

Revelation 2:1-7
 The Church of Ephesus
 Neglected Priority
 Study 6

We continue our study through the Book of Revelation this morning by opening to the 19th verse in chapter one

- Though our study will be predominantly in the 2nd chapter -verse 19 is foundational
 - Jesus, in verse 19, gives instruction to the Apostle John to “Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this.”
- If you haven’t been with us, or if you missed some of the teachings through our study
 - This verse is the key to unlocking the layout of the book of Revelation
 - It’s not man-made layout; but one that Jesus set for
 - The three sections of the book of Revelation:
 - “Things which you have seen”- chapter 1
 - “Things which are” – chapters 2&3
 - “Things which will take place after this” – Chapters 4 thru the end

For the past 5 weeks we have been studying “the things which [John] has seen”

- Which has been primarily Jesus revealing His true heavenly nature to John in chapter 1
 - This morning, however, and for the next 7-8 weeks or so as we go through chapters 2 and 3,
 - we will be looking at what Jesus calls “the things that are”
 - And then of course chapters 4 thru the end of the book are the “things which will take place after this”
- These “things which are” of which John is asked to write,
 - Are 7 separate letters to 7 separate churches in Asia minor – also known as modern day turkey
 - And we will be looking at the letter to the first church this morning – the church of Ephesus

However, before we jump in, there are a few things that are necessary to know from a broad perspective

- That will help us understand the whole

- First, chapters 2 & 3 contain 7 individual letters that have been dictated from Jesus to John directly
 - These letters are quite unique in that Jesus, from His eternal state as the glorified and risen Lord in heaven,
 - Told John the exact words to write and John recorded them
 - A bit like the old days when Executives would have their secretary come in to their office to – “take a memo” or “take a letter”
- I wonder if news traveled to the churches that Jesus had specifically written them a personal letter?
 - And if the people gathered in great anticipation to hear what their Savior said directly to them!
- What would you do if you heard news that you would be receiving a personal letter directly from Jesus?
 - If you knew that Jesus had singled out Calvary Monroe to write us a personal letter
 - Would you not drop everything or cancel any plan that you might have
 - Just to be there when the letter is read out loud to the body of believers?
 - Of course you would!
 - It should really get our attention when we read in each letter
 - “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”
- We are so privileged today to hold in our hand those very letters
 - And in some ways we are even more blessed than the first century believer because every one of us has our own personal copy!
 - Back then, it was one copy to the pastor who read to the church
- But we can hold it ourselves; study it for ourselves; apply it to our very lives
 - I hope we are not neglecting or taking for granted such a sacred privilege

What’s sad is that most of these churches had some real problems.

- What even more sad, is to think about how young these churches are

- You figure most were planted by the Apostle Paul only about 30 years or so before
 - And in just that short amount of time, the churches developed some real issues
- Ephesus- was the church of Neglected Priorities.
 - The church that had forsaken their first love
- Smyrna – Was the church of Satanic Opposition
 - The church that would suffer persecution
- Pergamos – was the church of Religious Compromise
 - The church that needed to repent from the doctrines of Balaam and Nicolaitans
- Thyatira – Was the church of Immoral Practices
 - This was the church that had a false prophetess who brought sexual immorality into the church
- Sardis – The church of Spiritual Apathy
 - The church that had fallen asleep
- Philadelphia – The church of Lost Opportunities
 - The church that endured patiently but had a little strength
- Laodiceans – The church of Material Prosperity
 - The church with a lukewarm faith (*a thank you to Dr. David Hocking for the outline*)
 - Seven in total

Many understand these churches from 4 perspectives and I think it would good for us to consider them

- **First, these are literal churches.**
 - We've talked about this before so I won't go into much detail
 - But these were real churches. If you were to go to Ephesus in John's day,
 - You could take in a service at the church of Ephesus
 - Or at the church of Philadelphia
 - Or if you wanted a really bad service, you could go to Thyatira or Pergamos
- **Second,** they can be understood as periods of church history
 - There are many commentators that hold to this view.
 - That each church, with their unique characteristic and/or issue
 - Can be viewed as phases of church history itself;
 - different stages of the church over the last 2,000 years

- (see bulletin insert)
 - My personal view on this is that this has merit, but it would be secondary in its significance
 - What I've found is that, of the good bible teachers that hold to this view,
 - None of them agree on the dates – making it hard to be overly dogmatic about things
 - And therefore, while I understand the view, I personally think there are more applicable perspectives
- **Third** perspective is that these are kinds of churches
 - Meaning that in every age of the church, we can see these types of churches in existence
 - There will always be Ephesus type churches that have left their first love
 - There will always be Thyatira churches who tolerate unholy sin and are disgustingly immoral
 - Or churches that are spiritually apathetic and therefore, dead - like we see with the church of Sardis
 - And so on
- And the **last perspective** – they are kinds of believers. Seven kind of believers
 - Maybe you're a Philadelphia believer.
 - Or maybe you're believer and you're dead like Sardis
 - Or you're like the Laodicean church and you're neither for God nor against Him
 - The point is that these 7 churches are deeply applicable to both you and me

So, with that bit of foundational information, let's jump right into the passage this morning in chapter two

- And we will be covering the first church – the church of Ephesus
 - Let's read what Jesus has to say to this church and see how it applies to you and me today
 - **2** "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: **2** "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. **4** Nevertheless I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love. **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. **6** But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

- **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.”

