

Revelation 2:1-7 Losing Your First Love

Review:

What does the word revelation mean? It means an unveiling or a revealing, in this case of events that were in the near future of the original readers. **Read 1:1a, 3b.**

Outline: The book of Revelation has 22 chapters and can be divided into two parts:
Chapter 1- 3 ~ Things that Are (Seven Local Churches)
Chapters 4 – 22 ~ “Things to Come” (Prophecy)

Introduction: Today we’ll study the first of seven performance reviews from Jesus for each the seven churches. It sobers me to think what Jesus might say to our church in such a review. This concerns “things ... that are” (1:19).¹

The Church in Ephesus

The first of the seven churches called on the carpet was the church in Ephesus. Who started that church? Paul, Priscilla and Aquila, and Apollos all played a part (but not John). This is the city where Paul encountered disciples of John the Baptist who had never heard of the Holy Spirit, the seven sons of Sceva were beaten by demons, there was big bon fire of magic books worth over 50,000 pieces of silver, and Demetrius the silversmith caused a riot. The theater where the riot occurred could seat 25,000. At the time this was written, its population was around 250,000.² Paul spent three years there, and after he left Timothy was stationed there. John eventually moved there. Since it was a port city on the Aegean sea, three major trade routes converged there, inundating the church with itinerant “Christian” frauds.

Think of the awesome vision John had of Jesus (1:12-18). No detail of this vision was explained. In such cases, the plain thing is the main thing. The message of the vision is that Jesus is Almighty God, ruler of the kings of the earth (1:5, 8). Which detail of the vision did Jesus refer back to in 2:1? In speaking to the Ephesian church, Jesus self identified as the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and who walks among seven golden lampstands. Jesus explained that the seven lampstands represent the seven churches. He holds the churches firmly in His right hand. If you are one of His sheep, this is awesome. No one can snatch you out of this hand. If you are outside the fold, this is awful. As we shall see, this information will hold particular relevance to the church in Ephesus.

ESV **John 10:28** I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

¹ A small minority of interpreters posit that each the seven churches represents a successive era in church history (this is not the same as the historicist view). However, this interpretation seems draw out of thin air.

² Mounce, *Revelation*, 85-87.

This letter was written to the angel of the church in Ephesus (2:1). What is the angel of a church? As was discussed in the previous lesson, this is unknown. It may simple be a personification of the church's characteristics.

******Christianity is not usually associated with hate. However, what did both the Ephesian church and Jesus rightly *hate* (2:2-7)?** They hated the works of the Nicolaitans (not to be confused with the Nickelodeons!).

Application: Don't try to be nicer than God. Sometimes, it is biblical to hate. In this case, it is biblical to hate the ungodly actions of evil doers:

ESV **Amos 5:15** Hate evil, and love good ...

What other praise did Jesus have for this church in 2:2-3? Jesus was appreciative of:

- 1) Their works, toil and patient endurance, **2:2a** (toil is active, endurance is passive). He repeats this in **2:3**.
- 2) How they could not tolerate evil men, but rather tested for false apostles, **2:2b**.

1) What role do works, toil, and endurance an bearing up play in being saved (2:2a, 3)?

Works, toil and endurance are the fruit, not the root, of salvation. Salvation is by grace, but a saving grace always produces faith, good works, and patient endurance. In the face of resistance, genuine faith does not fold up, it holds up.

ESV **James 2:26** ... as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Application: *Is your life characterized by works and toil for the Lord? Do you patiently endure opposition for the kingdom?*

ESV **Galatians 6:9** ...let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

ESV **2 Thessalonians 3:13** ... do not grow weary in doing good.

2) In 2:2, Jesus spoke of "those who are evil." What evil were these evil people doing? We think of Nazis or Communists as evil (and they are). In this case, the evil people were religious impostors, posing as true apostles. Before leaving Ephesus, Paul himself had warned:

ESV **Acts 20:29** I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock ...

