

The Loveless Church

Revelation 2:1-7

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We'll first read all seven verses of Revelation 2:1-7, and then we'll go back and unpack these verses individually. These verses are to the first church of the seven churches of Revelation.

"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 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; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.'"

When we look at the church today, we see all kinds of views and opinions and ideas about what the church is. It's interesting that the word translated "church" in verse 1, and throughout the New Testament, is the Greek word "ekklesia." It literally means "called-out assembly." It's interesting that we are called to assemble. We are called out of the world unto God to be devoted to God; we are called-out people, the church, the body of Christ.

Of paramount importance is not what the culture thinks about the church but what Christ thinks of the church. John R.W. Stott, in his excellent book, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, is an amazing book if you want to study these seven churches. In his book, he uses that title: *What Does Christ Think About the Church?* We're going to learn, for seven weeks, what Christ thinks about the church. We're going to see the very words of Jesus.

I notice that in some red-letter Bibles, they don't have chapters 2 and 3 in red letters. So red-letter Bibles are not always good to know when Jesus is speaking. I'll never forget that when I was a little boy staying at my Grandmother Miller's house—a godly woman, who loved the Lord—and she would read the Bible to me, I asked her, "Grandma, why don't you have a red-letter Bible?" (She always called me by my middle name, Paul.) She said, "Johnny Paul, I don't need red letters to know when Jesus is talking." I like that. I've never forgotten that. But if you have a red-letter Bible, it should show all of chapters 2 and 3 in red letters, because this is the voice of the Lord speaking to these seven churches. So Jesus is speaking to these seven churches, telling them how He views them.

Now you remember in Revelation 1:19, John was instructed to do three things. It says, "Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this." So there are three divisions to the book of Revelation: First is "the things which you

have seen,” in chapter 1—the vision of Christ; second is “the things which are,” in chapters 2 and 3, speaking to the seven churches—the voice of Christ; and third is “the things which will take place after this,” in chapters 4-22—the victory of Christ. So outlined for us in Revelation we have Christ’s vision, voice and victory.

How are we to view these seven letters to these seven churches? Let me give you five ways that we look at these seven letters. Number one, they were actually churches that existed. They were letters to each individual church that talked about their strengths and weaknesses; commending them, condemning them, commanding them and giving promises to them. So they were actual churches that existed in western Turkey, which in the Bible days was Asia Minor. The island of Patmos sits about 60 miles southwest out in the Aegean Sea from Ephesus. That will give you a feel for the setting.

I’ve gone to the city of Ephesus twice to see the beautiful ruins that are there and I visited, as well, the island of Patmos.

Secondly, each church addressed has a message for every church today. Every letter has a message for every church, so as we study these seven churches, we’ll see something that every church has to learn.

Thirdly, each letter has a message for every individual Christian. So it’s not just the church at large or the church historical, but for the Christians right now, we’ll see a need in our lives individually.

Fourth, I believe that each of the seven letters has a similarity in structure. I like what William McDonald said. He said, “Each opens with a salutation to an individual church; each presents the Lord Jesus in a role that is particularly fitting for that particular church; each describes his knowledge of the church’s works, introduced by the words ‘I know’; words of commendation are addressed to all the churches, except Laodicea; reproof to all, except Smyrna and Philadelphia; to each a separate exhortation is given to hear what the Spirit is saying unto the church; and each a special promise is included for the overcomers.”

Fifth, each of the seven churches pictures seven successive periods in church history. This is the prophetic picture. As you look at all seven churches, you’re going to see seven periods in church history. The church at Ephesus represents the apostolic church, AD 33-AD 100, after the death of the last Apostle, who was John, writing from Patmos.

The first thing I want to look at in our text is the church and the city. Verse 1 says, “To the angel of the church of Ephesus.” So in verse 1 we have the church, we have the city and we have the Christ of the church.

The church was founded by Paul on his third missionary journey, but he did visit at the end of his second missionary journey, in Acts 18. But the church really got its kick-off or start in Acts 19. And you can read about Paul’s ministry there. There was a great revival; they burned all their magic books, many turned to the Lord, he spent a couple of years there, at least in the

school of Tyrannus preaching and teaching the Word of the Lord.

But then a riot took place. When you follow Paul in ministry, when he went to a town there was always a revival followed by a riot. Wherever God is at work, the devil is at work trying to oppose the work of God.

There were silversmiths who made silver shrines to the goddess Diana. In Ephesus there was a great temple to the goddess Diana. The silversmiths were upset that no one was buying their shrines anymore, so they caused a riot and chased Paul out of the city.