The Lord's instructions were for John to write, and as Jesus is dictating His letter to His church in Ephesus

- John is instructed to address it to “the angel of the church of Ephesus”
 - When studying your bible, it's always good and healthy to ask questions all the time
 - A good question to ask here in this first verse is “who is this angel?” Who are these angels that each letter is written to?
 - You will notice that each letter is addressed the same – “to the angel of the church...”
 - So who are they?
- The Greek word for “angel” is <aggelos> (ahn-geloss), and it means “messenger” or “sent one”
 - Because of this, the identity of the aggelos is graciously debated among great bible teachers
 - I will give you 3 views and let you make up your own mind

The first view is that they are heavenly guardian angels of the churches

- This is the primary usage of this word throughout the book of revelation, and of the whole of scripture as well
 - 188 times this word is used in the NT and in all but about 6 times it's used in reference to heavenly angelic beings
 - 76 times we see it used in Revelation and, for the exception of here,

- each time it can be clearly shown to be heavenly beings
 - and so consistency is a good argument for these being heavenly angels as well
 - it's also argued that Angels are identified as "stars" in other passages of scripture
- A challenge to this view is, if we read carefully each letter, we see that the angels are the recipients of the content of the letters
 - Just as surely as anyone in the congregation itself
 - And since that's true, we see that each "angel" is charged with sins alongside those within church itself – as if he is counted among them
 - It is difficult to reconcile sinless angels with being partakers in the sin of the churches as well
- Another challenge to this view is when we look at what is promised to the overcomer in each letter
 - Angels do not partake of the tree of life (Rev. 2:7),
 - Angels cannot be imprisoned by men or killed (Rev. 2:10-11),
 - Also, angels are not written in the Book of Life (Rev. 3:5),
 - nor will they reign over the nations (Rev. 2:26-27; 3:21)

The second view is that these angels are human messengers from the churches in each city

- Human messengers that may have been sent to Patmos
 - For the purpose of meeting with John and carrying a copy of the letter back to each church.
 - These would be messengers like Tychicus was for Paul in Col. 4
 - **7** Tychicus, a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me. **8** I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that he[a] may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts, **9** with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is *one* of you. They will make known to you all things which *are happening here*"
- The challenge to angel being any human is that nowhere is scripture are human messengers called "stars" (like we see these angels referred to as)
 - And so it would be out of character for the whole of the Bible

The last view is that these angels mentioned in each letter are the pastors or some type of leaders of the churches themselves.

- This view is widely held as pastor/elders are given charge over the flock of God
 - And therefore it would seem natural for the Lord to speak to that man whom He has called to that position
 - And use him to correct the problems within the local church
 - Holding him more responsible
 - As James says in his letter “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.” (James 3:1)
- Each of these views – whether angelic beings, messengers or local pastors – are various views held by good and well respected Bible teachers throughout antiquity
 - I have my own leanings personally, but because the scripture isn’t real clear
 - I won’t pound the pulpit one way or the other
 - And hold this with an open hand
- What is certain however, is that there is an individual that Jesus addresses His letters to in each church
 - And it’s fairly certain that this individual is a leader in some way

So, again, verse 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:
 - Jesus addresses the church and then introduces Himself to the church
- The church in the first letter is Ephesus.
 - And to that church, He introduces Himself as the One with all authority and the One who assesses the churches
 - He holds the stars in His right hand and walks amongst the lampstands – the churches
- And so He’s telling this church, who’s main issue was neglecting the right priorities
 - That He’s the One who is the ultimate authority in all things – especially in the church
 - That He is the foremost object of worship and praise for all churches

- And that He's been watching them. Evaluating them. Assessing them
- And in doing so, Jesus commends them for many things.
 - In fact, I see 4 things here in the text that this church is commended for
 - We see them in verses 2 and 3, and also in verse 6

First, we see that Jesus commends them for their **dedication** to the Lord's work

