

Seven Churches of Asia

The Church at Ephesus

Introduction: (Revelation 2:1-7)

- I. We've all driven passed by a house with shattered windows, dried-out shingles, peeling paint, overgrown grass and weeds, untrimmed shrubs – all signs of a home that has lost its life.
 - A. In years past, that house was somebody's home.
 1. Perhaps it once rang with the laughter of a young married couple or sheltered a busy, growing, loving family.
 2. It may have provided comfort and fond memories for a nice elderly couple.
 - B. But now it stands uninhabited – a discarded shell. What a sad picture!

- II. And yet, a house that has become lifeless is not nearly as tragic as a church that has become loveless.
 - A. Imagine a congregation that once had a vital commitment to Christ growing stagnant and indifferent.
 1. Such a church might still be doctrinally sound, even evangelistic in their efforts to reach the lost in the community.

2. But their doctrinal soundness and their evangelistic efforts are no longer done out of a deep devotion to the Lord.
- B. Is this church like that?
1. Has our fire for Christ died out?
 2. Could it be that the blazing fire of love for the Lord that once warmed our lives as a people, and blazed brightly in this community, is now only glowing embers that could easily be extinguished at any time?
 3. As you look into your own life, has your fire for Christ died out?
- C. Sadly, the members of the church at Ephesus allowed the flame of their love to grow cold, and Jesus confronted them about it in no uncertain terms.
1. However, with characteristic kindness, the Lord also provided them with a solution.
- III. To understand the church at Ephesus a little better, let's briefly examine the background of the church and the city where these saints lived.
- A. The ancient city of Ephesus is located in what we NOW know as Southwestern Turkey. But in New Testament times, this region of the Roman Empire was known as the Roman province of Asia.
1. Ephesus was ranked as one of the top three cities of the eastern Mediterranean, along with Antioch Pisidia and Alexandria, Egypt.

- a. Economically, the city thrived as a result of its prosperous sea trade, made possible by an inland harbor connected to the Cayster River.
 - b. Today, there are only the remains of the once glorious city of Ephesus, and the harbor that brought such wealth to the city has filled in with silt from the Cayster River so that the city is now located nearly 10 miles from the coast.
2. The church of Ephesus was founded by the apostle Paul, along with the labors of a devoted husband and wife team, Aquilla and Priscilla.
- a. **Acts 18:18-19** – *So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him. He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow. 19 And he came to Ephesus, and left them there; but he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.*
 - b. **Acts 18:24-26** – *Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. 25 This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John. 26 So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila*

and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

- b. **Acts 19:8-10** – *And he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God. 9 But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. 10 And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.*

3. Paul stayed with the church in Ephesus for several years, and later turned the flourishing work over to his son-in-the-faith, Timothy.

- B. One reason Paul spent so much time ministering in Ephesus was because of the city's strategic importance. Ephesus was known as the Supreme Metropolis of Asia – a city with wide paved streets, such as this road that led through the commercial district of Ephesus. Other streets were actually inlaid with very intricate mosaic patterns, like this street near the center of town.

1. The city was not only an important center of trade because of its fine harbor, wealth flowed into the city from an interlacing system of highways that linked Ephesus to other cities of the East – cities such

as Laodicea, Colossae, Antioch Pisidia, and Tarsus, just to mention a few.

2. The city also boasted of a very affluent population of around 200 thousand people.
 - a. Many of the wealthy citizens of Ephesus lived on the hillsides overlooking the city in luxurious houses with graceful arches and ornate courtyards – much like the homes in this modern-day village not far from ancient Ephesus.
 - b. The city's great wealth came from merchandise of every description which poured into the spacious warehouses of Ephesus from the East and the West.
3. The ornate architecture of the city can still be seen in many of the restored ruins of ancient Ephesus – such as the façade of the Library of Celsus, a two-story library that boasted of ancient writings from all around the world.
4. Ephesus was also an important city to Rome from a political standpoint.
 - a. Since the city was the home of the Roman governor Ephesus, it was graced with temples built to honor emperors such as Trajan and Domitian.
5. Religiously, the city was the center of the worship of Artemis (her Greek name), or Diana (her Roman name).

- (1). The temple, with its statue of the goddess Artemis, was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.
 - (2). Thousands of priestesses were involved in the worship to Diana, including many who were dedicated to cult prostitution.
 - (3). The temple also served as a great bank for kings and merchants, as well as an asylum for fleeing criminals.
6. And then there is the famous theater where the townspeople rioted because Paul had preached against their idolatrous practices.
- a. The apostle had to be restrained by the disciples from entering this theatre to defend the gospel.
- C. It was in this economically wealthy, politically influential, and religiously corrupt city that a congregation of Christians met for worship.
1. What happened to these people, and why did the Lord give special attention to addressing them in this letter.
 2. Let's now turn our attention to the letter itself.

