

THE PRESBYTERIANS IN EPHESUS Revelation 2:1-7

Last week was Valentine's Day. My daughters both gave me wonderful cards that told me how much they love me. My wife and I keep these cards for years. They're precious to us, and have great meaning beyond just the particular holiday upon which they were given.

Imagine if God took the time to write to you what He really thinks of you. Would you listen? Wouldn't that become the most important document that you had ever received?

Verse 1 makes it clear these are not John's words, nor the words of any other human being. The speaker is Jesus. The stars are called 'angels' or 'messengers' - a term which probably refers to the 'pastors.' The lampstands are the churches. It's significant that He holds the stars in His hand. The most fundamental article of church government is that Christ is the Head of the church. Not pastors or denominational heads. Jesus is the Leader of the Church and it's His will that matters and His guidance that we're to heed.

I love the image of Jesus walking among the lampstands. It's an image of intimacy- He knows these churches intimately. He knows their specific situations and He encourages and warns them according to that perfect knowledge.

There is a pattern to each letter:

-To the angel/pastor of the church in city.

-The words of description of Himself.

-I know what you've been doing, good & evil. 4 churches have both good & bad, 2 churches are all good, 1 is all bad.

-“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

-To the 1 who conquers, I will give some image of eternal life.

It's significant these letters are in the front of the book- because there's a journey that Revelation takes thru all kinds of visions and worlds and wars, that culminates in the ultimate finish- the new heavens and the new earth. And by putting these letters to the churches up front, Jesus is saying, 'You need to band together as bodies of believers and follow me, in order to get to the final victory.' There's no other way- this is the Christian life- be the church together and follow Jesus.

The fact that there are 7 is telling- it's the number of perfection or completeness. The fact that there are 7 means that they represent the entire church. These are archetypes- churches that represent all churches through the ages. These are as much letters to us in the 21st century as they were to 1st century people.

John is writing from the island of Patmos- a small island off the coast of modern-day Turkey in the Medit. Sea. The island was used by the Roman government as a place to send criminals & people considered dangerous to good order (which of course included preachers.) Patmos is not far from the coast and the city of Ephesus, and so it's likely that Revelation would have been sent to the church in Ephesus first, and then passed on to the other 6 churches that are mentioned here. They form a geographic circle that was a natural transportation network.

It's fitting that we start with Ephesus, the greatest of all the cities in Asia Minor. Ephesus was a wealthy, cosmopolitan place that was famous for being the center of

worship of the goddess Artemis, the goddess of fertility who had the name “Queen of Heaven.” There was a temple there that was 1 of the 7 wonders of world- the largest building made of marble in the world.

It is also a city that comes up a lot in the NT. Paul went and preached there, and Timothy became a pastor there. One of the greatest books in the NT, Ephesians, is written to the church there. Let’s look closer at what Jesus has to say to them and us.

What Jesus Commends

Look at verse 2a. Sometimes we are afraid of talking about ‘works’ in the church for fear that we’ll become legalistic and think that our works save us. But Jesus is very up front- it’s good for you to work. A church that works hard at kingdom work is pleasing to God.

In verse 2b we see an ability to stand for the truth and weed out those who don’t speak truth. There are not many churches in America that are willing to point out false prophets in their midst. But this church was.

Verse 6 mentions ‘the Nicolaitans’- they’re mentioned a few different times in the letters to the churches- we’re not 100% sure but scholars believe the Nicolaitans encouraged idol worship and possibly sexual debauchery for people in the church. They were probably those who wanted to marry Christian ideas with the ways of the world.

And Jesus says, ‘you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.’ Notice he doesn’t say that we are to hate the false teachers themselves, but only their works.

This is a strong church- enduring patiently and standing up for truth in a culture full of temptations & distractions.

What Jesus Criticizes

But there’s a fatal flaw with this church. They’ve stopped loving. Look at verse 4, “You have abandoned the love you had at first [first love].”

Some interpreters say He’s talking about loving God, and others say He’s talking about loving each other. I say, it doesn’t matter- because those 2 are intimately connected. If you love God, you’ll love your brother in the church. If you love your brother, it’s a sign you love God.

But these people have stopped loving. In their zeal for doctrinal purity, they’ve allowed a spirit of contention and judgmentalism to come up that’s made them cold- and possibly they’ve quit loving people outside the church as well.