The church at Ephesus had some amazing pastors. In a moment we'll see Christ holding the stars in His right hand. Possibly that's a reference to the pastors. It's interesting that the church has Paul as their founding pastor; they had Apollos, who was mighty and eloquent in the Scriptures; they had Timothy, who pastored there when Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy to the young pastor; and then the Apostle John himself was their pastor. You talk about a great line of pastors! Actually after John's time on Patmos, he went back to Ephesus and lived out his years there pastoring and ministering to the church at Ephesus and to the other churches that were there in Asia. And Paul wrote a letter to the Ephesians in the New Testament.

The city of Ephesus itself was politically the capital of the province of Asia. Ephesus was located right on the coast. There was a river that emptied into a harbor there. Commercially it was on the main east-west trade route, so it was very prosperous. Religiously it had the great temple of Diana, also known as Artemis. It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The bank of Asia was also located there, where a lot of money was stored. It's interesting that it was also known as a city of refuge, where criminals and thieves could go where they would be immune from punishment for their crimes.

But morally, and significantly, it was a very, very debase city. It was very, very corrupt. If you ever travel to Greece and look at the Greco-Roman culture of that time, it was bad news. We think that we live in a very lax, promiscuous culture today, but it was so bad back then that you couldn't even describe the things that were going on. It was morally dark. It was the vanity fair of the ancient world. So the church at Ephesus was like a light in a very dark place. So we have a description of the church and the city.

It wasn't a whole lot different than the church in America today. The darker our nation gets, the more our light is to shine for Jesus Christ.

Now at the end of verse 1, there is the cry. Every one of the letters opens with a description of Christ that is taken from chapter 1. So in chapter 2, verse 1, Christ is described as "He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands." Notice the two words "holds" and "walks."

What are these seven stars He holds in His right hand? In chapter 1, verse 20, it says they are "the angels..."—or the Greek word is "aggelos" or "messengers"—"...of the seven churches." It is possible that it isn't a literal angel, because it is also used for a person, a messenger. Many

good scholars—and even I concur—that it could be a reference to the pastors of these churches. That is reinforced by the idea that this letter is written to this individual or this angel or aggelos. It's very unlikely that a letter would be written to an angel, but rather more likely it would be written to the leaders or the pastor of the church.

Then Jesus is walking “in the midst of the seven golden lampstands.” Chapter 1, verse 20, tells us that they are the seven churches. These lampstands were lamps filled with olive oil and had a wick that burned.

But the important point is that Jesus was holding the pastors in His right hand. I like that. Don't you like that old song, He's Got the Whole World in His Hand.

“He's got you and me brother in His hands.

He's got you and me sister in His hands.

He's got the whole world in His hands.”

As I look at our troubled world right now, I'm glad it's in the hands of Jesus. He's in control.

And He especially has the church in His hands. The church is the apple of God's eye. In the church, God is doing the main, primary work in the world. Jesus said, “I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Jesus is holding and is walking in the midst of the churches. So Jesus is with us.

I looked up the word “walking.” One translation has, based on the Greek word, “patrolling.” I like that. And then I looked up the meaning of the word “patrolling,” and it has the idea of “watching with oversight to protect.” It's used of the police department, which is under attack right now in our culture. Don't you like the idea that the police are patrolling your neighborhood? I do; they can hang out around my house all they want. If they're in a donut shop, I'm going to get donuts there.

But Jesus is patrolling the church; He's walking around, observing, “supervising,” as one translation said, the church. Why? Because He loves the church, because He is with His church—Matthew 18:20 says, “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” And Ephesians 5:29 says, “No one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church.” The context of this Ephesians passage is husbands loving their wives, as Christ loves the church. As Jesus loves, nourishes and cherishes the church, so should a husband love his wife and nourish and cherish her.

One of the reasons why marriage is a sacred and divine institution is that it reflects the relationship between Christ and the church. If you pervert God's design for marriage, you are attacking God Himself, because it relates to our relationship to God. We are the bride of Christ; He is our heavenly bridegroom. So Jesus is actually loving, nourishing and cherishing the church, which means to “warm with body heat.”

Soon, in John 14, He will come for the church. He will come for His bride. He's preparing a place, and He "will come again and receive you to Myself." We are the bride of Christ.

The third thing I want to point out is in verses 2-3 and 6. It's the commendation. There are seven things that the Lord commends about the church in Ephesus. "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; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake..."—that means "for My glory"—"... and have not become weary." They were trying to live in a way that glorified God.

