

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA
Message 3
Words: 5938
Scripture: Revelation 2:1-7

INTRO: Our subject is the seven churches of Asia, as described by the Lord Jesus Christ to John the Apostle in Revelation 2-3. John was banished to the Island of Patmos and I encourage you to look at where this is on a map. Then from there, go to the city of Ephesus and look at where these seven churches were located.

We have introduced the book of Revelation and chapters 2-3 and we began to look at the Church of Ephesus in the previous message. Revelation 2:1 says, "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands..." I have mentioned that the word angel means messenger, and that I believe it refers to the human messenger.

We looked at the counselee, which was the Church at Ephesus. We saw that Ephesus was a very old city and that after 1,000 years it was still an important seaport city. It was an important religious, economical and political center.

We looked at the counselor. He is the one who holds the seven stars in His right hand. We looked briefly at why pastors are referred to as stars. They must not shift around theologically. They stand on the Word and do not move about.

Then we saw that the Lord walks in the midst of the candlesticks. The candlestick is that which holds the candle or lamp. And the candlestick of the first church was in Ephesus. And the believers are that which produces the *phos*, or light for the world. It is the believer's life that produces the light. The Lord is the light. The pastor reflects that light to the believers. The believer's lives take up those teachings and it makes their lives godly, and that godliness is the Lord's light in the world.

So we have looked at the counselee, and we began with the Counselor in the previous message. Here is what we have looked at. The Lord Jesus said, "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand..." I recommended that the angel, or messenger meant

here is the pastor. He is pictured as a star, and a star is a light source. I believe he is to be a source of light from the Word of God and shine it to the people. Just before Jesus ascended, three times He said to Peter, "If you love Me feed My sheep." Furthermore, he must remain doctrinally stable, not moving about as those who are like the planets, that Jude speaks of.

We are looking at the counselor. We looked at the first part of the description of Him in these words, "These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand...". And now we want to look at the second part in the words, "...who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands."

2. The counselor (1:1b)

So, the Lord Jesus Christ is described in a two-fold way. As each of the seven churches is addressed, some matter spoken of in chapter one is pointed out about that church with the possible exception of one church. It is that aspect of the description of the Lord that is pointed out to each church that is applicable to that particular church.

The lampstands, according to our Lord's own interpretation, are the seven churches. The Lord has addressed the pastor and now the Church is addressed, and the church refers to all the people in that body of believers that the pastor pastors. Jesus said in Revelation 1:20 that the lampstands are the churches, and we know that the church refers to the people that are in it.

So, just what is a lampstand? Well, it is not the lamp. It is the lampstand. It is the place the lamp stands. Notice now the words, "To the church of Ephesus, write..." The church in Ephesus is the lampstand, it is the place the lamp or the church stands. So let me pose this question: If the place the church is, is represented by the lampstand, what is the lamp? Turn to Matthew 5. This lamp stands in Ephesus, and what is the lamp? As I see it, the lamp is the people in the church. It is the people that make up the church.

Notice in Matthew 5, verse 15. It says, "Nor do they light a lamp..." The word for lamp is *luknos*. Further it says, "Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand..." Well, the word in the original for lampstand in the text here is *luknia*. A *luknia* is not a light. It is the place designed to hold a lamp. In the case of the church of Ephesus, it was the church of the city of Ephesus that held the light. The candle, or lamp that sits on the *luknia* is a *luknos*. So it says next, "Nor do they light a lamp, *luknos*, and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand..." *luknia*. Now this word *luknia* is the word of our text in Revelation 2. So there we have a lampstand and a lamp.