Is this what Jesus would say to conservative Presbyterians? We have our doctrine that we love to study, and we have our church government that seeks the peace and purity of the church. We put a high premium on knowing the Bible and resisting false teachers in the world and in the church.

But *do we love Jesus?* It’s one thing to talk about Jesus, and another thing to love Him- to set our hearts on Him and desire Him.

The Apostle Paul says this same thing in that famous chapter, 1 Corinthians 13- ‘If I speak in the tongues of men & angels, but don’t have love, I’m a noisy gong. If I’m a prophet & have all kinds of knowledge & insight, but not love, I’m nothing. If I give all my stuff away, if I die for my faith, but don’t have love, I’m nothing’

Are you trying to serve God without loving Him? Are you trying to minister to people without really loving them?

I have been. I think recently I've been the minister who does his work and puts in his hours, but hasn't been motivated by love. I've even avoided some of you because I haven't felt like giving myself.

Maybe you've felt that way- you can do tasks in the church, but loving people is the hardest task there is. *But nothing will ruin a church faster than a lack of love.* That's why Jesus is so insistent- a Christian who doesn't love is an oxymoron.

And a church that doesn't love isn't worthy of being a church. In verse 5 Jesus is saying, 'your church will no longer exist, or if it does still exist, it won't be part of my kingdom.'

But, how do we love like Jesus wants us to? Trying harder doesn't work. Because if you try to love people with your own strength, eventually you'll run out of steam, and you'll start to resent the very people you're trying to serve.

You have to look outside of yourself. You have to first be filled up with love from Jesus, and then you can love other people out of the overflow of that love. Jesus is the ultimate Lover- because He knows you deeper than anyone else and He loves you more intimately than you can imagine. That's what He's doing here in Revelation 2 and 3. Did you notice the language? Pretty brutal, huh? He's speaking the truth in love to these people.

People who don't really care about you will not tell you the truth about yourself. People who really love you will tell you not just what you *want* to hear, but what you *need* to hear.

Jesus is the loving Pastor who both rebukes and encourages this church at Ephesus; and if they'll walk with Him, then there's a great reward. Look at the second half of verse 7. I mentioned earlier that Ephesus was home to the temple of the goddess Artemis. The temple was built on the site of an ancient tree-shrine. The pagans believed that Artemis protected the faithful and gave life to them.

But Jesus is making a very different claim. He's taking them back to Genesis 2 in the Garden of Eden, where He put a tree of life. This tree was intended by God to nourish and heal- and we'll see that it's a part of heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, when we get to chapter 22.

But how can Jesus promise that? Back in the garden, Adam and Eve lost access to the tree of life- because they sinned. God barred access to the garden by putting angels with flaming swords at the entrance to the garden.

But Jesus is promising access to that tree. How? 'To the one who conquers/overcomes.' Greek word there is 'nikao'- where the shoe company Nike got its name. In context with the tree of life, conquering means overcoming our own sinfulness that keeps us out of paradise. That's something you can't conquer by yourself. Because you're descended from Adam- a sinner and barred from the tree of life.

But there's another place in John's writing where he uses the word 'nikao'/overcomer. 1 John 5: "And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"

You have to trust in a greater conqueror. You have to know someone who can gain access to 'the paradise of God.' Adam failed to obey God and got us barred from the tree of life. Jesus obeyed God and gained us access to the tree of life. Jesus loved

you so much that He was willing to die in your place, and take on your curse, so that you could have life in the paradise of God.

That's love that's life-changing. Love that is filling. And love that moves me to love others.

Are you a skeptic who's unsure whether Christianity offers anything you need? What it offers is a love you never thought possible. But you have to jump in with both feet, you can't stand on the shore dangling a toe or two into the water. You have to jump in and try it out honestly, and then you'll realize that it's everything you ever hoped and dreamed.

Are you a Christian who's lost your first love? Repent of whatever has been stealing your love, turn towards the Great Lover and remember how loved you are.

For my series on Revelation, I am using the books *The Returning King* by Vern Poythress, *The Book of Revelation* by Leon Morris, *Letters to the Seven Churches* by William Barclay and a sermon series by Rev. Dave Silvernail, pastor of Potomac Hills PCA. There are other resources that I've drawn from, and I've done my best to notate direct sources. The reader should assume that little, if any, of this material is truly original.