- Verse 2 "**2** "I know your works, your labor, your patience"
 - Jesus knows everything. Nothing is hidden from Him
 - Which means He knows what this church is doing right!
 - This church was hard working. They knew what works pleased the Lord and they did them
 - They had an unmatched endurance in the work
- This "labor" we read about is more than just doing a chore,
 - It's a labor of blood sweat and tears. The word means to work to the point of exhaustion.
 - They were sold out, busy working for the Lord
 - And Jesus commends them for that and many Christians would do well to note this for their own walk
 - **Lazy** and **Christian** should never be used in the same sentence

He also commends them for their **discernment** in the work of the Lord

- **2** "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;"
 - The Ephesian church had great discernment
- I wish this could be said of the church as a whole today.
 - Today, like no other time, the church lacks discernment
 - We have charlatans peppered all over Christendom, in cities all across the land
 - Syphoning money off Christians who are undiscerning
- All across the airwaves we have men and even women,
 - claiming to be teachers of God's word yet denying the Word of God, and even worse – denying the blood that bought them
 - We must develop our spiritual discernment muscle

- 2 Cor. **13** For such *are* false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. **14** And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. **15** Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.”

Most of us here know of the Robert Tilton’s, and other in the past 20 years or so, but let me give you a glimpse of the horrific stuff that has crept into the churches lately

- (SHOW PICTURE #1) Toking the Holy Ghost; Getting high on the Most High;
 - It’s sickening.
 - Apparently the Spirit of God is something you can breath in like a joint and get high from
 - One might think this would have originated here in Washington
- Here’s (PICTURE #2) an equally bizarre one that’s popular in a highly influential church in California
 - It’s called “grave sucking” (SHOW PICTURE #3)
 - These people are going to the graves of dead saints, laying on their headstones
 - And soaking up the anointing
 - This same church is claiming gold dust is falling from the sky in the church
 - And all other overly bizarre signs and wonders
- And these, admittedly, are the more bizarre and overtly stupid ones
 - But we can add to them the more subtle concerns that have overtaken thousands of Christians
 - Such as telling everyone that what gives God the greatest joy is when we are selfishly happy
 - And that we are to do good for our own selves because God wants us happy-
 - And you being happy, makes God happy
 - And, of course, coupling with that the refusal to preach sin and repentance from the biggest pulpit in America
 - And so on

Paul says in Act 20:27 “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[c] 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.”

- As a pastor and minister of the Gospel
 - I am bound by my calling to warn those whom God has called me to under-shepherd
 - About these false teachers – these wolves in sheep’s clothing
 - If Paul didn’t cease for 3 years, day and night to the point of tears
 - Who am I not speak the same warnings
- And beyond a pastor’s warning, you, as a believer in Jesus Christ
 - Are commanded to search the scriptures daily to see whether or not they are true
 - To examining these teachings in light of Holy Scripture
 - And if reject them if necessary and call them for what they are

It’s so unfortunate that many are neglecting this very important spiritual discipline

- And if God’s people would do just this, these heretics and false apostles would have no one to teach. No one to follow them.
 - They’d be like the John Maxwell proverb that says “He that thinks he leads, but has no followers, is only out for a walk.”
- Jesus praises the Ephesian church here
 - For not bearing those who are evil.
 - And for testing those who say they are apostles and calling them liars if they don’t measure up
- It’s sad to me that people think this type of discernment in action is “unloving” or “ungracious”
 - But here Jesus clearly commends this church for doing so
 - That tells me we’re on safe ground

The 3rd Commendation Jesus gives the Ephesian church is for their **devotion**

- **3** and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary.

- Gal 6:9 “And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart”

The 4th and final thing Jesus commends the church for is for their decision regarding the deeds of the Nicolaitans

- **6** “But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate”
 - Isn’t that interesting. Jesus is telling us what He hates. Such a powerful statement from such a loving and longsuffering Savior
 - The deeds of the Nicolaitans is also condemned in verse 15 with the church of Thyatira
- If Jesus hates these deeds, wouldn’t it be great to know what the works of the Nicolaitins are so we can avoid them and expose them too?
 - Problem is – no one really knows.
 - Some have said that these people came from a Gnostic by the name of Nicolaus
 - Some have claimed that the Nicolaitin came from one of the first Deacons in the church that we see in Acts 6 –
 - “And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch,”

What I find interesting is if we break down the Greek word itself, I think it gives us a good indication of what the issue is:

- The word is a compound word in the Greek coming from <nike> meaning “victory”
 - And coupled with the word for laity
 - The word means to “rule over the laity”
 - The reference to “false apostles” is consistent with this
- Fruchtenbaum says: “This meaning may imply that this was an attempt to divide and make an unnatural distinction between the clergy and laity, creating a division in which the clergy exercised rulership over the laity. Certainly, elders have the biblical authority to determine the policy of the local church. But the authority described here probably went much further than the issues in the local church and may have extended to the personal lives of the members.”