Observation: From earliest times the church had to deal with false apostles. It is still true today. Paul also warned of:

ESV 2 **Corinthians 11:13-15** ... false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.

Application: Spurgeon said: “nowadays, if a man be clever; he may preach the vilest lie that was ever vomited from the mouth of hell, and it will go down with some.”³ Not all that glitters is gold. We must be ever wary and test those who would come in among us in a position of influence. It is incumbent on every church to test for false apostles.

What exactly is/was an apostle (2:2)? The word apostle is transliterated from *apostolos* (ἀπόστολος). If actually translated, it would be with a word like representative, delegate, messenger, or missionary. In a sense, missionaries are apostles, but whereas the Twelve Apostles wrote Scripture, missionaries merely read Scripture. Thus there were two levels or types of apostles: one was personally trained and sent by Jesus, the other was trained and sent by the Holy Spirit and the church. Since it is often used in a technical sense for the divinely appointed founders of the church who authored the New Testament, the translators use a transliteration to avoid confusion.

What constitutes a false apostle (2:2)? A false apostle is a church leader claiming to represent Jesus, but who in reality does not. A false apostle is a pretender, a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

How would a church test an apostle for genuineness (2:2)? To test an apostle, the church should examine both his doctrine and his lifestyle. If his teaching contradicts previous revelation (Scripture), or historic Christian orthodoxy (the *regula fide*), then he is a false apostle. If he lives an immoral life, then he is not a true apostle.

Heresy: Wherever the ecumenical creeds and various denominational confessions overlap in agreement, that should get our attention. This is a consensus wrought by the Holy Spirit. These creeds are not inspired, but contradicting them should serve like a theological smoke alarm. The area of overlap includes a belief in the Trinity, the deity of Christ, Jesus’ bodily resurrection and His future return.

Example: Joseph Smith claimed to be modern apostles equal to Paul or the Twelve, saying that Jesus appeared to him in the woods of upstate New York to commission him with a “restored gospel.” The problem is that his restored gospel flatly contracts the gospel recorded in the New Testament (which he claims is corrupted). It is a gospel of salvation by works. Furthermore, Smith taught there are many gods, not one, that Jesus and the Father two separate gods, and that we can become gods ourselves.

ESV **Matthew 7:15** Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

Despite their good works, what did Jesus have against the church at Ephesus (2:4)? They had “abandoned” the love that they had at the first. This is especially tragic since just a few years previous Paul had written to this same church:

³ David Guzik, “Study Guide for Revelation 2”, BlueLetterBible.org. Accessed November 26, 2020.

ESV **Ephesians 1:15-16** ... because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you ...

What does it mean to *abandon* a ship versus *leaving* a ship (2:4)? To abandon something implies you are not coming back. Abandon is from *aphiémi* (ἀφίημι), which fundamentally means to send away. It is also use of forgiveness. When God forgives us, He sends our sins away. It could be used to refer to divorce.

They had abandoned the love they had at first. What do you think Jesus meant by that (2:4)? Though not explained further by Jesus, it implies that their love for both Jesus and each other had grown cold. They seemed to be at a place of dead orthodoxy. A person can be as straight as a gun barrel theologically, and just as empty. Their love for Jesus had cooled, and with it a love for each other. Perhaps their ministry for the Lord was merely academic, a dry job, done without an underlying love for the Lord. Perhaps the endless parade of false apostles had caused them to be cynical so that they dealt with people in a joyless, tribunal-like fashion.

ESV **John 13:35** By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

ESV **1 John 4:20** If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

What are some marks of a church that lost its first love (2:4)? Some marks may include a critical spirit (you can made judgments without being judgmental), lost passion for evangelism, lack of interest in reading the Bible devotionally, a weak prayer life, inhospitality, and the church being more like a business than a family.

Example: Jonah obeyed God, but he had no love for the Ninevites, and did not want to see them saved.

