

The Church in Ephesus

The Seven Churches

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Let's turn to the very last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, chapter 2. I'll be reading verses 1 through 7.

1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. 2 I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. 6 Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'"

This is God's word.

Let me pray.

Father, these words remind us that the church in every generation could be commended for various things and also could be called account of various things, certainly the absence of certain things. So, Holy Spirit, may we be found to be people who have an ear to humbly hear and receive what the head of the church is saying to the church. We pray this in his name. Amen.

Well, I wonder how many of you have had the big vacation this year, you know, the vacation that you've been planning for, the one that you've been saving up for, the big vacation. Perhaps yes, maybe no. Maybe no vacation at all yet. I don't know. So I want to help you. I want to help you this morning. I'm here to help. I want to help you this morning and by that I mean for the next seven Sundays beginning today, I want to take

you on a trip to the Middle East as we visit the seven churches in Revelation. Seven churches and the picture that we've used for this is kind of a modern picture, you know, modern city but it wasn't that way in the first century when these letters were written. In fact, just to give you an idea, just to get the setting right, okay, we're going to see a series of slides here pretty quickly but the first one I want you to see is the setting for these letters took place in what is known today as modern day Turkey. It's called Asia Minor during the first century, but today it's known as Turkey, and John, the apostle, was exiled on an island called Patmos. The next slide you'll see will help you to see just in relation to where that island was at, you'll see in the Mediterranean Sea there, you'll see a red "P" and that stands, of course, for Patmos. Then you'll see numbers 1 through 7, and that's the various churches that these letters were written to.

The next slide you'll see is the actual isle of Patmos. In other words, there really was an island. In other words, when you read the Bible, you shouldn't read it like it's some kind of fairy tale and some mystery land. This is an actual island, the island of Patmos, and this was the island that John was on. He was in exile there. He is a prisoner and it's there from which he wrote these letters.

The church that we're looking at today is the church at Ephesus. Now, there is no official city of Ephesus today. The remains of Ephesus are found in what's called the province of Izmir, Turkey, and you'll see a current day picture of that. It doesn't look at all like it was in the first century. This is 2017, the province of Izmir and it's really a large province. It takes in a lot of area, and as we'll see next week when we look at the church at Smyrna, all of the remains of the church at Smyrna are also found in the province of Izmir.

Speaking of remains, this next picture is some of the ruins of Ephesus during the first century, and a lot of tourists travel to this site. But one of the primary sites that they travel to is the Temple of Artemis and that's in the next picture that you'll see. It's one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the Temple of Artemis. Again, some of the ruins, some of the remains of the city of Ephesus.

Now, that kind of gives us the setting for where these letters were sent to, but I want you to think for a moment with me about the founding of the church at Ephesus. In other words, how did the church at Ephesus get started? Did they throw up a building and say, "If we build it, they'll come"? Was it that way? No, not at all. In fact, you can go back to the book of Acts in chapter 19 and 20 and get all the information that we have been given on the founding, how the church began in Ephesus. And let me explain it this way: the word "church" in the Greek is "ekklesia," which means "the called out ones." The church is composed of people who have answered the call, okay? Think about it this way: most of you have a smartphone and you have maybe a song that identifies with a certain person, and when they call you, you hear that song and you know whether you want to answer or not, but the idea is when you get the call, the idea is to answer the call, okay? Now, the Apostle Paul went to the city of Ephesus along with some others and there they preached the Gospel. They preached the good news of Jesus Christ and that message was, in effect, a call. It was a call. It was a call from God going out to the people. Some would answer the call. Some did not answer the call.

So it's important you understand how this church began in Ephesus: it began with the call of the Gospel going out. Now, it was a call from a former way of life to a new way of life. It's a call not to be saved by your moral living, okay? It's not that kind of a call. It's a call to be saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ for good moral living. It's not a call, it was not a call to prepare your righteous record; kind of like you get your resume together, you go in for a job and you get all the best stuff together. The call of the Gospel is not a call for you and I to grab together all of our goodness, all of our righteous record, get it all together and then give it to God and say, "Here you go. See what a great person I am? Now you owe me. Because I'm so good, you owe me." That's not the call of the Gospel. The call of the Gospel is for us to receive, to receive the perfect righteous record of Jesus Christ on our behalf, freely given to us through faith in Jesus.

