

*Revelation 2:1-7*

Jesus said, "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. <sup>2</sup> I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. <sup>3</sup> You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

<sup>4</sup> Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. <sup>5</sup> Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. <sup>6</sup> But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

<sup>7</sup> Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

We are in the book of Revelation this morning...I know that excites some people, and I know it makes others nervous.

I think the Lord gave me this idea though...to study Jesus' letters to the Revelation churches throughout the season of Lent...and I think it makes sense because both the Lenten season and these letters share the theme of repentance.

Lent is the Christian season of Spirit-led self-examination...a time for Christ-followers to consciously listen, more intently than normal maybe, to God's voice in a posture of repentance.

And in all these letters to these churches, we find, if not a blatant call to repent, then at least a call to consider...to step closer to God and to His way.

Now...Revelation is a controversial book; ask ten people to interpret it, and you'll get at least five different opinions, but just so you know, I'm taking the point of view (which is the correct one, by the way), that these letters were written to real, specific churches in their own historical context. In fact, if you locate them on a map (all within the boundaries of what is Turkey today) you can see how this letter could have easily been written on the island of Patmos, and then sent to be read to these churches...they fall one right after another in perfect order along the road.

So, I'm suggesting that the issues highlighted in the letters were present in these individual churches, and yet the whole letter was intended to be read to all the churches. This means that though the issues were specific, the principles apply to every church...to every Christ-follower...both back then and to us today, because the principles communicated here reveal the heart of a God Who does not change.

And it makes sense that the first church would be the Ephesian church. Ephesus was the closest mainland church to Patmos, where John received this vision, and it was a substantial church in a substantial city...the fourth largest city in the Roman empire in its day...well over a quarter-

million people. So, it's no surprise that we find a significant Christian community there.

Ephesus was a port on the Aegean coast, and because of its location, it was a center of trade, government, sports, academics, art, finance, architecture, culture and theater. In other words, other than size, it was a lot like Wilmore.

Ephesus was also a major center of religious activity. The Temple of Diana, also known as Artemis, was there...one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and it drew worshippers and tourists from all over.

We read about the Apostle Paul's run-in with that whole industry in Acts 19.

The important thing to understand about all this, though, is that the church at Ephesus was immersed in the values, perspectives and lifestyles of the Roman world. They were not some reclusive group out in the countryside somewhere. They were planted in the middle of a very secular and very ungodly place.

So, considering that, it's all the more impressive to hear Jesus commend them, as he does there in verse 2.

You see, those Ephesian Christians were yellow, immersed in a world of red, yet they managed to remain yellow. They did not give in to the influence of their surroundings and become red themselves. They did not even become orange! They resisted the pressure to conform to all that their surroundings upheld. They kept their doctrines and lifestyles pure and godly. They recognized falsehoods. They stood for truth. They were tough in their faith. They hung in there with Jesus, which, considering their surroundings, was no small accomplishment.

And yet...there was something wrong at Ephesus.

Despite all the good...somehow, through the years, they had lost that love that brought them to Jesus in the first place...and that had compelled them to do the sorts of things that Jesus loves and wants His people to do.

If you look back to the description of the Ephesian Christians in Acts, you find a church that was so alive in Christ...so in love with Jesus...that it was making a powerful impact on the world around it. Luke reports that all the residents of that province heard the gospel and that the name of Jesus was lifted high in that place.

We read about how a whole pile of magic books were burned by those who'd come to Christ and seen the error of their old ways.

In fact, the church had made such an impact in Ephesus that the economy of the whole city was being affected...to the point that the makers of Artemis idols were complaining...even rioting!

You see, the city of Ephesus knew that the church of Jesus was there...those believers were making an impact on their world.

You might say that the Christians were playing *offense* in Ephesus.

But something happened between what we hear about them in Acts and what we hear in this letter of John's.

They had lost their urgency...their evangelistic engagement with the world around them. The fire of their love for Jesus that drove their offense...had diminished, and they'd fallen back into a *defensive* position.

Yes, they were still orthodox in what they believed.

They were still personally faithful to Jesus.

They were all those good things that Jesus says they were.

But they were no longer driven by love for Christ to engage their world.

They used to be a force for Christ in Ephesus. It used to be that the whole city knew they were there, for good or bad.

Now, the city didn't know who they were. They'd drifted into anonymity in their mission field.

How did this happen?

We don't know for sure, but I'd suspect it was for the same reasons it happens in people and churches today.

The fact is, the work of God is hard. It takes commitment and dedication and intentionality...and choice...we have to choose Christ's priorities with every new day.

And with every new day, the world around wants to get us off that track and away from Jesus, so it is always suggesting, in a million subtle ways, something that we could do instead of worship, prayer, study, outreach, and connecting with God and with other believers. There's always some other need, some other opportunity, some other option; there's always somewhere to go, something to watch, something to work on or play with...

Always the option to do something...else.

You know, in nations where the church is strong, Christians typically spend hours and hours every week engaged in worship and prayer and outreach and these sorts of things...things that feed their faith, either individually or together. They walk for miles so they can be together and be together with God.

How much time, really, do we give to engagement with Jesus? I mean, really? We say He has our whole life, but when you map it out, how much of our lives does He really have?

You see, that had become the issue at Ephesus. Oh, their doctrine and belief were sound. Jesus had their heads, but He didn't really have their hearts anymore.

That's why He calls it a problem of love.

The Ephesian Christians used to love Him and so they did those things that pleased Him: "If you love me, you'll obey my commands."

Jesus had the nerve to say that.

But here He tells the Ephesians, "You don't love me like you used to, and I can tell that because you don't obey me like you used to."

You see, there's a balance of orthodoxy and outreach that must be present in a spiritually healthy person and a spiritually healthy church.

Outreach without orthodoxy leads toward pluralism and permissiveness...you give up truth (which is just another word for orthodoxy). You give up truth for the sake of bringing people in and keeping people happy and making sure they're entertained.

That's outreach without truth.

But that was not the problem at Ephesus. The problem at Ephesus was orthodoxy...truth, *without* outreach. That moves people toward coldness and hardness and a loveless judgmentalism that usually winds up disengaging the church from the world around her.

A church that pleases Jesus is a church where *both truth and love* work hand in hand.

Imagine that. Truth and love...so many things seem to come back to that, don't they?

And this is no small matter to Jesus. He goes on to say, in verse 5 there, that this lack of love...and the results that come from it..., if it persists, would cause Him to "remove their lampstand from its place." They were in danger of no longer really being a community of God's people.

So, this was Jesus' call to them for repentance. In verse 4 there, He says, "You have forsaken the love you once had. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first."

This is also Jesus call to us today.

Is our love for Jesus the motive for the choices we make, the lifestyles we lead, the priorities we set, the way we invest our time and energies and talents and finances?

Are we playing offense in our community because of love for Jesus and His concern for the lost?

Would your neighbors and mine notice if we moved away?

Would it matter to our city if this church closed?

Are truth and love working hand in hand in our lives? Or, are we right in the head, but wrong in the heart?

If so, Jesus says we need to repent of that...to turn back to the love we had at first: love for Him, for each other, and for those for whom He died, but who are still apart from Him.

We need to turn back to His way of truth and love working together.

"Does Jesus have my head but not my heart?"

"What part of my life is no longer motivated by love for Jesus?"

"When it comes down to it, how much of my life does Jesus really have?"

"Have I lost the love for Christ that I used to have?"

As we come to His table here today, would you be willing to ask the Lord these questions? Invite His Spirit to speak to you about this specific call to repentance.