Body:

- I. In **Revelation chapter 2** the Lord addresses the church at Ephesus by using words and phrases we found in the first chapter of Revelation.
 - A. In verse 1 the Lord tells the apostle John, who is writing these words:

1. **Revelation 2:1** – *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... "*
 - a. What does it mean when the Lord speaks to the angel of the church at Ephesus, and what's the symbolism of the Lord holding seven stars in His right hand, and of Him walking among seven golden lampstands – or candlesticks, as some translations render it?
 - b. Back in the FIRST CHAPTER of Revelation the Lord HIMSELF explained what these things mean.

2. **Revelation 1:20** – The Lord said: *The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.*
 - a. In our introduction to this series of lessons last week, we suggested the seven STARS, which are the ANGELS of the seven churches, may represent the inner spirit or inner life of the church that the Lord holds in His hands to either bless or rebuke, to either bless or condemn.
 - b. Furthermore, the Lord describes Himself as walking in the midst of the seven LAMPSTANDS, which we are told are the seven CHURCHES.

- c. This suggests the Lord is pictured as walking among the churches of that day, looking intently into each of these churches, being fully aware of everything that goes on within each of them.
 - d. It's almost as though the Lord is walking among His churches taking inventory – taking inventory of their love, zeal, faithfulness, courage, loyalty, steadfastness, doctrinal soundness, and much more as He holds the very destiny of that church in His hand.
3. This sense of the Lord's continual presence – of His walking among the churches, even today – can be both reassuring and threatening.
- a. The psalmist David speaks of the Lord's inescapable and penetrating knowledge, where everything is naked and exposed to His eyes.

(1). **Psalm 139:1-4** – *O LORD, You have searched me and known me. 2 You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. 3 You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. 4 For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O LORD, You know it altogether.*
 - b. But, how many of us would be willing to pray the final words of this psalm?

(1). **Psalm 139:23-24** – *Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; 24 And see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

4. So, as the Lord takes inventory of our life and of this church what does He see? What does His inventory reveal?

a. Do we live with the knowledge that Christ is always with us; reading our every thought, perceiving our every motive, hearing our every word, and watching our every action?

b. The writer of the book of Hebrews puts it this way:

(1). **Hebrews 4:13** – *And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.*

c. Absolutely NOTHING escapes the eyes of the Lord – He sees all and knows all.

II. As the letter continues, the Lord begins His remarks with words that should have sent a chill into the heart of every member of these seven churches – the words: *"I KNOW!"*

A. So just what IS the message to the church at Ephesus – what is it that the Lord KNOWS about them that they may not even know about themselves?

1. **Revelation 2:2-3** – "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; 3
and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for
My name's sake and have not become weary."

B. Lord's inventory of the Ephesus church found seven areas of strength that He could praise – seven specific areas of strength that can be grouped into three main categories.

1. First, Jesus praised them for being energetic and hard-working.
 - a. These people lived in a city where paganism and immorality ran rampant.
 - b. But instead of hiding in a corner, or convincing themselves that it's no use telling others about the gospel of Christ, they stepped into the battle, and wielded the sword of the Spirit bravely and consistently.
2. Second, Jesus also praised them for their patience and perseverance.
 - a. These saints had patiently persevered under some of the most trying circumstances, and made a tremendous impact in their stand for the truth.
 - b. They, no doubt, had won many victories as a result of their strong stand for righteousness within the community, and they were not only well known for their efforts, but apparently respected as well.

3. Finally, the Lord praised them for their doctrinal soundness.
 - a. They knew the truth of the gospel of Christ, and they knew it well – so much so that they were able to instantly identify doctrinal error.
 - c. What was true of the Hebrew Christians was certainly NOT true of the saints in Ephesus.
 - (1). **Hebrews 5:12-14** – *For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. 13 For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. 14 But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*
 - b. The members of the church at Ephesus were thoroughly familiar with the gospel of Christ, and not only openly proclaimed the gospel in their community, they could also instantly detect doctrinal error when they heard it, and simply wouldn't tolerate it.
 - c. They wouldn't tolerate anyone who **PRETENDED** to be a faithful Christian or an apostle.

- (1). Remember, the apostle Paul had warned the Ephesian elders about the threat of false teachers arising from within the church.
 - (2). **Acts 20:27-31** – *For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. 28 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. 31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.*
- d. False teachers would never soil the church at Ephesus, even though some tried – including one group whom the Lord identified as the “Nicolaitans.”
- (1). **Revelation 2:6** – *But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*
 - (2). It is most commonly believed that the Nicolaitans were a sect of the Gnostics, who apparently taught Gnostic philosophies such as denying that Jesus came in the flesh,

and teaching that sins committed in the flesh are not charged against the spirit.

