

Revelation 2:1-7      “Ephesus: When Does a Church Cease to Be a Church?”      May 5, 2019  
Jeremiah 2:1-13  
Psalm 81

The Lord speaks through Jeremiah of Jerusalem’s first love.

“I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride” –

And what does God mean by this?

Back during the Exodus – and the conquest in the days of Joshua –  
when God redeemed his people and gave them a good inheritance.

But Jerusalem has exchanged the LORD her God for those who are no gods.

And so the LORD concludes:

“my people have committed two evils:

They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters,  
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,  
broken cisterns that can hold no water.”

That’s a great picture!

Over here, there is a fountain of living water.  
(living water *can* just mean “flowing water” –  
a spring that never runs dry)

And over there, is a cistern –  
a cistern is an underground water storage tank.

If you don’t trust that the spring will last,  
then you might choose to dig a cistern to store water.

But of course, if the *LORD* himself is the fountain of living water –  
then you *know* that the LORD will never run dry.  
And so the decision to dig a cistern is itself a declaration of unbelief!

I don’t trust God to provide – so I’d better take care of myself, thank you!

Isn’t that a good picture of how we tend to act?

We don’t trust God.

We rely on our own efforts – our own wisdom –  
our own bright ideas –  
but our own best efforts are broken cisterns  
that can hold no water.

In short – we have lost our first love – our devotion to our Lord Jesus!

Our Psalm of response comes from Psalm 81 (TPH 81A)  
and uses similar themes to call us to listen – to hear – and to trust in the LORD!

Sing TPH 81A  
Read Revelation 2:1-7

Over the next few weeks we'll be looking at the letters to the seven churches  
in Revelation 2-3.

I've given you a basic outline of all seven letters in the bulletin.

You can see a basic chiastic structure.

a – b – c – d – c – b – a

- a. Ephesus – Repent or I Will Remove Your Lampstand**
- b. Smyrna – Do Not Fear, Be Faithful unto Death**
- c. Pergamum – You Hold Fast, but Some Follow Balaam: Repent**
- d. Thyatira – Do Not Tolerate Jezebel – She Refuses to Repent**
- c'. Sardis – Wake Up and Repent, only a Few Are Faithful**
- b'. Philadelphia – Hold Fast, I Am Coming Soon**
- a'. Laodicea – Lukewarm so Repent**

There are many patterns in the letters to the seven churches.

The first and the seventh churches are in danger of losing their identity as churches.

Jesus says that unless they repent,  
he will come and remove the lampstand from Ephesus,  
and he says that he will spit Laodicea out of his mouth.

The second and the sixth churches are faithful.

There is no rebuke for Smyrna or Philadelphia –  
simply exhortations to be faithful and hold fast.

The third and the fifth churches are mixed.

Pergamum holds fast – but there are *some* in Pergamum who follow Balaam.

In contrast, Sardis is dead – but there a *few* in Sardis who are faithful.

The call for both is to repent.

At the center is Thyatira –

Thyatira is also mixed – but with this difference:

there is no call to repentance!

For Jezebel the time for repentance is past.

Jezebel refused to repent, and so now there is only judgment for her and her children.

As you can see – one of the central themes in these letters is the call to repentance.

Five of the seven churches are deeply flawed.

The other two are suffering greatly!

Things are not the way they should be!  
*We* are not the way we should be!

It never surprises me when I see sin in the church.  
The church is deeply flawed!  
But it's *not okay* for the church to be deeply flawed!  
When we see sin – we need to repent.

We need Jesus.

But this is why John said to us –  
“I, John, your brother and partner  
in the tribulation and kingdom and patient endurance that are in Jesus”

At our worst, we have sinned and need to repent.  
At our best, we suffer trials and tribulations.

But the whole of the Christian life is lived *in Jesus*.

Also, each of the letters to the seven churches  
begins by connecting backwards to the vision of the Son of Man in chapter 1,  
and ends by connecting to the final vision in chapters 21-22.

That also suggests that the middle of each letter  
connects to the middle of the book of Revelation.

Which means that the basic point of these letters  
is very much the same as the basic point of the whole book!

The Christian life always starts with Jesus.  
It is characterized by suffering and affliction (the way of the cross)  
and for those who persevere – for those who conquer – it ends in glory!

### **1. “The Words of Him...” Jesus Walks Among His Churches (v1)**

*“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.*

It is important to start off by saying that the letter is addressed to the *angel* –  
to the *messenger* of the church in Ephesus.