- “If this is the Nicolaitan error, then one only need look at the top-heavy ecclesiastical structures which characterize much of Christendom throughout history to see the sour fruit of such teaching”
 - Guzik “Based on this, some point to presumptuous claims of apostolic authority and to the heart that sets up hierarchies and separates the "clergy" from the "laity." Perhaps the **Nicolaitans** fulfilled all these aspects, being both an idolatrous immorality and a presumptuous, hierarchical, "hidden mysteries" system typical of Gnosticism.”

By all outward appearances, this church rocked!

- Jesus commends them for their dedication to His work; for their active discernment in the work of Christ
 - He commends them for their devotion to His work; for laboring for His name’s sake even during difficult times
 - And for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitins....but Jesus has a **concern** for the church...verse 4

“Nevertheless” – this is a very strong word. <Alla> in Greek – meaning a great contrast is coming

- Something so serious that it almost cancelled out all of this great commendation
 - Although they are commended for their loyalty and their efforts
 - The problem in the church is very serious
 - “Nevertheless, I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love.”
 - They had left, not lost, their first love
 - They are departing from it.

David Hocking made a great point that I think all of us, me included, need to hear

- So often we rationalize up our lack of love by emphasizing our works
 - It is so easy to excuse the lack of love - sometimes even insisting that what we want is holiness and purity
 - Which of course all Christians should desire
- But too often we are commending ourselves in devotion, and discernment and dedication to the Lord’s work
 - And in doing so, we fail to understand the seriousness of the lack of love

- But Jesus says here, in the face of all the great things this church has going for itself
 - That He is against them. He has something great against them
 - And it's their lack of love
- Verse 5 tells us that if this isn't rectified and soon, He will remove their lampstand
 - They will cease to exist as a church

But what is this first love? If it's so important to Jesus,

- So important that a church would cease to be corporately
 - Then how do we identify what the "first love" is?

There are great Bible scholars that differ on this. And I want to present to you all four viewpoints so as to bring the enormity of the subject:

- **Love for the second coming of Jesus Christ** - 2 Timothy 4:8
 - **8** Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.
- **Love for the non-believers.** Evangelistic - Jude 21-23
 - **21** keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. **22** And on some have compassion, making a distinction;[a] **23** but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire,[b] hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.
- **Love for other believers** - John 13:34-35
 - **34** A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. **35** By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."
- **Love for the Lord Himself** - Matthew 22:34-40;
 - **34** But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. **35** Then one of them, a lawyer, asked *Him a question*, testing Him, and saying, **36** "Teacher, which *is* the great commandment in the law?"
 - **37** Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'[a]
 - 38** This is *the* first and great commandment. **39** And *the* second *is* like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'[b]
 - 40** On these two commandments hang all the Law and the

Prophets.”

- Eph. 6:24 “**24** Grace *be* with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen.”

The Love for the Lord Himself is the well in which we draw the love for others.

- If we have not love for Jesus properly prioritized, the love for others will not flow properly from our hearts
 - And I believe this is what the Lord has against them
 - And why He would rather remove their lampstand than to allow them to remain a poor representation
- ***All the work for the Lord cannot please the Lord with our first loving the Lord properly***

And so the Lord challenges the Ephesian church. Jesus graciously tells them how to get right.

- **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.”
- There are three things Jesus tells them
 - First, **remember**. Remember from where you have fallen.
 - Remember, as 2 Timothy 3:4 us, that we were once “**4** traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,”
 - Second, **Repent**
 - This is a change of mind and conduct.
 - We need a radical change - most of us have become accustomed to a performance-oriented/ work oriented Christianity;
 - we have been taught to “do” more than to love.
 - But we need to love first and then the work will be a by-product of an overflow
 - Thirdly, **Return** – “and do the first works”
 - This is an issue of priorities. These are efforts that flow from an intense love for God Himself!

Jesus write a letter to this church. Introducing Himself and then commending them for great things they are doing

- For their devotion, their dedication, their great discernment

- But all of that meant nothing to Jesus if they didn't first love Him above all their works
 - So displeasing to the Lord is their lack of prioritizing Him
 - That He warned that He would remove their church all together
- And so, in the tender mercy and grace of the Lord
 - He calls them to remember their first love. Remember what it was like when they first became Christians
 - And then repent. Put the first things first

And then He makes them a promise: **“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.”

- “Jesus makes this promise **to him who overcomes** - but what does this overcomer overcome?
 - We usually think of overcoming in dramatic terms of overcoming sin and in spiritual warfare, but here Jesus seems to be speaking of the overcoming of the coldness of their hearts and lack of love marked by the leaving of their first love” (Guzik)
- And if they overcome – they will be partakers of the tree of life in heaven
 - A beautiful promise