

“The Love You Had at First” (Revelation 2:1–7)

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What is wrong with churches?

If you pose that question to different people, you will likely get very different answers. Some people will say churches are too boring. Others might say churches are too entertainment driven. Some might say churches are too focused on the Bible. Others would say that most churches aren't focused enough on the Bible. Some might say that churches don't reach out enough to non-believers. Some say that churches don't meet the needs of their members.

Of course, there are many more opinions that people have of churches, some of them accurate, some of them not, depending on the church.

But the opinions of other people aren't what matters most. If we want to have a true opinion of churches, an accurate assessment of whether churches are healthy or not, we need to hear from Jesus. And that's what we're going to do today.

Imagine that Jesus wrote a letter to this church. What do you think he would say about us? What are we doing well? What are we neglecting to do?

Imagine that Jesus wrote *you* a letter. Imagine that he was evaluating your life. What would he say about your thoughts, your desires, your words, and your actions?

This morning, we're going to begin a series of sermons that look at what Jesus says about various churches. We started studying the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, at the beginning of this year. We saw that the book is written by John, probably the apostle John, who received a vision of Jesus while he was on the island of Patmos, off the coast of the Roman province of Asia Minor, or what is now Turkey. We saw that Jesus is God, the ultimate Judge, as well as a Priest and a King. And we saw that Jesus told John, “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea” (Rev. 1:11). These seven cities were in that province of Asia Minor. We also said that the numbers in the book of Revelation are symbolic, and that the number seven is a number of completeness or fullness. It seems that the churches in these seven cities at the end of the first century are representative of all churches.

In chapters 2 and 3, Jesus tells John what to write to these seven churches. We usually find that they are doing some good things. But Jesus corrects five of the seven churches, telling

them to repent. We'll see that one church is even dead, lacking any spiritual life. As we look at these seven messages, we'll consider what they say about churches today and what they might say about our church.

We're going to read Revelation 2:1–7 today. We'll start by reading just the first verse:

¹ “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.’”¹

The person who is speaking here is Jesus. We know that because of what we saw at the end of chapter 1. Jesus, the one who died and rose from the dead and lives forevermore, tells John to write down messages to each of these seven churches. He begins with a message for the church in Ephesus. Though these words were directed primarily towards that church, they were meant to be read by the other churches, and by all churches. So, we would be foolish to think that this letter is only directed towards Christians living in Ephesus at the end of the first century.

Ephesus was a very significant city within the Roman Empire. It was perhaps the fourth largest city, after Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. It was on the west coast of the Roman province of Asia Minor. This is not the current continent of Asia. Rather, it was the western part of what is now known as Turkey. Find Turkey on a map, and then locate Izmir on the west coast. Ephesus was a bit south of there.

Ephesus was known for its temple of Artemis. Artemis was a fertility goddess, and the temple to Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. There were thousands or priestesses who served at the temple, including many who were cult prostitutes. As strange as it sounds, at some pagan temples, worship of gods and goddesses was combined with sexual acts. Perhaps that's not so strange, when you think about it, given how people have often viewed sex as a sacred act. At any rate, it was a major city, a cosmopolitan city, and a city of idols. There was even a temple to the Roman Emperor, who was regarded as something of a deity.

Ephesus was also a significant city in the early church. Though the apostle Paul didn't start the church there, he spent over two years in that city. He wrote the book of 1 Corinthians there, and he wrote the letter of Ephesians to the church there. He also wrote the book of 1 Timothy, a letter to his younger associate, who was at Ephesus at the time. The apostle John also lived in Ephesus. So, it makes sense to address this church first.

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

In these messages, Jesus addresses each church by sending the letter to the angel of the church. The idea is that these angels are messengers to these churches. Somehow, what the churches are doing on earth corresponds to heavenly activity. One of the message of Revelation is that unseen realities affect what happens on earth.

Jesus begins by describing himself as one who holds seven stars in his hands and walks among the seven lampstands. At the end of chapter 1, we saw that the stars represent angels and the lampstands represent the churches. Jesus is in charge, and he dwells among his people.

There's another interesting thing about this description: There were golden coins that circulated in the Roman Empire at this time that had a picture of the Emperor's son, who had died several years earlier. The picture showed a "child sitting on a globe surrounded by seven stars."² The Emperor was regarded as a god, and so his child would be viewed as the son of a god. And perhaps John uses this imagery to remind Christians that the true Son of God is Jesus.

Let's now look at what Jesus has to say to this church. We'll start by reading verses 2 and 3:

² "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary."