So, here is our question again: If the church is, the lampstand, what is the lamp, what does the lamp picture? So look at Matthew 5:15 again: "*Nor do they light a lamp (luknos) and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand (luknia), and it gives light (lampo) to all who are in the house.* You can easily tell that we got the word *lamp* from the word *lampo*. So we have a *luknia*, a unit to hold a lamp, then we have a *luknos*, the lamp, and it shines, *lampo*. If I were to translate this verse it would read, "*Nor do they light a lamp (luknos) and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand (luknia), and it shines (lampo) to all who are in the house.*"

But we have missed one thing. Look at Matthew 5:14. It says, "You are the light of the world..." Which word of those we studied do you think is the word *light* when it says, "You are the light of the world?" Well, it isn't any of those. The word *light* here is *phos*, which comes from *photos*, and you can tell we get our word *photo* from *photos*. *Photos* is light. *Photography* comes from the words, *photos* and *grapho*, to write. *Photography* is writing with light. And Jesus said, "You are the light of the world."

So, the lampstand is the church, but what is the light, the phos? And I recommend that each individual believer makes up the light. So, let us go back to Matthew 5:14 and read on: *"You are the light (photos) of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.*

15 *"Nor do they light (set on fire) a lamp (luknos) and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand (luknia), and it gives light (or it shines, lampos) to all who are in the house.*

16 *"Let your light (photos) so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*

So, in verse 16, what is in the believer that shines? It is the life or conduct of the believer. What dims the light? Not living right! What brightens the light? Right living! Why is the Church so powerless today? The life of professing believers is so lacking in godliness and sometimes even ungodly. In a church that holds to unconditional love, unconditional grace, unconditional forgiveness and unconditional eternal security, discipline of sinning members disappears and darkness sets in. Those teachings are instrumental in removing the fear of God which is instrumental in sinful living.

We cannot speak of these seven candlesticks in detail. But this picture of the seven branched candlestick comes, without doubt, from the seven branched candlestick of the OT tabernacle. The only light source in the tabernacle was this seven branched candlestick. The ONLY source of spiritual light in the world is a church that lives right!

Without doubt, the oil of that candlestick pictures the Holy Spirit. The gold material of which it was made pictures the divine Lord Jesus Christ. No Lord no candle sticks. No candlestick, no light.

And in our verse, by the Lord's walking in the midst of the candlesticks we see first that the Lord is vitally interested in each church, and in each church member. He did not leave the Church when He ascended to heaven. He is not far removed. He walks in the midst of them.

Furthermore, because He walks in the midst of them, He knows exactly what is going on in each church. It seems to me that claiming to be a Christian, and being a member in a church does not mean much today. My wife read this quote to me the other day by David Brainard: "Easy church membership is always a sign of a backslidden church."

But the Lord wants the church to be without spot or wrinkle. Let me ask, how do we respond when someone points out sin in our lives? Well, that hardly ever happens, but if it does, how do I respond. Do we immediately point fingers back at something, or do we thank that person? When somebody points out something in our children, do we protect, or deal with it? And if we protect, we will pay a price for it somewhere. And furthermore, if the correction is right, humbly repent and change the behavior.

A while ago as we were traveling we listened to some messages that were recommended to us which were preached by John McArthur. The subject matter was discernment. I recommend them to you as well. His text was 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 which says:

21 Test all things; hold fast what is good.

22 Abstain from every form of evil.

Every believer should live like this. And what do you have to be able to do to test all things? You have to be able to discern. McArthur said discernment is the ability to distinguish between right and wrong or divide truth from error. D. Martyn Lloyd Jones went a little further and said

it is the ability to distinguish between right and almost right.

McArthur listed some reasons why there is such a lack of discernment in the Church today. The first thing he listed was the lack of doctrinal clarity. He said people do not like doctrine because doctrine...? divides. Why do we like such teachings as unconditional love, unconditional grace, unconditional eternal security, unconditional forgiveness? I believe these teachings blur doctrinal clarity.

