These letters have been instructional for ALL CHURCHES since the end of the first century.

The letters to the 7 churches give us an early look at what Jesus wants in a church. Revelation was written around 96 AD, so these churches were perhaps 30-40 years old. They'd been around long enough to be established and long enough to develop some good and bad habits. Jesus commends and/ or rebukes the churches early in their lifespan.

We at Highlands are close to 30 years old, so we can learn from these letters. The question for us is, "What does Jesus want to see in the church?"

LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES

The section from chapters 2-3 deals with the letters to the SEVEN churches in Asia. Note the number 7; it is symbolic and representative of all the churches, even up to us today.

These churches had different issues, strengths, and weaknesses in dealing with the challenges of their day. The closing refrain from each letter indicates that each letter is applicable to all churches everywhere. 3:22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' "

Some churches have a mixture of commendation and rebuke. Some get a word of encouragement to endure, while others get a sharp rebuke, with the sharpest going to Laodicea.

EACH LETTER HAS A PROMISE TO THE ONE WHO CONQUERS.

1. EPHESUS - Revelation 2:7: To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. Ephesus

NOTE:** Christian tradition holds that John had previously been the pastor/bishop in the Church of Ephesus. The church had some pedigree leaders and pastors – Apollos, Paul, Timothy, Priscilla and Aquilla, John. This was an important church in one of the more important cities of the empire.

REVELATION 2

Message to Ephesus

1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:

2 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; 3 and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.

4 But I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love. 5 Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent. 6 Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.'

D. Johnson:

Jesus commends the Ephesian church for its arduous toil, patient endurance (in persecution), and especially its intolerance of false teachers. This doctrinally astute congregation has tested and exposed false prophets. They share Jesus' revulsion over the heretical movement called "the Nicolaitans" (who have deceived the Christians of Pergamum). Its elders have heeded Paul's directive to be vigilant shepherds, protecting God's flock from deceptive, abusive leaders (Acts 20:28–31).

Paul's farewell address to the leaders of the church of Ephesus...

Acts 20:28 Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Paul was aware of the spiritual warfare described in Revelation. He knew that the church would constantly face attack from without and from within (sadly that church collapsed by 200AD, likely because of apostasy)

Read in today's context, the commendation that Jesus gives this church in Revelation 2 would be seen as a negative because Jesus commends them for being 'intolerant'. They do not tolerate evil men who are false 'apostles'.

Today's culture would say, "they were just speaking their truth; who are you to criticize them?"

Jesus knows that false teaching will destroy a church from within.

It is all too easy to pick on the "doctrine guard dogs" and cast them in a bad light, but Jesus commends those who are diligent to hold fast to the truth. I'm glad that our denomination has guardrails for holding to biblical truth. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians, "speak the truth in love." Truth and love GO TOGETHER.

To paraphrase former presidential candidate Barry Goldwater...

Extremism in the defense of Gospel truth is no vice. And moderation in the pursuit of tolerance is no virtue.

V. 6 "DEEDS OF THE NICOLAITANS"

Beale/Campbell—participation in the idolatrous cult of the goddess Artemis, goddess of fertility (Acts 19:23-41) "great is Artemis of the Ephesians. This cult worship was an essential part of the city life.

We don't have the same kinds of idolatrous cult gods and goddesses, but false teaching abounds in the culture.

Consider this EXAMPLE of Modern day false teaching to be aware of REVISIONIST HISTORY "Little Mermaid" pt.3

Ariel arrives at the wedding of Eric and Ursula and actually embraces Ursula. The force of Ariel's kindness gains the power of magic and the shell that contains Ariel's voice glows and moves from Ursula to Ariel; By the heat of Ariel's love, Ursula transforms back to her original form – the octopus body. The crowd is repulsed but Ariel continues to hug this being that repulses the others.

The force of Ariel's feeling forces the voice out of the shell and back to Ariel. Then she sings in a voice as warm as the sun. She rescues Eric and Ursula.

Turning to Ursula she says, "You hurt me, but I understand why.(13:21) and I don't hate you Ursula. You've taught me the power of my voice. I could even thank you for that." Ursula weeps and repents...16) King Trident arrives and threatens Ursula with a bolt from his trident, but Ariel throws herself in front of her, willing take the blow. . Ariel confronts her father and affirms that she too has magic and begins to sing. All the merpeople are enthralled and begin to sing with her. The song goes far and wide and people on land begin to sing... Ariel and Ursula jump back into the sea. (20:00) In the end Ursula marries Triton and Eric becomes a gay vegetarian.

Malcolm and his guest were reflecting on the revised Little Mermaid story with these words...

“The most beautiful moment is when Ariel throws her body in the line of her father’s trident to save Ursula. She will sacrifice herself to save someone, who up until now is seen as evil. Someone in good standing sacrifices themselves for someone who is considered irredeemable.

DOES THAT REMIND YOU OF ANYTHING????

While listening I thought, “They probably don’t know it, but they tapped into the gospel, and they don’t seem to be aware of it. They talk as if this is some sort of new story line that they have come up with.”

There is no greater story than that of Christ, and to rewrite the Little Mermaid, the author borrows from THE GREAT STORY of sacrifice.

1:5 To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood

WHEN THE WORLD borrows the gospel narrative, we need to stand for the TRUE story and witness to it.