And the whole letter is written in the second person singular –  
the “you” in verses 1-6 is a singular “you.”

Jesus is addressing the *aggelos* – the *messenger* – directly and speaking to him.  
I think it will become clear as we go along  
that the “angel” – the “messenger” – is representative of the whole church.

Many think that the angelos is the pastor of the church.  
Others think that the angelos is a sort of guardian angel.  
Others think that the angelos is simply a symbolic representation of the church itself.

The more I study Revelation, the more inclined I am to think  
that when all the interpreters of Revelation gather with the Apostle John in glory,  
and we say, “did you mean this or that?”  
John will look at us and say, “Of course I did!”

(In some cases he may even say, “No, but come to think of it – that’s brilliant!”)

This is not a puzzle book to be deciphered or decoded.  
This is a picture book to be seen in all its glory and beauty!  
And like so many pictures – there is *so much more going on*  
than simply fitting together puzzle pieces!

But Jesus starts by saying to the angel of the church in Ephesus:  
“The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand,  
who walks among the seven golden lampstands.”

We saw in the previous verse (1:20) that the seven stars are the seven angels,  
and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

So Jesus wants the church in Ephesus to see that he is with them.  
Or, perhaps better, he wants us to see that *we are with him!*

“He walks among the seven golden lampstands.”  
We saw last time that this is temple language.  
The tabernacle had one lampstand.  
The temple had ten lampstands.  
John is describing the heavenly holy of holies –  
with seven golden lampstands,  
reflecting not just the seven churches in Asia Minor,  
but all the churches in the world!

Jesus wants us to see that his church dwells with *him*.  
He *walks* with us – among the lampstands.

## 2. “I Know...” Your Patient Stand Against False Apostles (v2-3)

<sup>2</sup> “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. <sup>3</sup> I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

And Jesus says some really good things about this church.

I know your works – and not just your works, but your *toil* –  
your diligent labor – your *hard work* –  
and what is more your *patient endurance* –  
this is the same word that John had used, when he said,  
“I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and kingdom and patient endurance  
that are in Jesus...” back in 1:9.

Indeed Jesus uses this word *twice* – in verse 2 and again in verse 3 –  
“I know you are enduring patiently”!

You are doing precisely what the church should be doing!!

What is more, Jesus uses another word twice:

(v2) I know how you cannot *bear with* those who are evil...  
(v3) I know you are enduring patiently and *bearing up* for my name's sake...

You cannot bear those who call themselves apostles and are not...  
And you patiently bear up for my name's sake and you have not grown weary.

I've heard many pastors over the years refer to Ephesus as being commended for their *doctrine*  
or their *orthodoxy*.

But in fact, there is no reference to doctrinal orthodoxy in the commendation in verses 2-3.  
They are commended for being a hard-working, diligent community.

The chief evidence for doctrinal orthodoxy is the statement that they have tested  
“those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.”  
But that assumes that the test of a true apostle is orthodoxy!  
But what is the test for being apostolic?  
Certainly doctrine is important!  
But as you look through Christ's letters to the churches,  
what is the *false teaching* that Jesus keeps objecting to?  
“eating food sacrificed to idols” and “sexual immorality.”

In other words, the church in Ephesus is *commended* for their *ethical purity*!  
I don't doubt that it includes *teaching* –  
but most of the language of verses 2-3 commends them for

“your works, your toil, and your patient endurance...  
You are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake,  
and you have not grown weary...”

The church in Ephesus has been diligent in their fidelity to the name of Jesus.  
They continue to bear up for the name of Jesus.  
They endure patiently all the persecution – the tribulation –  
the affliction that comes because of the name of Jesus.

This sounds like a wonderful church!  
They are faithful to Jesus.  
They are devoted to good works.  
They don’t put up with false apostles –  
they have no place for sexual deviance...

What’s wrong with these people?!!

Just one thing:

**3. “But...Repent...” You Have Abandoned Your First Love (v4-5a)**

*<sup>4</sup> But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.*

What is the *one thing* that they are missing?

Love.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says that if I speak in the tongues of men and of angels  
but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.  
And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,  
and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains,  
but have not love, I am nothing.  
If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned,  
but have not love, I gain nothing.

Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that doctrine is about knowledge,  
but practice is about love.