Jesus starts off with a commendation. This church has been toiling in work, patiently enduring hostility from the world. They have rejected false teaching, including the teaching of some who claim to be apostles but are not. "Apostle" is one of those biblical words that a lot of people outside the church aren't familiar with. It refers to someone who was sent on a mission. Often, we speak of the twelve disciples plus Paul being apostles. We might call them capital-A Apostles. There were likely other Christians who proclaimed the message of Jesus who were also called apostles. ("lower-case-a apostles"). The idea is that they all were sent by Jesus to tell the world about who he is and what he has done. But there were some who claimed to be apostles and were not. They distorted the messages of Jesus. So, it seems this church rejected false teaching and were also standing firm against the pagan practices that surrounded them.

² G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 260; also Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 4.

Before we move on, we should pause here to note that Jesus commends not tolerating evil. He commends rejecting false teaching. He encourages this church to continue to recognize and oppose evil. He encourages them to continue to recognize and reject false teaching. It is important to observe this because theology matters. There is correct theology and bad or false theology. “Theology” simply refers to the words we use to talk about God and things related to God. We can get this right or not. It matters because God wants to be known, and God has revealed himself in his Son, Jesus, and in the pages of the Bible. If we are to know God personally, we should know what he really is like. If we want to know Jesus personally, we should know the real Jesus, the one described in the Bible, not the Jesus of our imaginations.

It is also important to see that there truly is evil. We can recognize evil and we should resist it. We should identify it and call it for what it is. And we can do this because God has revealed a standard by which to judge good and evil.

Why does this matter? There are churches that downplay theology. But Jesus doesn’t do that. There are churches that don’t use the Bible as a standard by which to measure good and evil. Jesus doesn’t do that.

There are some people who call themselves “Red-Letter Christians.” The idea is that we should pay attention to Jesus’ words, which are printed in red ink in some Bibles. I guess the idea is that we should pay more attention to Jesus’ words than the other words in the Bible, such as those written by Paul, who wrote thirteen books of the New Testament. These Christians often say we shouldn’t be so narrow theologically, but should instead focus on loving our neighbor and caring for the poor. But there are dangers to this approach, and there are ironies to it. It is dangerous to take only Jesus’ words and not his actions. What Jesus did besides speaking is just as important as what he said. Also, the words of Paul and John and others who commented on the meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are very important, and they are just as much God’s Word as Jesus’ words are.

The irony is that so-called Red-Letter Christians talk about the importance of deeds and not words, but they put more emphasis on Jesus’ words than on his deeds. Another irony is that they seem to ignore some of his words, including these ones. These are words of Jesus that need to be heard. We need to know true theology, true Christian teaching. And we need to reject false teaching. As we’ll see from other letters, Jesus calls Christians to reject false teaching that infiltrated them.

I know of pastors who reject key elements of the faith. I've heard pastors who refuse to call God "Father," though Jesus called him Father and told us to pray to "Our Father in heaven" (Matt. 6:9). I suppose they do this for fear that somehow calling God "Father" would somehow be sexist. That is absurd. First, it is true that God the Father is not male in the sense that he has a male body. He doesn't have any body, and neither does the Spirit! But God has chosen to reveal himself as male, using "Father" and male pronouns. Jesus is the Son of God, not the Daughter of God. But this isn't sexist. Both men and women are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Though they are obviously different and have some different roles to play, they are of equal value and worth.

I have known pastors who reject that Jesus is the only way to God, though Jesus does say, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). He doesn't say he is one of many ways to God, but *the* way. Knowing this, these pastors would say that while Jesus is the only way to God, people don't need to trust in him explicitly. People of other faiths, they would say, could be right with God by following the dictates of their conscience. But this is all wrong. Jesus said to unbelieving Jewish religious leaders, "unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins" (John 8:24). "I am he" is a reference to God. Jesus is saying, "Unless you believe that I am God, you will be condemned." Jesus wants to be known. The Father wants to be known. And to be right with God, we need to come alive spiritually by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit points us to Jesus, gives us knowledge of Jesus. Jesus is the groom of the church, his bride, and it is hard to believe that you could marry someone you don't know or trust.

Similarly, I have heard of pastors who reject the divinity of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead, even though Jesus claims divinity, and the apostle Paul said that the resurrection is a matter of first importance (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

And there are pastors who reject some of Jesus' words, such as his definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman (Matt. 19:4-6).

Of course, there are many people who are not pastors, yet who claim to be Christians, and who believe these false teachings. The point is that there are many false churches, false because they reject the clear teaching of the Bible. Jesus tells us we should recognize and reject false teaching. He is happy when his church does that.