The second reason he gave why there is such a lack of discernment in the Church is a failure to be black and white. Is that a problem here in our town? Let me recommend those messages to you from "Grace to you" on the internet. Now why do I mention this? The Lord walks among the churches. That is a reference to the people in any particular church. And we are in a day in which we need great discernment. Half truths and now total untruths are tolerated in many churches, and if sin takes place, we are called on to love and extend unconditional grace. McArthur said the climate in the church today is intolerant to discernment, we are all about love and unity and non-divisiveness. Is he right?

You see, the word for discernment, has in it a word that today is a very bad word today. It should not be mentioned. The original word for discernment is *diakrino*. Turn to Matthew 16. The *dia*, is a preposition usually meaning *through*. The other word is *krino*, meaning *to judge*. There is that bad word. So it means to judge through or discern. Verse 1:

1 Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven.

2 He answered and said to them, "When it is evening you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red';

3 *"and in the morning, 'It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.'*
Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times.

4 *"A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." And He left them and departed.*

The Jews wanted a sign. They had not studied enough and refused to believe who Jesus was. They came to test Jesus. The word does not have the idea of checking to find the truth about Him, but to tempt Him into some error. And Jesus said they could judge what a day would be like by looking at the signs in the sky, but they could not tell who He was by looking in the Scriptures.

And He called them a wicked and an adulterous generation. Now take our modern world. We can look at a fellow human being, and not discern if they are a man or a woman. What words would Jesus have used to describe our generation? You see, we do not discern because it means we have to make a judgment, which of course is not politically correct, so we don't do it.

McArthur gave Proverbs 2:3, let me read for you verses 3-5:

3 *Yes, if you cry out for discernment, And lift up your voice for understanding,*

4 *If you seek her as silver, And search for her as for hidden treasures;*

5 *Then you will understand the fear of the LORD, And find the knowledge of God.*

Well, in our passage, the pastor is addressed in the words, "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven

stars in His right hand..." But the people are addressed in the words, "... who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands..."

3. The commendation (2:2-3, 6)

In verse 2 now, having looked at the counselee and the counselor, we come to the commendation. In verses 2-3 the Lord says:

2 I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you that you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars;

3 and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.

In 1:14 we learned that the Lord of the Church has eyes like a flame of fire. It is a discerning eye. It burns away the dross and looks on the actual character of each church. So He now tells the messenger of this church, "I know your works..." The pronoun 'your' refers to the pastor. Here we learn something very important. The light this church throws off comes from the believers, but the pastor is credited or corrected for the works of those in the church.

Recently I heard of two Christians in a local church here working for a local company. And what I heard I found astonishing, in the negative sense. And it seems that they did not even recognize they might have done something wrong. It seemed there was no conscience. And do you know of whom it reflects? The pastor.

Ultimately, the works are all the works of the people of the church. The church is the people. But the pastor is credited or reproved for what the people do. The influence of the pastor is evident in the actions of the people. The actions of the people of the church are a reflection of the pastor. So the Lord says, "I know your works."

And now we ask, of what importance are the works of believers? Listen to the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 5. He said, *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*

And when the Lord says to this church, "I know your works..." He is speaking of that area of works in which their light shines in this wicked city of Ephesus. Now think with me for a moment. These letters will have been delivered to each of the seven churches. What must they have felt like when the Lord so clearly showed He knew all about them? Whenever I study these churches I wonder what the Lord would write to the church I pastor. No doubt that when the Ephesian church read the Lord's evaluation of them they realized that He truly was the One who walks among the churches and knows what is going on.

So let me ask, when Jesus said, "I know your works, your labor and your patience" what area of their lives is He speaking about? Well, first He speaks of that which consumes their energies in the church positively.

a. Positive expenditure of energy

So the Lord says, "I know your works, your labor and your patience." Here is that which consumes energies. First is their work. From the Lord's own words this church was an energetic church. M.R. DeHaan has said, "To come to Christ costs nothing. To follow Christ costs something. To serve Christ costs everything" (Quoted by Tim LaHay). What these works were, we are not told. But works require the expenditure of energy. May I ask you, what energies do you expend for the Lord in the church? We are not talking here about our daily job, or family life, as important as those is. We are talking about the work of the church.