But Paul says that doctrine without love is worthless –  
*and also* that practice without love is worthless!

What does it mean to *love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength?*  
It means that how you *think* is driven by love for God.  
How you *live* – how you *love* – how you treat people, how you use your time –

everything in life! – should be directed by that love for the LORD your God.

How important is this?

In Deuteronomy 5, Moses set forth the 10 commandments.

In Deuteronomy 6, Moses said that there was really only *one* commandment!

“Now this is *the commandment*...(singular):

Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one –  
and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart,  
and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Jesus agrees with this when he says in Matthew 22 that the first and great commandment  
is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Jesus then says that ‘a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

If you love the Lord your God with all your heart,  
then you will certainly love your neighbor – who is created in the image of God –  
because every time you see your neighbor, you are reminded of the God you love!

And insofar as you *do not* love your neighbor,  
you *do not* love God!

If we see our neighbor as a means to an end (even a very noble end!) –  
then we do not love our neighbor.

And if we do not love our neighbor –  
then we do not love God!

And if you lose *that* love – the only love that is worthy of being called your “first love” –  
then you have nothing but an empty shell of Christian doctrine and practice.

<sup>5</sup> *Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.*

This is fascinating!

What is the solution when the church has forsaken its first love?

Remember and repent.

“Remember”...

Remember is one of the key words of Deuteronomy 6-11.  
Remember from where you have fallen.

Israel was told to remember the Exodus –  
how God had saved them from the land of slavery –  
from bondage to Pharaoh –  
remember how the LORD brought you through the Red Sea on dry land –

remember how he delivered you from your enemies –  
remember how he gave you the Promised Land...

And now Jesus says to his church:

“Remember therefore from where you have fallen” –

Where is that?

What did Jesus just say?

“The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand,  
who walks among the seven golden lampstands.”

The seven lampstands are the seven churches.

So where are the Ephesians?

Paul wrote to the same church in Ephesus these words:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who has blessed us in Christ  
with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” (Eph 1:3)

The Ephesian church – like every other church – *like you* –  
are “seated with Christ in the heavenly places” (Eph 2:6).

In Jesus God became man – so that he might join us to himself,  
and raise us up with him.

Jesus died – Jesus rose again on the third day – Jesus ascended into heaven –  
and then he poured out the Holy Spirit on his church,  
so that we might be united to him by faith –  
so that we might be where he is!

And so Jesus says if the church of Ephesus has lost its first love –  
then it has *fallen* from the heavenly places...

“Remember therefore from where you have fallen!”

This isn't some little “oops, I made a mistake!”

This is falling from heaven to earth.

This is – like Adam and Eve in the garden –  
partaking of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil –  
spurning their first love!

This is bad!

This is really bad!!



This is catastrophic!

Remember therefore from where you have fallen!

But take heart – don't give up hope!!

If it was too late, God wouldn't say anything to you!

But he says to you the most hopeful word a sinner can ever hear!:

“Repent”!

Repentance unto life is a saving grace,

whereby a sinner – out of a true sense of his sin,

and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ –

does, with grief and hatred of his sin,

turn from it, unto God,

with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience. (SC)

Repent!

Recognize your sin for what it is!

You haven't been loving God!

And recognize the mercy of God in Jesus Christ for what it is!

The only way of salvation!

Your only hope is the *good news* of Jesus!

Your only hope is that Jesus died – Jesus was raised – Jesus is Lord!

And so when you your sin as that which casts you down out of the heavens –

*your sin* is that which separates you from God! –

that should make you *hate* your sin – and *grieve* over your sin!

But because you apprehend the mercy of God in Christ –

because you see that God is merciful *because he sent Jesus to die for you!*

Therefore, with grief and hatred for sin,

we turn away from it in disgust,

and endeavor to live for Jesus!

Or to summarize it more briefly (as Jesus says it here in verse 5):

*repent, and do the works you did at first.*

Your first love was characterized by your first works.

When you love God with all your heart

then everything you do is flavored with that love!

The doctrine that sounded cold and hard when spoken without love –

becomes full of warmth and life because it is suffused with God's *love!*

The works that seemed rigid and unfeeling when conducted without love –  
become a life-giving balm when practiced with love for God and neighbor.

Jesus reminds us that good works are a good thing!

The Reformation *rightly* said that good works cannot justify us before God.

We have *all* sinned.

We have all failed in many ways!

If you are trying to be “good enough for God” –

well, then you’ll have to be better than Jesus!!