Jesus is also pleased with a church that would reject idolatry. The church in Ephesus, like all churches in the Roman Empire, was surrounded by false gods and goddesses. There would have been enormous pressure for people in Ephesus to worship Artemis and the Emperor. There would have been enormous pressure to conform to the morals of the Roman Empire, which included a lot of sexual sins.

Frankly, the temptation to worship idols and to engage in sexual sins is still with us. Not much has changed, other than the surface features like names. We still have temples dedicated to idols. It's just that now the idols are called Patriots or, perhaps today, Buccaneers. Or the temples might be referred to by other names like Wall Street and White House, or South Shore Plaza. We can make sports, entertainment, money, politics, consumer goods, and just about anything else the object of our trust, the thing we worship, the thing we believe will make us happy, satisfied, secure, whole. Jesus warns us against this, just as he warned against sexual sin, a topic that will come up explicitly in his words to two other churches. We must put our trust in Jesus above everything else. And we must live according to how he wants us to live, not according to the way everyone else in the world lives.

But Jesus wants more than just right theology and a rejection of evil. Jesus wants our love. Let's read verses 4 and 5:

⁴“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.”

Jesus had said positive things to the church, but now he says, “But I have this against you.” You do not want to hear those words from Jesus. Well, actually, you should want to hear those words from Jesus in this life. When he says these words, he is giving this church an opportunity to correct itself. That's what real love does. Real love isn't afraid of conflict. Real love talks openly about problems. Jesus loves us so much he wants us to change. That's because we aren't the way we should be. God made us to love him and worship him, to serve him by doing life on his terms. But we don't do that. We ignore God, or we rebel against him openly. In short, we sin. We're fighting against our design, against the One who designed and created us. That is bad for us. Jesus, because he loves, wants to correct us.

Before I continue with what Jesus says, let me make another observation: Healthy churches address sin, and healthy churches address problems. Healthy churches aren't afraid of

conflict. We in this church shouldn't be afraid to speak the truth in love, even hard truths. Yet so often there's a passivity here. Many people refuse to say what they actually think. When there are problems, sometimes people just leave and refuse to talk about it. But that's not the way of Christ. Real love addresses problems. Real love talks about what isn't right. And spiritually mature Christians do that, too.

Back to Jesus: What does he have against this church? They have lost their first love. He calls them to repent, to turn back to how they used to be, to do the works they once did. Notice that love is parallel to works. Real love produces good works. However, one can do works without love. One can do works from a place of loveless, joyless duty. Jesus doesn't want that.

What love does Jesus mean? What works were they doing? It's not entirely clear. But consider the greatest commandment in the Bible, according to Jesus: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37–39). We were made to love God with everything in us. We were also made to love each other. Somehow, the Ephesians had lost this love. They might have loved theology and calling out evil, but they didn't love God in the way they did when they first became Christians. And they didn't love other people.

What did this mean? Maybe they were just going through the motions when they gathered as a church. Maybe they paid great attention to Scripture without really treasuring God the way they should. I think it's very likely that they had lost a zeal for God, for the gospel, and for evangelism. It's possible that the reason why lampstands are mentioned is because of their light. Jesus once described himself as the light of the world (John 8:12). Jesus also said this to his disciples as part of his famous Sermon on the Mount:

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:14–16).

And Paul told the church at Philippi that they shined as lights in the midst of a crooked world (Phil. 2:15).

It's quite possible that Jesus meant that these Christians were supposed to be lights in the world, pointing other people to the true light of the world. They were supposed to tell others that

God has come to earth to save people from their sins. Though we have run away from God, he came to us. He sent his precious Son, who lived the perfect life that we don't live and died an atoning death in our place, bearing the punishment that our sins deserved. They were supposed to urge people to come to the true God by placing their trust, their hope, and their future in Jesus. They were supposed to share great news: we can be forgiven of everything wrong we've ever done.

But this church didn't do that. They didn't care about people who were outside of Christ. They were content to remain in their holy huddle, maintaining their perfect theology and their Bible studies, calling out evil and standing against it.

And Jesus says this is wrong. He says, "If you don't change, I'm going to remove your lampstand. Since you don't want to be light, I will extinguish whatever light you have. I'll shut your church down."

This should hit close to home, because in many ways, what Jesus says here is a description of our church. We have been satisfied to have our pleasant traditions and our Bible studies. We are very happy to complain about the evil in the world. But we haven't sought to be light to those living in darkness. People have often refused to change the way they do church in order to reach the lost. There are many churches like this in America that close their doors each year because they failed to evangelize, to make disciples in the name of Jesus. They lost their love, and as a result, they lost their church.