Let me give you an assignment. When you are at home by yourself somewhere, take out a piece of paper and write down what you do in the church. What energies do you burn for the church? If the Lord handed you a list of what you do, what would be on that list? I came to church here this week and one of our ladies was busy getting fall decorations up. I ask you, what energy do you expend for the church?

Then Jesus said, "I know your labor." According to Barclay, this word speaks of labour to the point of sweat or exhaustion. He says it is, and I quote, "...the kind of toil which takes everything of mind and sinew that a man can put into it. The Christian way is not for the dilettante and for the man who fears to break sweat. The Christian must spend his life going all out for Christ and his fellow-men" (75). In our Plautdietsch we would say of a person who is described by the word *labor*, "dee rakaden fe dem Harrn."

May I ask you, what do you do for the Lord in the church? Do you have a responsibility? Do you expend energy to the point of exhaustion? You can't do all you want at home or elsewhere because you have church responsibilities. The Lord knows your work and labor. Some day comes accounting time, when every believer will be rewarded according to their works. No amount of works earns any part of salvation, but every work truly done for the Lord will be rewarded. You see, it is our works that are the light the world sees.

Last, the Lord speaks of their patience. He knows their patience. The word is *hopomenee*. It means to *remain under*, or *bear up under*. The idea is that of weights being placed on them and they bear up under that weight. They don't break down under the weight. Anyone who has labored in church work knows what this word means. This is a great test for any church. We know a lot about this. Let me quote

Barclay on the word *patience* which is the word *hupomeneen* in the original. He writes, "Hupomene is not the grim patience which resignedly accepts things, and which bows its head when troubles flow over it. Hupomene is the courageous gallantry which accepts suffering and hardship and loss and turns them into grace and glory. It is often said that suffering colors life; but when we meet life with the hupomene, which Christ can give, the color of life is never grey or black, for life is always tinged with radiance and with glory" (76).

You see, all of this is the positive expenditure of energy in the work of the Lord. And the Lord knows it all, and I can assure you that in heaven is a book and it has the name of all true Christians in it. And some day every Christian will receive according to what he has done, that is, according to his works.

b. Negative expenditure of energy

But that is not all the Lord commended them for. You see, they expended energy that propelled them forward. The Gospel reached others through the believers in the church. Believers were built up in the faith by the church.

But there were other things that consumed their energy, but it was a negative expenditure of energy. The Lord says: "I know your works, your labor, your patience..." And then He adds, "...and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars..." Here we have the negative expenditure of energy. It is like a country's defense budget. You have to spend all this money just to remain safe. It does not get you ahead financially, but instead it costs. It does not grow any crops or produce food, or

oil or anything else of positive use. It just consumes. But if you don't expend that energy, you will die. When a church fails to expend energies in the defense department, the price comes in a downward spiral, which in the end will bring it to an end.

First, they had those there who were evil. Now of whom are we speaking? Are these people who are or have sought to be in the church, or are we speaking of the people outside the church? No doubt they are those who profess to be believers but they are evil. 1 Timothy 5:24 says, "Some men's sins are clearly evident, preceding them to judgment, but those of some men follow later."

In 1 Corinthians 5, we have an example of an evil man in a church whose sins were clearly evident, and the church refused to deal with it until Paul wrote to them and told them to expel him from the church. Tim LaHay says, "A true church is in the world but not of the world. One of the things that characterized the early church, but not some of the other churches, was the refusal to fraternize with loose Christians. The early church heeded the injunctions of the Holy Spirit to 'watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them' (Rom. 16:17). Church discipline is almost unheard of today. The early church practiced it, and the truly separated church that is filled with the Spirit today will still practice it", end quote (45).