D. We can only imagine that the Ephesian Christians were encouraged and felt proud of their accomplishments when they heard these words of praise.

1. But not everything was right within the church.

III. The Lord found one thing which He condemned.

A. **Revelation 2:4** – The Lord said: *Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.*

1. Their love for the Lord, for one another, for the truth, for teaching the lost, etc., had not been entirely extinguished, but it was nothing compared to what it had once been.

2. Simply put, they didn't love the same way any more.

a. The quality and intensity of their love had weakened over the years.

3. This happens so often in a church like Ephesus, which was in its third generation of members.

a. The church at Ephesus was now about 40 to 50 years old. Many, if not most, of its original founders had since died, and the sons and daughters of those original founders were now either in, or approaching, their retirement years. Plus a whole new

generation of younger couples were now the mainstay of the church.

- b. The love and zeal that had been so characteristic of the founders had waned over the years in the lives of the second generation, and may have even reached the point where some of those in the third generation (the grandchildren of the original founders) may not have been very faithful to the Lord.

B. Even though the Ephesian church was still doctrinally sound, and still working and laboring for the cause of Christ, their spiritual fervency was not what it used to be.

1. They no longer felt a closeness and intimacy with Jesus Christ or for each other.
2. Perhaps their works of service were done more out of DUTY than DEDICATION, more out of OBLIGATION than FAITHFUL *obedience*.
 - a. They may have slipped into simply going through the motions – serving the Lord out of habit.
3. And worse yet, they may have even deluded themselves into thinking that as long as they came to church regularly, everything was okay.

C. There are several Greek words that are commonly translated as LOVE – two of which are AGAPE and PHILEO.

1. Agape is the highest kind of love – the kind of love that God has for each and every one of us, and the kind of love the Lord had in laying down His life for us on the cross.
 - a. It is a self-sacrificing kind of love that always seeks the highest and best – that seeks to always bring out the best in others.
2. Phileo, on the other hand, simply means brotherly love, or friendship – it's the word from which Philadelphia comes from (the city of "Brotherly Love").
 - a. This is a good kind of love, but it isn't even close to being as deep and self-sacrificing as agape love.
3. The kind of "love" the Lord demands of us is "agape" love not simply "phileo" love – He doesn't want us to merely love Him as a good friend, rather the Lord demands that we love Him so much that we would also sacrifice ourselves for Him.
4. In the **21st chapter of the gospel of John**, there is a discourse between the Lord and Peter which occurred after Peter had denied the Lord three times, and after the Lord had been crucified and resurrected from the dead. He was meeting with all His disciples and has this dialogue with Peter.
 - a. **John 21:15-16** – *So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You."*

He said to him, "Feed My lambs." 16 He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep."

- b. Twice the Lord had asked Peter if he loved Him with an agape kind of love – once in **verse 15** and again in **verse 16**.
 - c. But twice Peter was able to only claim a “phileo” kind of love.
 - d. **John 21:17** – *He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You."*
 - e. This grieved Peter deeply – not because the Lord had to ask him three times, but how the Lord asked him the third time.
 - f. Jesus used the word “phileo” in this verse – asking Peter, am I really your friend? And once again, Peter could only claim a “phileo” kind of love for the Lord.
5. If the Lord asked you what kind of love you have for Him, what would your reply be: “agape” or “phileo?”
- a. Could it be that, like those in the church at Ephesus, you no longer feel a closeness and intimacy with Jesus Christ or for your brothers and sisters in Christ – you no longer have that fervency

and burning desire serve the Lord that you once had many years ago?

- b. Could it be that, like those in the church at Ephesus, your works of service are being done more out of *duty* than *dedication*, more out of *obligation* than *faithful obedience*.
- c. Could it be that you have slipped into simply going through the motions – serving the Lord out of habit.

IV. So what could the members of the church at Ephesus do to fix the problem of having left their first love?

A. The Lord told them there were three specific things they needed to do to revive their first love.

- 1. **Revelation 2:5** – 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.

B. So what are the three things the Lord told them to do to rekindle their first love?

- 1. First, they were to REMEMBER.
 - a. They were told to remember from where they had fallen, and reflect on the times when their love burned brightly.