So understand that during the first century, Paul and the other companions went to Ephesus with the call of the glorious Gospel. Some answered that call and those who answered the call, made up the church, right? Because the church is the ekklesia, the called out ones. It's those who answered the call and so those who answered the call made up the church and so this letter, the reason why I'm explaining this you'll understand in just a moment, this letter was written to a collective group, not one isolated person over here, one isolated person over here. It was written to the collective group, to the church at Ephesus. And I say that because, I've just been really thinking a lot about this lately because, you know, I get the opportunity to meet a lot of people outside the church, a lot of people who are unbelievers, and have a lot of conversations that kind of tune me in to what people think and how they're thinking. I think it's important to know that.

So think about it this way: a person can attend a church and never be a Christian. Are we agreed on that? A person can attend church, they can actually attend fairly regular and never be a Christian. Now, I also want to say this: there are people who are physically infirmed that cannot, that physically cannot attend and gather together with other believers. They can't do it because of some physical infirmity. Now I'm not talking about them, okay? I'm talking about those who are Christians, if you are a Christian, if you are a Christian, you will not neglect the assembling together with other believers. Let me say it again: you can attend church and never be a Christian, but if you are a Christian, you will not neglect the assembling together with other believers.

I spent a few weeks ago, I have to be careful when I tell stories. It didn't happen here. So I was officiating a funeral and the spouse looked at me almost mad, almost angry, and said, "He was a Christian. He was a Christian." I said, "Okay, tell me about it. Tell me about it." And so he was a Christian but he didn't think he needed to go to church. She said it was just enough for him to go out and sit underneath a tree and read the Bible. I thought, "Interesting." It reminded me of the African American pastor, Voddie Baucham. He was telling this story, he said, "You know, imagine that one of my members came to me and said, 'Brother Voddie, I love you, man. I love you. I mean, I love you above all others. You are my favorite brother. I love you. I just love being around you. When I'm around you, I feel better. I feel excited. I feel thrilled. I love learning from you. I love hearing you teach the word of God. I just love you, brother. I love you, but I hate your

wife." Now Voddie said, "Well, what do you think I'd say to that?" I said, "Brother, that's not going to work for me. That's not going to work for me, that you love me but you hate my wife. That's not going to work for me." And Voddie went on to explain, he said, "You know, I've never laid down my life for my wife. Never have. Never have had to do that, but in spite of that, I still would not have that kind of arrangement, you love me but you hate my wife." Then he added this, "Why do we think that Jesus who did lay down his life for the church, why do we think that he would be okay with that?" In other words, why do we think that Jesus would be okay with a person who says, "I love Jesus. Jesus, I love you. Man, I love you supremely. You're first and foremost but I don't want to have nothing to do with your church. I hate your bride." Why do we think that Jesus would be okay with that? Because he's not. He's not okay with that.

You see, in Revelation 1, what we have is Jesus walking among the lampstands and we find in chapter 1 that the lampstands are symbolic of the churches, and he comes to John and he reveals himself to John and instructs John to write what will be the seven letters to the churches in Asia Minor, and the first letter is to the church at Ephesus. Now, you may be sitting here today thinking, "I hope we have time to cover this, this and this." We won't have time. We will not have time to cover everything that's said in these seven verses. There's a lot and so I've tried to narrow it down to what I feel will be most helpful for us and that's three things. First, what Jesus knows. We find out here what Jesus knows about the church. We also find out what Jesus wants most. Isn't that interesting? You think, "What would Jesus want most from me?" But then finally, we'll look at how can we give Jesus what he wants most? How can we do that?

So, first, what Jesus knows. Look at verse 2. It's interesting in this letter he makes very clear when he tells John to write it, "Tell them I know." Do you see that in verse 2? "I know." Let's just stop there. I know. Now, many of you after 23 years together, many of you know me. You know me fairly well, but I'm pretty sure that none of you know me like Catherine does, right? None of you know me like she does. She tells me at times at home, "Oh, Van, if they just knew you." I don't know what she means by that. But you see, the point is this: our spouse knows us better than anybody, right? Like nobody else. And I say this because one of the metaphors used to describe the church's relationship with the Lord Jesus is marriage. Over and over again, it's just one, it's one of the metaphors but it's used quite frequently to speak of this unique relationship that the church has with the Lord Jesus.

One verse I think I find helpful is in 2 Corinthians 11. Notice this, Paul said this to the church at Corinth, "I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ." Now, he's talking about betrothal. He's talking about that engagement period and what we can learn from these verses and others with this imagery of marriage is, firstly, that the church is promised to Jesus Christ. The church, those who comprise the church, are promised to Jesus, and the church is the bride of Christ. It's the wife of Jesus Christ and we find that Christ here knows and loves his church.