But here, in Revelation 2:5, Jesus is speaking to his *church* – to those who are already his!

And he says *repent, and do the works you did at first.*

By grace, your will has been renewed.

You are now *able* to do what is right and pleasing in his sight!

But you’ve lost your way a little.

You have forgotten who you are – and who you belong to!

So *repent, and do the works you did at first.*

Otherwise...

#### **4. “If Not, I Will Come...” and Remove Your Lampstand (v5b)**

*If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.*

This is serious stuff!

A church that has lost its first love – it’s love for the Lord their God –  
will not remain a church for long!

Jesus calls the church of Ephesus to repent and return to him!

And he warns that if she does not,

then he will remove her lampstand.

The seven lampstands are the seven churches.

We saw last week that the scripture distinguishes between the *lampstand*  
and the lamp – or the flame.

The flame is the Holy Spirit.

The lampstand is the church.

The flame will never go out!

The Holy Spirit will continue to shine forth through all generations!

But there is no guarantee that a particular congregation –

or even a church in a particular city –

will endure forever.

The Middle East and Egypt used to be the most Christian part of the world!  
Now – not so much.

There is no guarantee that Michiana Covenant will endure forever!  
All we can do is *repent* and do the works we did at first.

How do you know when Jesus has come and removed the lampstand?  
It's rare that there is a clear, obvious moment –  
but what is the point of a lampstand?  
To hold forth the light.

Insofar as the light of the gospel is dimmed, blurred, or fading –  
that is an indication that they have lost their first love –  
  
but so long as the light of the gospel is *present* –  
that at least *suggests* that the lampstand has not been removed.

But when the gospel is replaced by something contrary to the gospel  
when the light that was supposed to shine in the darkness *becomes darkness* –  
how great, indeed, is that darkness!

When Christian faith and practice are displaced by something else –  
then it is clear that the lampstand is gone.

But Jesus then offers one last bit of encouragement:

**5. “Yet This You Have...” You Hate What I Hate (v6)**

<sup>6</sup> *Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*

Who are the Nicolaitans?  
They are the followers of Nicolaus!

Who was Nicolaus?  
We have no idea!

What were their works?  
We have no idea!

There have been all sorts of speculations.  
But if Jesus thought that the details were important,  
then he would have included them.

(Later, he will explain the false teaching of Jezebel and Balaam).

The point, though, is entirely clear:

“you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”

You have this going for you: you hate what I hate.

Why does Jesus say this?

Because he has rebuked them for abandoning their first love.

And while they don't yet love what they ought to love –  
at least they hate what they ought to hate!

The Church in Ephesus may be going through the motions –  
but at least their going through the *right* motions,  
which means that their repentance will take the form  
of no longer doing the right things for the wrong reasons,  
but doing the right things for the right reason:  
namely, because we *love Jesus!*

Now I should also point out that Jesus is speaking to the *church*.

It plainly has implications for individuals!!

But he's not talking about people losing their salvation!

He's talking about the church ceasing to be a church.

(Which, of course, means that no one else will ever be saved there...

If there is no church, then there will be no preaching of the gospel –  
and therefore, no faith, no repentance, no salvation!)

But also, at the end of the letter to the church in Ephesus,

Jesus switches from the second person singular to the third person singular:

#### **6. “Hear!...To the One Who Conquers...” Eating of the Tree of Life (v7)**

*<sup>7</sup> 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.'*

Here's the chief thing that we know about the Nicolaitans.

Their name means “followers of Nicolaus.”

The name “Nicolaus” means “victory of the people.”

“Nike – laos”

But Jesus says to the one who is victorious...

The word translated “conquers” is the word “Nikaw.”

The true victory does not belong to the Nicolaitans – but to the people of Jesus –  
or more precisely, to the one who has an ear,  
and hears what the Spirit says to the churches.

Do you want to win?

Do you want victory?

Do you want to hear the shouts “Nike, Nike, Nike” – “victory, victory, victory” –  
as you come sprinting, hobbling, or even crawling toward the finish line?!

Well, to the one who conquers – to the one who hears what the Spirit says to the churches,  
to the one who repents and returns to his first love –  
“I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil –  
and they and all their descendants were plunged into an estate of sin and misery!

But to the one who hears – who believes – who repents –  
who returns to the works you did at the beginning –  
such a one will eat of the Tree of Life in the paradise of God.