In every church, Jesus says, "I know," repeated seven times. In chapter 1 it said that "His head and hair were white like wool," and "His eyes like a flame of fire." He knows all things and He sees. He knows the church.

What does Jesus commend in this church? Number one, He commends them that they were a serving church. He looks at their "works." He knows what they are doing. This was a working church. The bulletin of this church looked like the flight schedule of an airline at LAX. Every day of the week, they had something going.

Some people think that's a good thing—and it can be. But it can also be a bad thing; we get so busy in our church activity that we forget Christ of the church. And that's what happened in the church at Ephesus.

Secondly, He commends them that they were a sacrificing church. He also knew their "labor." "Labor" means their "toil." It has the idea of "at a cost." So they were working; they had their deeds and were "doing" church, and they were also a toiling church, at great cost.

Thirdly, they were a steadfast church. He knew their "patience." "Patience" means "endurance." It's not a passive word; it means "steadfast endurance." They would not give up.

Serving the Lord can be a battle. We battle the world, the flesh and the devil. But it's always too soon to quit. Never throw in the towel when you're serving the Lord. Don't stop serving the Lord. Don't stop working for the Lord. Don't stop persevering for Him.

Number four, they were commended that they were a spiritually discerning church. He said, "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."

This is not your modern church today; they lack discernment. Sometimes I wonder how the church today can be so undiscerning and so foolish—the things they believe, the fads they follow and the teachers they endorse. It's unbelievable to me! Occasionally I'll turn on Christian television. There are some good, Biblical preachers on, but there are also a lot of bad, dangerous and poisonous ones. So you need to open your Bible and make sure that what is being preached is really the Word of God. The Ephesian church tested those who claimed to be apostles.

I reject those today who come to me and say that they are an apostle. There is no sense, in the first, primary meaning of that word, that anyone today has apostolic authority. The apostolic authority is in the Bible; it's not in a man or a person. It is usually said so they can have power over other individuals to promulgate their ideas.

So look to the Bible; that is the authority. We have the apostles' doctrine in the Scriptures, canonized in the Bible. We don't need someone to come and say they are a prophet or an apostolic person, who has this authority.

Sometimes people come to our church and say, "I'm a prophet. Can I preach on Sunday morning?"

I tell them, "We're a non-'prophet' organization."

I've had Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—they've all shown up. I don't think so. I have God's Word; I don't need anyone to come to me. Anything they would have preached, I would have to check with the Bible anyway, so I might as well start with the Bible, because that's God's holy Word.

So Ephesus was a discerning church. In Acts 20, in one of my favorite stories in the Bible, Paul actually met with the elders of the Ephesian church on the beach. So Paul called them down to the beach at a spot called Miletus. Paul knelt with them on the beach and prayed. He told them he had to go and they knew they wouldn't see him again. They loved him so much that they wept on Paul.

But before he left, Paul told them, "I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves." So they listened to and heeded the words of Paul, and they were discerning.

Fifth, they were a suffering church, verse 3. "You have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary." The New Living Translation renders this, "You have patiently suffered for Me without quitting." I like that. The idea that they "hast borne," as the King James Version says, is a reference to the suffering that they were going through for the name of Christ. Read 1 Peter and his encouragement to the suffering saints.

Number six, they were commended because they were a separated church. Verse 6 says, "This you have that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." Twice the word "hate" appears in this verse: "You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans...I also hate." We can be commended when we hate the things that God hates, and we love the things that God loves. It's okay to hate things. Anything that dishonors God should be hated by a believer.

Now notice that they didn't hate the Nicolaitans; they hated their deeds. That distinction needs to be made. We don't hate the person, but we hate their behavior and their doctrine, that it's not Biblical.

Why do I say that they were separated? Because we can't be dogmatic or absolutely sure what the deeds of the Nicolaitans were. The etymology of the word "Nicolaitans" actually means "to rule over the people." Some believe that their deeds were the establishment of the clergy over the laity.

By the way, this is not a Biblical distinction. John, in writing Revelation, described himself as their "brother" and "companion in tribulation"; he was one of them. So there is no distinction of the clergy over the laity in the Bible.

But the doctrine of "the deeds of the Nicolaitans"—and most scholars agree—that it could mean "license." That means that they were teaching that you can live however you want, you can sin as much as you want, because God doesn't care about your body; He only cares about your spirit.

There are those who teach this same thing today: you can get drunk, you can sleep around, you can lie, you can steal, and that's okay. God really doesn't care about those things.