Now, let's look and see in particular what he knows. Look at verses 2 and 3. First he said, "I know your works," in other words, I know your deeds. I know the good deeds that you're doing. I know "your toil," and the word "toil" there means "to work until you sweat." It means to labor hard. So he's speaking to the church. "I know your work. I know how you're working hard," and then he says, "I know your patient endurance," he said, I know also "how you cannot bear." Now look at that phrase with me just for a moment. We need to just camp on that for a moment, "how you cannot bear with those who are evil." That phrase "cannot bear" literally is the word "tolerate," and I bring this up because in our culture, one of the worst sins that can be applied to a person is for you to be intolerant. "Oh, you Christians, you're bigots and you're intolerant of others." And I just want to point out here that Jesus is commending this church for their intolerance. In other words, there are some things, some matters in which we must not tolerate. Now, that doesn't mean just a blanket statement, we don't tolerate anything, it's specific here and it's specific in regards to doctrinal soundness. In other words, doctrinal health. In other words, it's important that we do not tolerate false doctrine, and for this church at Ephesus, they were being commended. They were not tolerating just any teaching that was just blowing through the church world and so Jesus is commending them in this matter for being intolerant.

In verse 3, he mentions again, "enduring patiently and bearing up," notice he said, "for my name's sake." In other words, they were so identified with Jesus that they were willing to be publicly identified with Jesus in such a way that it would cost them. It would cost them. It was costly to identify with Jesus but they were not reluctant to do that.

So what do we see here? Jesus knows and what he knows, he is commending them. I mean, how many of us, we go to a job and we're working away and we just want somebody, want somebody, especially the boss or supervisor to come by and just say, "You're doing a great job." Just want to hear that commendation, that affirmation, and that's what Jesus is giving the church at Ephesus. "I know. I know what's going on there. I know how hard you've worked and I know how patient you've been. I know how you've been working until you sweat. I know your intolerance of false doctrine. I know that you're doctrinally sound and healthy. I know these things." He's commending his church. Now they're not perfect, as we'll see in a moment, they're not perfect. There is some ugliness here, okay? But what I want you to see is that Jesus finds beauty even in the midst of ugly things.

Remember there is a song by U2 that's entitled "Grace," and there's a line in it that says, "Grace finds beauty in ugly things," and that's what the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ does. You see, the world, the world may despise the church, there are a lot of things the world can poke at us and say, "You're not doing this. You're not doing this. And this is not right and that's not right." That all may be true but when your spouse, when your spouse looks at you and says, "You are beautiful," that silences all the critics, right? Just hearing your spouse say, "You look fine. You look great." That silences all of the critics and that's what Jesus is doing here. He's commending his church. He knows and he commends them. And I'd like to hope, just before we get beyond this point, I'd like to

hope, wouldn't you, I'd like to hope that the Lord Jesus would give us at Calvary a commendation. I'd like to hope that.

As I look at this, though, I think about it, I wonder and I think, in what way would the Lord Jesus commend Calvary Christian Center? We're far from perfect but what we're finding here, at least, is that Jesus has a way, Jesus has a way of finding beauty in ugly things because not all things are well at Ephesus, as we're going to see. In fact, let's look at it next, what Jesus wants the most. Look at verse 4, "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first." Now, let's not forget their intense labor, their endurance, their doctrinal soundness, all of that is commendable but may I ask you this question: where is the delight, the joy, the love? You notice the list of things that Jesus commended them for, "I see this. I know this. I know this." But notice he did not say, "My, my, your love is outstanding. Man, your joy is off the charts. I see so much delight in your being." He doesn't say that. He commends them but then in verse 4, "you have abandoned the love you had." Now in particular, in particular he is speaking of their love for Jesus. Jesus is writing to the church about their love or the lack thereof, for him.

Now what does this mean? We can say it in a few different ways. First, their love for Jesus has grown cold. Back in 1964, there was one of those groups that just had like a one-hit wonder. They were called the Searchers and they recorded a song entitled, "Every time you walk in the room," as some of you my age may remember. It was written by Jackie DeShannon and I was listening to the interview of her about three months ago and she was talking about writing that song and she wrote it from a personal experience. She had fallen in love with a young man and he kind of ran in the same circles that she did, and so she would be somewhere and he would walk in the room and it was just like, you know, she just couldn't take her eyes off of him. You've been there before, right? Somebody you're attracted to, you think, "Woo," and they walk in the room and you're just like everywhere they go, you're just following them. Every time you walk in the room.