Jesus is calling us to care. He is calling us to repent. He is calling on us to continue to hate false teaching and evil, but he's also telling us to love God and love our neighbors.

Before I say anything more about that, let's see how Jesus wraps up his message to the church in Ephesus. Let's read verses 6 and 7:

⁶"Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.
⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."

We don't know who the Nicolaitans were. They are mentioned later in this chapter in the words directed to the church in Pergamum. They probably were people who urged Christians to live as the pagans lived, to engage in sinful practices. Jesus said he hated their works, just as the Ephesians hated their works. The solution to a lack of love isn't to stop hating evil.

Then Jesus wraps up his message with these words: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Jesus knows some people won’t pay attention to his words, but those who have ears to hear his message will pay attention. And he says that what he says to the churches is what the Spirit says. Notice that means that these words aren’t just for the one church alone, but for all churches. And what Jesus is saying here is what the Holy Spirit, the third person of God, says. The Holy Spirit is the one who ultimately authors the Bible, who moved certain men like John to write what he wanted them to write. We know of Jesus and his words because of the work of the Holy Spirit. If we want to be led by the Spirit and follow Jesus, we need to pay attention to the Bible.

And what does Jesus want us to hear? “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” Jesus offers encouragement. If we conquer, we can eat of the tree of life and live in paradise with God. At the beginning of the Bible, God made a beautiful garden, a paradise, and in that garden was the tree of life. And if the first human beings obeyed God, they would have remained in that garden. They would have eaten from the tree of life and never died. But the first human beings disobeyed God. They failed to trust God and take him at his word. They failed to love God. As a result, God kicked them out of paradise and into the wilderness, where life was hard, and where life ended with death. The rest of the story of the Bible is a story of how people can get back into that garden with God and live forever. And, in the end, God turns the whole world into a garden, and in that garden is the tree of life. You can read about that in Revelation 21 and 22. What Jesus is saying here is that if Christians conquer, they will live forever in that perfect world.

But how do Christians conquer? The answer comes later in Revelation. In Revelation 12:11, we’re told that those who conquered Satan, the devil, did so “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.” We’re also told that “they loved not their lives even unto death.” How do we conquer evil? How do we conquer sin? We don’t do that through being really good and nice. We don’t do that through having perfect theology. We can’t conquer on our own. We conquer because Jesus conquered. And Jesus conquered evil by laying down his life for us. He is the Lamb who was slain for sinners. Lambs were animals killed in place of sinful Israelites so that they weren’t wiped out by God. Jesus never sinned, but he was treated as a sinner. Our great problem is our sin against God, and Jesus sacrificed himself to wipe away our sin. In response to that sacrifice, we must trust in the word of the gospel—that’s what is meant by

“testimony” in Revelation 12. We must cling to Christ. We must love him more than we love even our own lives.

The key to recapturing the love that we should have for God is to think about the love that Jesus has for us. We can have eternal life because Jesus died on the “tree” of life, the cross. I’m sure the apostles made a connection between the tree of life and the wood of the cross, and that is why they sometimes call the cross a “tree” (Acts 5:30; 13:29; 1 Pet. 2:24). The key to loving God is to love Jesus, and the key to loving Jesus is by thinking of how he loves us.

No one will love you like Jesus does. Jesus sacrificed himself to save people who didn’t know him, who didn’t love him, who were enemies of God. Who else would do that for you? No politician will. A family member might sacrifice himself or herself for you, but they can’t pay for your sins. But if you trust in him, he already has paid for your sins. The perfect, glorious Son of God left his home in heaven to come for you, to live for you, to die for you, and to rise in triumph over sin and death for you. He will one day come again in glory for you. We need to continually think about this in order to fuel our love for God.

Christians, love Jesus above everything else. Think about his sacrifice for you. If Jesus loved you so much while you were an enemy of God, then you should care about people who are currently enemies of God. Love your neighbor so much you care about their souls. Love them more than you love your comfort and convenience. Love God so much that you want to see him glorified through the salvation of souls. Speaking of the tree of life, remember what Proverbs 11:30 says:

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,
and whoever captures souls is wise.

If you are not a Christian, I want you to know this: Jesus is real. He is truly the Son of God. Jesus cares about evil, about sin. He cares about truth. And the truth is that all of us have been separated by God by our sin. You stand in need of salvation, and the world’s only savior is Jesus. I urge you to trust in him. If you want to know more about him and what it means to follow him, please talk to me. Jesus is the only one can grant you eternal life. He has opened up paradise and the tree of life for you because he suffered on a tree of torture and death. He urges you to be a conqueror by following him.