What can we learn about love from 2:5? "Love" (2:4) is from *agapé* (ἀγάπη), which though it can refer to an emotional feeling, more fundamentally refers to a volitional commitment. God does not command feelings, does He? Love can be rekindled by remembering how it used to be, the coldness can be repented of, and by "doing its duties."⁴

Application: *How is your walk with the Lord? How's your love life with Jesus?*

What remedy did Jesus have to cure their lack of love (2:5)? 1) Remember. 2) Repent. 3) Work.

1) Memory can be a powerful force in motivating a return to a closer relationship. **Example:** When the prodigal son remembered how good his father's servants had it, he was motivated to return (**Lk 15:17-18**).

2) **What does it mean to repent (2:5)?** Repent is from *metanoëo* (μετανοέω) and literally means to change one's thinking. It is a change of thinking that leads to a change of action.

⁴ Mounce, *Revelation*, 88.

Imagine a guy who said, “I don’t love my wife anymore”, to which the counselor responds, “Well, stop it!” God doesn’t command a feeling; they were to change their attitude.

3) In 2:2-3, praised them for their works, yet in 2:5 He urged them to “do the works you did at first.” What was the difference? Their latter works, though good, were somehow different from the works they did at first. The difference may be motive. Their latter works lacked a love motive. Their first works sprang from their first love.

ESV 1 Corinthians 13:2-3 ... if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

In 2:6, Jesus said He would “come” to them. Does this refer to the second coming? No; this threatened coming would have been a judgment coming specifically against the one church of Ephesus. Not every reference to Jesus coming is a reference to His second coming.

What did Jesus threaten to do if they did not repent (2:5b)? He said He would take away their lampstand.

What would it mean for Jesus to remove their lampstand (1:5b)? See 1:20. It does not mean they would lose their salvation. Since the lampstands represented churches, it would be reasonable to conclude that they would cease to exist as a church. How this would be accomplished was not specified. Perhaps the loveless believers would eventually die of old age without spiritual replacements, and the church would cease to exist. Perhaps the church would be extinguished due to persecution, war or natural disaster (plague, earthquake, etc.).

Application: Be aware that many former churches are still in operation, but have had their lampstands taken away. They are *ichabod* (the glory has departed, **1Sa 4:21**)—no longer real churches.

Literary Link: Jesus identified Himself to the believers in Ephesus as the One who walked among the seven lampstands (**2:1**). This was relevant specifically to the Ephesian church because Jesus was warning them that He would remove their lampstand (**2:5**). That which would normally have been a carrot was now a stick.

Whatever happened to the church in Ephesus? Hopefully the church at Ephesus repented because of this letter. A thousand years later, Ephesus was conquered by invading Muslims (A.D. 1090). No church is there now, and the ancient city lies abandoned.⁵ The small, modern city of Selcuk is close by.⁶

⁵ “Ephesus”, Britannica.com. Accessed November 24, 2020.

⁶ Madeline Arthington and Karrie Sparrow, “What Happened to the Seven Churches of Revelation?”, imb.org. Accessed November 25, 2020.

Review: After criticizing their lack of love (2:4-5), what praise did Jesus have in 2:6?

Jesus criticized them because of their lack of love, and then praised them for hating! We all need a love/hate relationship when it comes to Jesus and sin.

- **Nicolaitans (2:6):** Not much is known about these Nicolaitans. Commentator William Barclay speculated that “Nico” sounds like *niké*, the Greek word for victory, and “laitan” sound like *laios*, the Greek for people. Thus, Nicolaus was a teacher of evil who won a deceiving victory for evil over the people.⁷

Some rebellious, anti-authority house church advocates have interpreted this to mean that Jesus hated the clergy system: the victory of clergy over the people of the church. However, one could just as arbitrarily conclude that what Jesus hated was congregational rule, the victory of the people, that is, a church operated by democratic consensus.