But that's definitely not New Testament Christianity. Your body belongs to God. Your body is to be sanctified or set apart to God. You're not your own; you're His. "So glorify God in your body." I believe that even our thoughts should be set apart to God. Our attitudes and actions should be set apart to God. Our bodies should belong to God.

So it would be possible that if license was "the deeds of the Nicolaitans," the Ephesian church hated that, and they separated themselves from that. In 2 Corinthians 6:17, Paul is quoting the Lord speaking, saying, "Come out from among them and be separate...Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you."

As a body of believers in the church, we are to be separated from the world. We are not to think like the world, talk like the world or act like the world. We are to be "other-worldly." Our citizenship is in heaven, so we obey heaven's Lord, and we speak heaven's language. That's how we are to live on earth.

So what an amazing church Ephesus was: they were serving, sacrificing, steadfast and patient, spiritually discerning, suffering and they were separated or devoted to living a life of true godliness and holiness.

But Jesus knows what we don't know, and He has a complaint, fourthly, against the church. It's in verse 4. He says, "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love." That's the theme of the church at Ephesus: you've departed, you've drifted, you've grown cold to your first love.

I want you to note that they "left" and not "lost." The word "left" means "to quit, to forsake." They didn't lose their first love; they left it. That means that they are responsible, by their own lax deeds and attitudes; they had drifted away.

Backsliding happens very subtly. You begin to skip devotions in the morning, you don't pray like you used to, you skip church some Sundays and you don't serve the Lord. "I'm a good person," you say, rationalizing. You gradually, slowly drift away.

I don't know if you've ever been in a swimming pool on a mat, but if you close your eyes, lay there for a few minutes, when you open your eyes, you see that you've drifted all the way to the other end of the pool. Or you're on a boat taking a nap, and the boat can drift on the water. You really can't tell you're moving. That's what backsliding is like; you just drift away.

Now what does Jesus mean by "first love"? "First love" comes from the book of Jeremiah 2. In Jeremiah 2, God is speaking to the nation of Israel. They had turned away from God and were following other gods; they had committed spiritual adultery. He said, "I remember...the love of thine espousals, when you went after Me," and when they loved Him, obeyed Him and followed Him. "The love of thine espousals" means "the love of your engagement."

Some of you who have been married a long time know that when you've been married many years, you start to take each other for granted. You drift apart. Your love grows cold. You can always tell a couple that has been married a long time in a restaurant, because they're actually eating their food, as opposed to talking. Sometimes the old married couples will just sit there eating in silence.

Your wife will ask, "Don't you want to talk?"

"Well, yeah. Go ahead and say something while I eat."

Remember when you first met? Kristi had her own apartment. When I would go to see her, I picked her neighbor's roses to give to her. I was a poor preacher. I was a pastor, didn't make a lot of money and couldn't afford to buy her flowers, so I would sneak around her house and cut the neighbor's roses and take them to her. Finally, when she was taking a walk, she saw where her roses came from. I would leave love letters on her door, notes and do kind things for her. After so many years, you start drifting away from that.

So God was saying to Israel, "Remember the love of thine espousals? Remember the things we had going for us? When you first met me?" Jesus is saying, "Don't you remember when you first got saved? How you would pray and cry and give me thanks? You would read your Bible? Every time the church was open, you would be there and sought Me."

Remember when you first got saved how fresh and exciting it was? How new it was? Remember when you discovered John 3:16, and you underlined it and put "Wow!" in the margin of your Bible? "It's so cool; God loves me and gave His Son to die for me!" Remember when you first began to walk with the Lord?

Many times we get cold, apathetic and complacent, and we begin to drift away from our first love.

I believe that this “first love” mentioned in verse 4 that they had left was their love for God. It would include love for others, but it was primarily and first of all their love for God. Everything we do must flow from our love for God. It’s so very important.

Jesus said that in the last days, “Because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.” Don’t let that happen to you. And labor is no substitute for love; “Well, I’m an usher,” “I’m a Sunday school teacher,” “I’m a worship leader,” “I’m a pastor” or “I’m a greeter at the church.” But has your love for the Lord grown cold? Are you serving with a fervent love?

The Ephesian church was laboring without love, and Jesus said that it wasn’t right. He is serious about this. It’s really a bad thing. Also, our love for others flows out of our love for God.

Notice the command in verse 5. This is what we do about our cold, loveless hearts: “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.”