So you know that, right? You understand that kind of feeling. That kind of sensation was gone for the church at Ephesus. It was like Jesus could walk in the room and they didn't recognize him anymore. Notice, he was no longer attractive. No longer beautiful. No longer lovely. It's like the Righteous Brothers singing back in the 60's, "You've lost that loving feeling." It began with, "You never close your eyes anymore when I kiss your lips." No, something is wrong here. It's not like it used to be and Jesus is addressing his church and in verse 5, he says, "Hey, remember therefore." In other words, we can't leave this this way. "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first." Now listen, Jesus is speaking to his spouse. The church is his bride. He is speaking to his lover and he's saying, "There are things about you that need to change."

You do remember, right, when you were single? When you were single you could pretty much do what you wanted to do. You didn't have to tell somebody, "Hey, I'm gonna be gone for a couple of days." You just took off. Or you could leave your clothes out in the middle of the floor for days. You didn't have to worry about that. You just do what you want to do because you were single, right? You could eat out of a can if you wanted to.

You'd do what you wanted to do, but what happened when you got married? Things changed, didn't they? Things changed. Yes, they did. Yes, they did. You know, when you were single, you'd spend your money on what you choose, but when you get married... Some of you aren't married yet. I'm telling you, when you get married it's going to change and do you know why? Because you don't think so right now, but you're accountable to another. When you marry, you become accountable to another.

Why am I saying this? Well, understand what the Scriptures say. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says wives do not have authority over their body but their husband does. Likewise, husbands, you don't have authority over your body, the wife does. I mean, that's all in the context of sexuality, of sex between a husband and wife. And what is being said? Because of marriage and, you see, the point is this: the church is married to Christ and he is to be the ultimate influence in our lives. We can no longer live like we used to. We've answered his proposal, you see. We've answered his proposal and we belong to him. We can't just go spend our money the way we used to, we can't spend our time the way we used to. We are accountable to Jesus. He is to be the ultimate influence in our lives.

I heard about a young lady who did receive a proposal of marriage. It was a big deal. The guy spent all kinds of money, made it a huge event, got down on his knee, asked her if she would marry him, and she did say yes, if. Yes, if you will quit smoking. And when they went to premarital counseling, the pastor asked, "Why did you do that?" She said, "Look, smoking is not a moral, it wasn't a moral issue for me." She said, "I just wanted his kisses to be sweet when he kisses me." And don't you see while this church at Ephesus has commendable qualities, Jesus wants their kiss to be sweet. In other words, you're working, you're laboring, you're doing all this but where is the sweetness of your joy? Where is the sweetness of your delight? Where is the sweetness of your love like it used to be?

You see, the church at Ephesus is in danger of becoming like the prodigal son's elder brother. You remember the prodigal son took off and spent his inheritance upon prostitutes, was out in the pigpen and he finally came to himself and came back home, the father embraced him, had a party, and the elder brother who had been home all along, never did go off and spend money on prostitutes, in fact he had been home obeying all along. He heard all this party noise, some Jamie Johnson on the player, you know? And they were all having a big time, man, and then he walks up and, "What's going on?" He asked one of the servants and in verse 25 of Luke 15 he said this, "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, he begged him, he said, 'Come on in. Come on in.'" He looked at his father and said, listen to this, listen to this, he goes, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!" Let me just ask you: where is the sweetness? Where is the delight? Where is the joy? Where is the

love? You say, "Well, he's mad. He ought to be upset." No, he shouldn't. No, he shouldn't because the father reminds him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

You see, what was wrong with that older brother? Why did he get mad? It's because down deep in his heart he had been obeying, he had been doing stuff, he had been working, he had been toiling, "I've been doing all this stuff and I've never disobeyed." But where was his joy? Where was his love? Where was his delight? What kept him from when he heard the music thinking, "My brother is home, praise God! Let's celebrate! I'm so glad because I've been so provided for, the father has been so good to me, he's been so generous to me. I have nothing to complain about." No, he had been busy working but, you see, down deep, down deep in this young man's thought pattern was, "I've done this and I've done this and you owe me. You owe me." It was not of grace, not of mercy. It was cold, dead religion.

And the church at Ephesus was in danger of falling into that same mindset. They were busy, busy, busy, busy and all of it was good and it was commendable, yet they had departed, abandoned their first love for Jesus, and that's why in verse 5 he said, "Repent." What does that mean, saints? That means that we must have a change of mind about what is truly valuable and beautiful. You see, there was a time when Jesus was valuable and lovely and beautiful. He was first. He had the ultimate influence in their lives, but they abandoned that.