More likely, Nicolaitans were simply practitioners of the false teaching of a guy named Nicholas. All that is known today about them is what Jesus Himself said about them; there was something wrong with their “works” (2:6). Evidently the problem was that what they were *doing* was evil. Perhaps they were antinomian, teaching that living under grace meant freedom to sin. If so, their problem was immorality. The church at Pergamum was troubled by them too (2:15), and they seem to have been associated with the same teaching as Balaam, which included sexual immorality.

Application: Nicolaitans are still among us. They lead churches that justify unmarried couples living together, abortion, and homosexuality. Some false professors reason that since we are saved by grace alone, we can live like the devil and still go to heaven. The problem is that although it is true that we are saved by grace, those truly saved by grace will not want to live like the devil.

Examples: A modern example the Nicolaitan error is a cult called “The Family” or the “Children of God.” They promote free sex between consenting church members and have used the sexual favor of attractive young church members to lure in new male recruits (called “flirty fishing” and “hookers for Jesus”). I have encountered these folks twice. Once a troop of them showed up for church with guitars and much praise; had we not recognized their group’s name we might have accepted them as sincere brethren in Christ. Another time, one of their missionaries came seeking support. He had a photo album of his ministry and sounded quite sincere; when I finally learned the name of his “church” and asked him about its sexual practices, he did sheepishly but freely admitted to it.

A more common example lies with the theological liberalism that has infected nearly every denomination. Liberals are often tolerant of sexual sins.

How should we respond to modern Nicolaitans (1:6)? See 1 Corinthians 5:11.

⁷ Barclay, *Revelation*, 81.

ESV 1 Corinthians 5:11 ... I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

According to 2:7, to whom does all this apply? This appeal seems to be to whoever has an ear to hear. Another indicator of the universality of this appeal is the instruction of listen to what the Spirit says; previously, it was Jesus spoke to the church.

ESV Mark 4:9 And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

What did Jesus promise to those who conquer (2:7)? Jesus promised access to the tree of life. This imagery was particularly relevant to Ephesus because one of the seven wonders of the ancient world had been located there: a massive temple to Artemis, four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens.⁸ One of its symbols was the date palm tree.⁹ In contrast, Jesus made reference to the tree of life.

What is the tree of life (2:7)? See *Genesis 3:22-24, Revelation 22:1-2*. This tree represents eternal life. It first appeared in Genesis 3 in the Garden of Eden, but after sin entered, people were barred from it. It then re-appears in Revelation 22 in the New Jerusalem.

ESV Revelation 22:1-2 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Karl Marx: The immoral and godless Marx wrote: "*Die Religion... ist das Opium des Volkes*" (religion is the opiate of the people).¹⁰ Marx wanted revolutionary social upheaval. He said religion was invented by the bourgeoisie to pacify the proletariat by promising rewards of life after death. To godless people, this life is all there is, and the government takes on god-like importance. *Who are you going to believe, Jesus or Marx?*

Romans 8:18 The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

1 Corinthians 2:9 No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.

What is it that Jesus wanted the conqueror to conquer (2:7)? From context, what which needed to be conquered was a lack of love.

⁸ Mounce, *Revelation*, 86.

⁹ Dennis, *ESV Study*, 2465.

¹⁰ "14.4A: Marx and the 'Opiate of the Masses'", SocialSci.LibreTexts.org. Accessed November 25, 2020.

So What?

What does our church need to hear from what the Spirit said to the church in Ephesus?

Are we lacking in works, toil and patient endurance? The Ephesians exceeded in good works. If we are lacking in toil for the kingdom, we need to redouble our efforts.

Are we wary of false teachers and do we test people for genuineness?

Have we left our first love? We also need to test false apostles, but moreover we need to test ourselves to see if our love for Jesus and each other is what it ought to be.

Do we hate the evil deeds of false teachers?

****Ask this question before reading the text to engage people's minds and focus their attention.

You can hear this lesson being taught at SermonAudio.com/NTRF.

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Revised November 26, 2020