There are three steps you need to take if your love has grown cold for God. We are to First, “Remember...from where you have fallen.” Remember what you used to do when you were first saved, how you walked with the Lord. Second, you need to repent. It means to change your mind and turn around. Third, you need to return or “do.” “Do your first works.”

Remember how you used to read your Bible? Read your Bible. Remember how you used to pray? Pray. Remember how you used to just sing in the car and worship the Lord? Sing and worship the Lord. Remember how you used to study the Word of God in the evening? Go back to the Word of God. Remember when the church doors were open, you were always there in fellowship? Get back to doing those things.

There is a warning in verse 5: “or else,” which indicates this is serious stuff.

You might say, “Well, this isn’t that big a deal. They had all that stuff going for them, so why was the Lord so upset about this one little thing—that they weren’t doing it out of love?” Because it’s important. He said, “Repent...or else I will come to you quickly and remove the lampstand from its place—unless you repent.”

I don’t believe that He is warning them that they will lose their salvation. I believe He is warning them that they will lose their effectiveness. They’ll lose the sense of God’s presence and power in their lives. As a church, their light will go out.

How many churches have died? How many churches have grown cold? How many churches’ lights have gone out? So many times the world creeps into the church, and the light goes out in the church.

One of my big concerns as the pastor of this church is, if the Lord should tarry, what the future holds for this congregation. I hate to think that it would become cold in its love for God, that it would neglect God’s Word, that it wouldn’t stay doctrinally sound and discerning and that it

wouldn't stay separated from the world and committed to God. With God's help and by God's grace, I'll do the best that I can to train and to raise up the next generation and to communicate all I can of God's truth to this generation. But if the Lord tarries, sooner or later, I will go "the way of all flesh." I will not be here.

What happens to this church 20 years from now? Thirty? Forty? Fifty? One hundred, if the Lord tarries? What's going to happen to the church in America? My greatest concern right now is for the church in America. America is great because America is good. When America ceases to be good and godly and fear the Lord, there's no more greatness in America.

George Washington said that you can't govern a nation without God and the Bible. And we have systematically gotten rid of both in our nation. Is it any wonder that we see anarchy and chaos and confusion in our nation? We've neglected God and His Word.

Jesus said that the church is "the light of the world" and "the salt of the earth." If the salt loses its savor or flavor, it's good for nothing.

So the Ephesian church was loveless. They were laboring, they were orthodox, they were sound, but they were a dead church, and the Lord was warning them that He would "remove" their "lampstand." So beware of the barrenness of a busy life.

It closes with a promise, verse 7. Every church had a closing promise. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." He's not talking about physical ears; He's talking about spiritual ears. It was to "churches," plural; not just to the church at Ephesus but to all the churches, even including ours today.

Here's the promise: "To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." The promise is that if you are an overcomer, you're going to heaven. And you will eat "from the tree of life...in the midst of the Paradise of God." When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden and ate from the tree God had forbidden them to eat, they were driven from the Garden, so they couldn't eat from this tree. But we will go in to eat of that tree, and it's going to be awesome. It's in the midst of "the Paradise of God."

What does He mean by "to him who overcomes"? I hope I can convey what this means; it's so important that you get this. First, let me tell you what He doesn't mean. He doesn't mean that as a Christian, you need to grit your teeth, clench your fists and say, "I'm going to overcome! I'm going to overcome! I'm going to overcome!" You know what happens when you do that—you fail. He's not talking about rolling up your sleeves and saying, "I'm bound and determined I'm going to be an overcomer!" No.

What does it mean to be an overcomer? Turn to 1 John 5:4-5. John says, "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world." That is a great description of the overcomer: you're "born of God." Notice that it is for "whatever is born of God." It's not just for the super-saints, it's not just for the "deeper-life club"; it's for "whatever." "And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the

Son of God?"

So when He describes the promise to the overcomers, it is for those who have been born again, for those who have put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Basically, it is for the Christians. Anyone who is a child of God is an overcomer. If you have been born again, you're going to go to heaven and "eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."

That's good news! That's the promise. So you can tell yourself, "I'm an overcomer. I'm going to heaven."

But you need to ask yourself, "Have I been born again? Have I been born of God?" If you haven't been born of God, you're not an overcomer and you won't go to heaven. Then you need to repent of your sins and believe in Jesus Christ and trust in Him to save you.

And if you are a Christian, you need to ask yourself, "Has my love for Jesus grown cold? Do I still go to church but just go through the motions? Do I no longer have the emotion: the love and warmth and fervent love for God?"

Remember from where you fell, "repent and do the first works" once again.