So, you say, "Is that really the way it's supposed to be?" Well, Jesus is saying to them, "You must love me supremely." In Luke 14, here's what he says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." You could not find a more difficult passage of Scripture to have to deal with than those verses. Do you understand what Jesus is saying? You cannot be, you cannot be, you can never be Jesus' disciple unless we fall under these terms: hating their mother and father, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even his own life. Now, let's just stop there for a moment and let's just agree: hate, the word hate here is what troubles us the most. If we could just lift that word out, we could reason with it okay. But this is a tough verse.

Now, many people have stumbled over this verse and many people say, "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. I'm not serving any kind of Savior like that. I'm not serving any kind of God like that." Now stop for just a moment. Do you really think that Jesus on one hand would instruct us to honor our father and mother and then out of the other side of his mouth say hate them. That would not make any sense, would it? So it has to be that Jesus is making a point here that we need to understand and we need to think hard about it. Jesus is saying that our love for him is to be of such a high degree that in comparison to loving others, it would appear and look as if we hate them. We are to love Jesus to such a degree, to such an ultimate degree, that if you compared that love to other loves, it would appear that we hated them.

Now, you see, some would say, "See, that's what's wrong with you Christian people, you sound so fanatical. You sound so fanatical." I was with a family some time back and the spouse said, "Look, we're Christians. We're Christians. We attend church on holidays." And I thought, "What are we talking? We talking Fourth of July? What are we talking here? Can you explain that to me?" I was a little more tender than when I was there but I just said, "Could you explain to me what you mean." And they said, "Look, look, we attend on holidays, we are religious, but we're not fanatical about it." It was almost like she was mad at me. "We're not fanatical about it." And I thought, you know, that's the word, you see. It's the worst possible thing to be fanatical about Jesus but now listen to me, listen: every one of us in this room are fanatics. Every one of us in this room are fanatics. You may look, "I'm not going to be fanatical about it." Now listen, all of us are fanatics because we are all willing to spend our time, our energy and our money on the things that we have decided will give our lives the most meaning. Every one of us in this room have done that. You are a fanatic. You are a fanatic. You may not like me pointing at you but you're a fanatic. You are. Those listening by radio, they're fanatics. Everybody is a fanatic because we all have decided where we're going to spend our money, our time, our energy. Something, somebody or some thing, because we have decided this is where I get the most meaning in life.

So here it is: are we to be fanatics for Jesus? In the most positive sense of that word, yes. I know people will try to take that word and try to wrench it around in different ways and make it sound ugly, but in the most positive way, you are to be a fanatic, I am to be a fanatic for Jesus, meaning that I am going to find my meaning in him and that he will have the ultimate influence in my life.

So what does Jesus want most? Does he want your volunteerism at church? He wants that. He wants that but what does he want most? Do you see it now? He wants love for him to be supreme. That's what he wants.

Now the final question: how do we give Jesus what he wants most? And I'll be quick, verse 7, look at verse 7, this is real simple. How do we give Jesus what he wants most? It's by being romanced with what he has given us. In verse 7, "To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." Look, if you don't want that, if that doesn't sound good to you, you're aiming way too low, okay? If that being part of your future, if that's not part of your future, if you look at that and go, "Eh," you are aiming so low. You see, my point is this: how do we give Jesus what he wants the most? Loving him supremely? It's by being romanced, by being romanced once again by with what he has given us. In verse 7, this is an expression of Jesus' love for us. In other words, verse 7 is not even possible, we're never going to experience that outside of Jesus' sacrificial love and substitutionary death on our behalf. You don't just die, you just don't die and just walk into this. It takes the death of someone. It takes the death of someone no less than the Son of God to make this possible for us.

So we can give Jesus what he wants most by getting out the wedding album, okay? The love starts growing cold, get out the wedding album of the word of God and start skimming through and start seeing God's great salvation plan, and look all the way back

before the foundation of the world when the Son of God was slain on our behalf, and allow his sacrificial love to wash over us anew. That's how we give Jesus what he wants the most, it's being awakened and stirred and stimulated by what he has done and what he is giving us even now, and it will clear our vision that we might behold the value of Christ over all competitors, because when you leave today, you're going to be assaulted by all the competitors out there, all of the false lovers. You're going to be assaulted by that and you're going to be tempted to spend your time, your money and your energy and find meaning in those things, but it's only by getting the wedding album out, and I plead with you, get the wedding album out of God's word and get a clearer vision to behold the value, the beauty of Jesus Christ because that is repenting. That is repenting, turning from this false lover and this false lover to the one who can thrill our soul, and as we give Jesus what he wants the most, he vows to give us what we need the most which is ultimately himself.

Let's bow our heads.