He writes again, "Some years ago, while visiting the church of the Tzeltal Indians of southern Mexico, I saw what it meant for a group of believers to observe church discipline, having only the Bible to instruct them. One man was standing outside, watching while the services were being conducted. We were informed that this was because he had

been going with an unsaved woman in the village, which compromised his Christian witness and was considered an offense by that church. They would not permit him to sit inside through the services until he repented. We were also informed that others of that church were not permitted to take communion or give their tithes and offerings if they were not in fellowship with the Lord. What a stir it would create in the modern church if such practices were conducted faithfully; but who can say they should not be?" (46).

William R. Newell, speaking of the Ephesian church says, "There was holiness there - a precious character! To permit men known to be bad to be in fellowship or even in office, is common today (he wrote a long time ago), but is treachery to Christ - whom the Church represents. Further, it is deadly wrong instead of kindness, to the unsaved and evil, to have them in 'fellowship.' Some day they will curse you for such unfaithfulness! (37).

So who are these evil men? Well, let me recommend that they are not always those whose sins are open beforehand, nor do they necessarily look demonic. Many of them look the part of a Christian. Nor do I think they are they people who know they are bad and they have the desire to corrupt others. They may well be people who think they are good and what they have to say is good and should be followed. They may be liars, or those who cause strife. They may brake agreements and if you would talk to them, they will tell you that they were doing the Lord's will.

But liars do not do the Lord's will. Party makers behind the back of leadership are not doing the Lord's will. They are evil, as our text says. And the Ephesian church recognized many such men and they dealt with them as the commentators I mentioned also pointed out. This is the negative expenditure of energy. It

is dealing with this kind of thing that makes church leaders weary.

The Ephesian church had such a characteristic that could not bear such people and they dealt with them. Furthermore, the Ephesian church had another positive characteristic. Jesus said, "And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars..." Not only did they have evil men who came among and sought to bring their evil into the church, they had those who came and claimed to be apostles. Who are these people? They are those who think the Lord has sent them to correct the church. They think they are there to bring some new truth to the church. And let me commend many of you who have heard of some writer or speaker and immediately checked them out and found them to be bad.

Today we do not only have those who bear this mindset, but those who go beyond that and actually call themselves as those sent by the Lord to straighten the church out. And sometimes ear is given to them. Why? Because if they say the Lord sent them, who are we to say that is not so! As McArthur says, discernment is gone.

But notice now, that the commendation goes further in verse 2. The Lord Himself said of the Ephesian church regarding those who claimed to be apostles, "And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars..."

Now notice that they had tested them. They had tested them with the view of seeing if their teachings could be approved, but when they had tested them, they found them to be liars. There are many professing believers, who after a few tests fall off. Here is one test I have learned to use. When some person has some new idea they think the church should follow, a

good test is to not respond to that and see how they handle it when you do not respond to their ideas. Some of these kind leave after a while and try elsewhere.

The Ephesian church was willing to test professing believers who put themselves forward. And it seems obvious that they were willing to put those out whom they found to be liars.

I have learned another thing from experience; if you excommunicate when you should, you will meet the strongest of opposition. And when you lose people because the excommunicated person was a brother or sister or some close relative, one's perseverance is severely tested. I believe I know why churches do not excommunicate. In such times such teachings as unconditional love and unconditional forgiveness and unconditional eternal security and unconditional grace become convenient doctrines.

But I want you to notice what the Lord Jesus Christ says further in verse 3 of this church: "and you have persevered..." Despite the opposition such stands might have brought about from people, and most certainly from the demonic realm, they persevered.

So look at this word 'persevered'. Now go back to verse 2 where it says they could not bear a certain kind of professing Christian. The word translated 'to bear' and the word translated 'to persevere' are both the same, *bastizo*. They could not bear certain Christians whom they had discovered to be evil no matter how good they looked, and they could not bear those who claimed they were sent as apostles of the Lord. They could not bear them. But they could bear the problems that it caused to remove them. They persevered, *bastizo*.

