

Studies in Revelation:
Message to the Church in Ephesus
2:1-7

Introduction: This morning we are in Revelation 2:1-7 as we start to consider the messages Jesus sent to the seven churches in Asia. As I told you last week, these seven churches were in existence at the time John was writing, and this book was taken to each of them where it was read aloud and then sent on to the next one. What this means for us is that these are real churches with real people in them. And because of that, they had real needs, and Jesus gave them real solutions. That is why we want to take the time to look at each of them - there is a message here for us today.

If you were to read these two chapters in a single sitting, you would see that the message to each church follows the same format. Jesus starts with a description of himself taken from chapter one, and then gives his assessment of the church (both positive and negative). After this, he leaves the church with a challenge and then a promise. So let's jump right into the text and start by identifying who this "angel" is that Jesus refers to.

The word Jesus uses is the word *angelos*, and it means "messenger," or, "someone who is sent." That messenger can be either human, satanic, or holy. In Mk. 1:2 this word is used to describe John the Baptist when we read, "*Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way.*" In Mt. 25:41 we read, "*Then he will also say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels.'*" And then in Mt. 4:11 we read that after Jesus had been tempted in the desert that "*the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him.*"

When it comes to the "angel" mentioned in our text, some people would say that the angel mentioned here is a specific holy angel, like a guardian angel, that has been

assigned to the church. I really like that idea, but it doesn't fit the context. Why would you send a message to a spiritual being? How would he then communicate the message to the church? A guardian angel for the church just doesn't fit the context. It was the people of the church who needed to hear the message, so this "angel" most likely is the human leader of the church, the one who brings the message from God to the people.

Then at the end of verse one, we see the description of Jesus taken from chapter one. He is the one "*holding the seven stars in His right hand and is standing in the midst of the seven candlesticks,*" or the seven churches. We developed this idea last week by saying that Jesus is in close proximity to his church. That is a word of both comfort and warning. It is comforting to know that Jesus is close enough to intimately know our situation. And it is because of that closeness that Jesus can identify with whatever is going on in our church. But at the same time, this is a word of warning because that closeness means that everything we do is open and exposed to his assessment.

And the reality of this presence of Jesus with the church is seen in the next verses as Jesus gives his assessment of the church in Ephesus. In verses two and three, and again in verse six, we see that the church in Ephesus had a lot going for it. It receives a very high commendation from Jesus. In a nutshell, they were hard working, faithful under pressure, and orthodox.

Their hard work is seen in the words Jesus uses to describe their labor – "*I know your deeds and your toil.*" "Deeds" is a very common word for work, but the word "toil" is strongly associated with sorrow. It is the idea of intense labor that is associated with travail of some kind. It is not joyful, pleasant, gratifying work; it is grinding, difficult labor. The city of Ephesus was a difficult field to be working in. They didn't have tax-exempt status. Culturally, it was pagan, not Christian. Economically, if you were a Christian you were marginalized and it was very difficult to make a living. And what was

their attitude toward the work? They persisted. In other words, when the going got tough, they kept going. Which leads us to the next word of commendation, they had endurance and perseverance.

Let's talk about this word endurance. The endurance Jesus refers to in verse three has the general idea of carrying something, but it has a particular nuance. This is the word used of Jesus when it says He went to His death "*bearing his own cross.*" The concept being commended by Jesus here is that of patiently enduring the weight of something unpleasant. This church understood the truth that the right direction is usually the more difficult path. Doing the right thing is almost never the easy thing. So instead of looking for the easy path, they faithfully "remained under" (the idea of patience) the weight of whatever the difficulty was.

So we see that they were hard working and faithful, but what about the last element of their commendation, that of being orthodox. I'm using the term "orthodox" in the sense of being biblically accurate. An orthodox person is a person whose character, conduct, and beliefs all are precisely in keeping with biblical teaching. And we see the orthodoxy of this church the phrase in verse two, "*you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false.*" We also see it in verse six, "*you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*" We aren't completely sure who these Nicolaitans were, but apparently they were a group of people who considered themselves Christians, but who lived lives of open immorality under the guise of grace.

This was a church that took biblical truth seriously. As a church they exposed error and evil. They saw things in shades of black and white. This reminds me of the time when Duane Motley, our missionary to Albany, stood in the shadow of the capitol building and in front of a crowd of hundreds publicly condemned our Governor, Andrew

Cuomo, for living in adultery with a woman who was not his legally wedded wife. That is the spirit of this phrase, *“you cannot endure evil men.”*

On top of that, they weren't impressed with nice labels. Evidently, there were men who had come into the church who called themselves apostles, and instead of immediately embracing them because of their claim, they examined them. This was not a gullible church. They understood the prevalence of error and falsehood in their culture, and in spite of that, they maintained their orthodoxy.