- b. Nothing can help a dying faith more than to remember the zeal, love and dedication that once filled our hearts when we first obeyed the gospel.
 - c. When we begin to reflect on those days long ago, do we remember:
 - (1). How nothing could keep us from worship services -- we were present every time the doors were open?
 - (2). How we read and studied our Bible, and wanted to learn everything we could about God's word?
 - (3). How we felt a burning need to share our faith with others, and were very fervent in our efforts to teach others the gospel of Christ?
 - (4). How much of an influence we had on other members of our family as they saw the love for Christ burning brightly in our own lives?
 - d. If we can't remember these things, then chances are we were never really converted to Christ to begin with.
 - e. But if we can remember these things, we need to think about them again and spend a lot of time reflecting on them.
2. Second, they were told to REPENT.
- a. The word "repent" means to turn back, to do a complete turn-around.

b. The hearts of the Ephesians should have ached with godly sorrow as they remembered from where they had fallen and reflected on those days long ago when their love and zeal burned bright.

c. Godly sorrow is the ONLY kind of sorrow the apostle Paul says will bring about genuine repentance.

(1). **2 Corinthians 7:9-10** – *Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. 10 For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.*

d. If our hearts genuinely feel sorrow when we see how much our own love for Christ has diminished, and yet we do nothing to change, we have only experienced the sorrow of the world.

e. A sermon may convict us, but until it convinces us of a need to change, it hasn't done us any good.

f. Genuine godly sorrow is the only kind of sorrow that will lead to genuine repentance.

C. And finally, the third thing the Lord told these saints in Ephesus that they must do is repeat their FIRST WORKS.

1. Unless the church at Ephesus was willing to go back and start repeating or doing their first works again, the warning of Christ would have been spoken in vain.
 - a. The real mark of repentance is CHANGE.
 - b. If there is no change, there is no repentance.
 2. Therefore, it was necessary for these saints at Ephesus to get busy and DO something about their condition.
- D. Failure to change their condition would result in tragic consequences
1. **Revelation 2:5** – Again, the Lord said: *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.*
 2. Unless they regained the love they lost, the Lord would remove their lampstand out of its place. What does this mean?
 - a. It may mean that the church at Ephesus would cease being a church in the Lord's eyes.
 - b. They had a responsibility to uphold and dispense the Lord's light to the community around them, but if they weren't willing to do so out of a fervent love, the Lord would simply extinguish their light.
 3. Why? Because the Lord will accept nothing less than TOTAL love and commitment

- a. **Matthew 22:37-40** – In answering which was the greatest of all the commandments, Jesus said: *“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”*
 4. Think about the consequences of this – the Ephesian church, just like the church here, could actually cease being a church in the Lord’s eyes.
 - a. The name “Church of Christ” might still be on the sign on the front of the building.
 - b. We might still be coming together for worship.
 - c. We might still be teaching the lost and doing other wonderful works.
 - d. But we would no longer be a congregation of the Lord’s people – because the Lord won’t accept anything less than total love and commitment.
- V. However, there is one final glimmer of hope.
- A. The Lord entreats the members of the Ephesian church to listen carefully to what the Spirit is revealing to the church.

1. **Revelation 2:7** – *"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."*
 2. Failure to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit as He speaks this warning to the seven churches – and to us today – will result in dire consequences.
- B. However, to those who overcome the obstacle of a love that has grown dim, the Lord offers these words of encouragement.
1. He will give to those who overcome to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.
 - a. What Adam lost in the garden of Eden because of sin, will be restored to him who overcomes.
 - b. Those who overcome this sinful influence in their lives will be able to enjoy the fullness of life implied by the expression "to eat of the tree of life."
 - c. This fullness of life will not only be experienced here, but even more so in the "Paradise of God" which is heaven itself.
 - d. Heaven is reserved only for those who overcome -- not for those who are overcome.

Conclusion:

- I. Here is a deeply troubling message to a church that may have prided itself in its past accomplishments.
 - A. If we had not know better, we would have probably never dreamed that the Ephesian church had such a serious problem internally.
 1. On the outside, they looked great!
 - a. They had a long history of faithful service.
 - b. They had employed some of the finest preachers (Paul and Timothy).
 - c. They were known throughout the brotherhood as being a great church.
 - d. Their former eldership had been close friends of the apostle Paul.
 - e. There was even a letter written specifically to them that found its way into the New Testament -- Paul's letter to the Ephesians.
 2. But on the inside, they had left their first love.
 - a. The zeal and fervor they once had for Christ had diminished.
- II. Are we like the church at Ephesus – have we left the level of intensity of our first love?
 - A. The only way you can answer that is to look at your own life as an individual.

1. So, let me ask each of us this question: Are you someone who needs to remember from where you have fallen, repent and do the first works.
2. If you are, then you can come to the Lord this very morning, confessing your sins to Him, and know that He will forgive you of every one of those sins and restore you completely once again.
3. But for those of you who have never obeyed the gospel in the first place, you need to begin by believing that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the Living God, repent of your sins, and then be buried with Christ in baptism for the remission of your sins.