Jesus knows that you can be diligent for the truth, endure, and not grow weary while ALSO doing something that merits a rebuke from the Lord. Jesus sees a major flaw in the stalwart church at Ephesus: “You have left your first love.”

THIS IS A VERY SERIOUS CHARGE with dire consequences if there is no repentance...

5 Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.

The call is to the Christian life of ongoing repentant faith. There is grace to believe in the first place and grace to keep repenting when we get off track.

This issue is more serious than we might think. Leaving your first love is an accountable offense. If it happens, we will be held to account. Whether it happens intentionally or unintentionally, Jesus calls us to repent.

What does one do then to regain the first love? You remember from where you have fallen, repent, and do the deed you did it first. You don't sit and bemoan where you are but actively pursue Christ.

** There is wisdom here for a marriage relationship in that if one's love has grown cold, you don't just sit and bemoan that. You must act to regain that first love. You remember what it was that sparked that love in the first place, and then you begin to do the deeds and behaviors that you did when you were in that loving relationship. ***

Do you REMEMBER the times when your love for Christ was the most fervent? Fan that first love into flame. The consequences to the church at Ephesus are life and death. The same warning goes for US TODAY.

WHAT DOES LOSS OF FIRST LOVE MEAN??

There are varying views on this:

Loss of love for Christ

Loss of love for each other

Loss of love for the lost

The text isn’t specific, nor does it exclude any of those three options.

To the original hearer how might this sound? How does it sound to you?

When I hear it, my first thought is that it relates to Christ. The first love of the heart of a Christian is love for God in Christ. The first and great commandment is to love God above all else.

One way we know that we’ve lost our first love, and thus have lost touch with the heart of Jesus is that the news of Him walking among the churches is scary, not comforting. Yes, He knows our hearts and what the inside of the fruit looks like. BUT REMEMBER that HE DIED FOR US ANYWAY.

Ortlund – Gentle and Lowly - The gospel offers us not only legal exoneration—a precious truth!— it also sweeps us into Christ’s very heart. You might know that Christ died and rose again on your

behalf to rinse you clean of all your sin; but do you know his deepest heart for you? Do you live with an awareness not only of his atoning work for your sinfulness but also of his longing heart amid your sinfulness?

Those would be questions that are addressed to the church at Ephesus and TO US.

Jesus says, "if you love me, keep my commandments", so (obedience) deeds are in view. What would this obedience look like?

Jesus says, (Jn 13:34,35) "This is the new commandment I give you, love one another just as I have loved you. By this will all men know that you are my disciples, that you love one another."

Love for Christ and love for one another is to have an outward impact – the world will know that you are my disciples. Jesus walks among the lampstands and lampstands are the churches so that they would give light to the world.

When we lose our love for Christ and for each other, our light grows dim.

The church at Ephesus is stalwart for truth and for protecting the inner purity of the church, but they've lost their first love and they risk losing their lampstand.

Remember the key verse I mentioned a few weeks ago ch 12... after the dragon is thrown down...

11 And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death.

Matt 24 Jesus speaking about the 'end of the age'...11 Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. 12 Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. 13 But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved. 14 This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.

Standing firm for truth AND proclaiming the gospel GO TOGETHER. Repentance unto salvation doesn't happen where there is no proclamation of the GOOD NEWS. No one figures out the gospel because we are "nice, moral, upstanding" people. Walking the walk without talking the talk simply leaves people clueless as to how to be saved.

v. 5 "do the deeds you did at first"... Acts 19 Paul at Ephesus...

8 And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. 9 But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. 10 This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

It is a privilege to be a lampstand for Christ in a community, but those who leave their first love risk having their lampstand removed. The Ephesians were not facing hardship from the outside, but rather lost love from the inside. In losing their love for Christ, they sin by failing to witness for Christ to the lost world around them.

The temptation is to maintain a form of goodness without it being rooted in love for Christ. That is what we see as a spiritual trend today. The spirit of the age is to say, "let's have good without God." You can only run on the fumes of biblical goodness for so long. Once God and Christ are removed then there is no ultimate reference point for good. We are left to navel gaze for answers. Even worse, we may be left to gaze at the navel of our neighbor...

One current example of the navel gazing is in what has happened at Harvard. **An article by Hannah Frishberg in the New York Post cites the new chaplain head as saying, quote, "We don't look to God for answers, we are each other's answers,"**

A world in which 'we are each other's answers' is not set up for human flourishing.

If that's the case, then we've got TROUBLE MY FRIENDS.

Fortunately, the Bible does not leave us clueless in our lost condition. There is one who loves us and releases us from our sins by His blood, Jesus the righteous. Jesus, the Alpha and Omega. Jesus, the faithful witness. Jesus, the firstborn from the dead. Jesus, the ruler of the kings of the earth. Jesus, the friend of sinners and the lover of our souls.

COME TO THE TABLE – that's what the TABLE IS ALL ABOUT

This table represents the breadth and length and height, and depth of God's love for us. Jesus comes to live the life we should have lived and die the death we should have died to save us from the death that we deserve.

Our first love for Christ is rekindled as we consider HIS GREAT LOVE FOR US – His deeds of sacrifice.

If your love has grown cold, then let it be warmed in the fiery glow of the cross.

The Cross is the blazing fire at which the flame of our love is kindled, but we have to get near enough for its sparks to fall on us.” – John Stott

<https://quotefancy.com/john-r-w-stott-quotes>

The TABLE is one way to draw near to the cross so that its sparks may fall on us.

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