This is a good model for our church, isn't it? Wouldn't it be a great thing if Jesus were to assess us and conclude we were known for three things; our hard work, our faithfulness under pressure, and our orthodoxy? But unfortunately, that isn't the end of Jesus' assessment. He also states that he had something against them. And we see it in verse four where Jesus says, *“Yet I have something against you, you have left your first love.”*

What does that mean? I can remember going to a friend's house for a party, and his recently married sister was there with her husband. They had been married about two months, and as we were sitting in the living room, she was sitting all snuggled up on his lap. She wasn't sitting there because of a lack of seating, she just wanted to be close to him. I remember saying to my wife on the way home, “Aren't newly married couples weird?” So she reminded me of many similar incidents in our life as newlyweds. That is the concept here, except Jesus is applying it to those early days of our salvation when we were so filled with ardor, even passion, for Christ. This church wasn't there anymore. Their zeal for purity and focus on “the work of the ministry” had sapped them of loving fervor. There is a lesson here!

When you think about it, this charge against the Ephesian church is very similar to the condemnation of the Pharisees in Luke 11:42. *“But woe to you Pharisees! For you*

pay tithe of mint and rue and every kind of garden herb, and yet disregard justice and the love of God; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.

That is right where the Ephesian church was – zealous and orthodox, but not full of love.

We see a historical example of this in the years following the Reformation. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Reformation was a return to biblical scholarship. The Greek and Hebrews texts were being used for new translations of the Bible instead of relying on the Latin text. The abuses of the Catholic Church drove people to the Scriptures for everything, thus the phrase, *sola scriptura*. Creeds became very important as the churches sought to publicly identify themselves as being orthodox. All of this is very good, but what happened eventually is that it became dead, dry, scholastic orthodoxy and there was no emotional fervor in the church.

Because of that deficiency, a new movement arose in the church. It was at the opposite end of the pendulum, and was known as pietism. Pietism focused on the emotional dimension of our walk with Christ. It emphasized the importance of the “inner light” of the Holy Spirit, as opposed to the scholastic rigor of the Reformers. Pietism, which was not intrinsically wrong, eventually morphed into mysticism, which was very subjective and speculative, which leads to all kinds of problems. But the point is that when our orthodoxy lacks loving fervor, we are in trouble. That is the charge Jesus is bringing against the church in Ephesus.

So Jesus challenges this church with three things – remember, repent, and return. In verse five Jesus says, *“Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first.”* Remember how far you have fallen in your descent from that first love, repent of that waning love, and then return to that level of first love. That is the model we each need to follow as we find areas in our lives that need to be addressed: remember, repent, and return.

And just to underscore how important this was in Jesus' estimation, he gives this very somber warning. "If you don't," according to the end of verse five, Jesus says He "*will remove their lampstand.*" Another way of putting it is, "your church will die." The thought that struck me as I was studying this verse was, "How important is it that we as a church love God with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves," as our church purpose statement says? Can you appreciate that our existence as a church depends on this matter? That is how important this matter of being loving is to a church.

Well, unfortunately, the church of Ephesus didn't heed the message. We aren't sure exactly when, but eventually the Ephesian church closed down and ceased to exist.

So in verse seven we have a challenge and a promise. The challenge is to listen to God's message. "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*" This is an especially appropriate challenge to the church in Ephesus because of their busyness and zeal. It is good to be busy about the Lord's work, but if you are so busy, and so zealous, and so proactive that you can't stop and hear that "still, small voice," you are out of balance and headed for trouble. This is the Martha Syndrome, isn't it? When Jesus came to visit Mary and Martha, Martha was busy taking care of the Lord's needs – she was being a good hostess. But Mary "had an ear to hear" what Jesus was saying.

So the challenge to the church is to stand still long enough to hear the Lord, and the promise is that if they will overcome, they will get to "*eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.*" This is a reference to the tree of life we see in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:9 that was made off limits to mankind when Adam sinned, but now we see the promise of eternal life, in heaven, to those who are faithful to God.

Conclusion: I think you would agree with me that there is much in these verses we can learn from. This church in Ephesus wasn't too different from us. It had some good

points, and some bad ones as well. Culturally, Ephesus was probably even more degenerate than Greene County, yet they stood for what was right and stayed busy doing the work of the Lord. But they were imbalanced, which is the first thought I want us to take with us today. I don't want us to be a church characterized by dead orthodoxy. As Peter says, we need to be *"fervent in our love for one another."*

And the second thought I want us to take away comes from the phrase, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." The way James puts it is, *"Prove yourselves to be doers of the Word, and not hearers only."* As I have said many times before, sitting here listening to the message is only half of our responsibility. We can't leave thinking to ourselves that we've fulfilled our responsibility because we've listened to a sermon. Listening is the easy part. Now comes the difficult part – putting into practice what we have heard. Are you a Mary or a Martha? How are you doing in this matter of your first love? What height have you fallen from?