Furthermore the Lord says, "...and have patience..." No matter what the cost, they bore it and they had patience with it. They bore up under whatever the cost was in Ephesus.

And last, the Lord says they had, "...labored for My name's sake and have not become weary." They had not grown weary of standing. One could translate that they had not become sick of it. You know the potential of becoming sick of paying a price for standing. But that is not pleasing to the Lord. Now if a church has this kind of opposition and problems, one might conclude that they were not being blessed by the Lord. But it is not how well things work that determines the Lord's blessing. It is doing what is right from the right motivation that counts.

And now, the Ephesians, having paid this huge price for their stands have the Lord Himself write them a letter and commending them for how they have stood for truth. This must have been a great encouragement. But having commended them, the Lord does have some criticism for them.

4. The criticism (2:4) 5254

Well, no doubt, if we should receive such commendation from the Lord, we would wish there was nothing negative to say about us. May I ask you, if there is something negative to say about us where we are contrary to anything in the Word of God, what might it be? Would you be afraid if the Lord wrote about us, and then He said, "Nevertheless..."? Surely, when the Ephesian church first heard this message they must have been all ears when the Lord said, "Nevertheless I have something against you..."

Well, we find that in verse 4 which says:

2:4 Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

Note that the KJV says, "I have *somewhat* against thee..." The word 'somewhat' is in italics indicating that it has been supplied. Because of the way the original reads, a word needs to be supplied and the NKJV says, "I have this against you..." the word 'this' is a pronoun referring to leaving their first love. Leaving their first love is what the Lord had against them. Now how could all of what the Lord has just said be true, and the fact that they had left their first love be true as well? That is a big question.

Let us begin by noticing first that they are not leaving, they have already left their first love. It is no longer there. Yet further, it does not say there is no love, but they have left their first love. Oh, there is a very important warning for us here. The family commentary says, of leaving this first love, "...for the abatement of which no steadfastness in outward services can be a compensation, since it is the heart that Christ desires." What are they saying? Here is the word that comes for us: You can stand for truth as much as you want, but if you leave your first love, the Lord has somewhat against us.

Notice further, it says they had *left* their first love, not they had *lost* their first love. That is also how it can be with our salvation. We will never lose it, but the Lord will not stop us from leaving it, and many do. You see, if one inadvertently loses something, we are not as easily to fault for it; but if we leave it, now we are fully at fault.

Merryll C. Tenney says of the Ephesian Church, "The church had departed completely from its initial affection for Christ and had lapsed into a state where its spiritual life had become only an orthodox routine. No great scandals disfigured its reputation, and its organization was still functioning smoothly, but the inner springs of its life had begun to run dry" (57). Is there not a word for us here?

Straus says, "They maintained a spirit of sacrifice, steadfastness, separation, and a keenness for detecting heresy, but they were guilty of a sin no average person could detect. They had left their first love" (37).

Barclay gives two suggestions as to what leaving their first love could mean. First, he says it could mean that they have left the love which we call the love of the honeymoon stage. Or, it could mean, and I quote: "But much more likely what this means is that the first fine rapture of Christian fellowship and love for the brotherhood is gone. In the first days the members of the Church at Ephesus really loved each other; they had been a band of brothers; dissension had never reared its ugly head; the heart was ready to kindle and the hand ready to help. But something had gone wrong. It may well be that heresy-hunting had killed love; it may well be that the eagerness to root out all mistaken men had ended in a sour and rigid orthodoxy."

CONCL: Well, I have to leave this point unfinished. But it leaves each of us time to ponder, what could it mean, to leave one's first love for the Lord? Have I left my first love for the Lord?

Well, so far we have looked at the counselee in verse 1:

1 To the angel of the church of Ephesus write,

We have looked at the counselor in 1b:

'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:

Then we have looked at the commendation:

*2 I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars;
3 and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.*

And last, we were looking at the criticism in verse 4:

Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.