



Dear Ephesus (Part 1)
Revelation 2:1-7
GCSP - 08/08/2010

A good portion of my vocational life was spent in retail. I worked for K-Mart as a teenager and young adult, I spent several years with the Family Christian Store chain in various capacities, and I managed a few OfficeMax stores not too many years ago. One commonality between these and other retail environments was the store inspections that the corporate big wigs would do sporadically. Some gave a week's notice and others showed up unannounced to see how well the management and employees were adhering to company standards.

I don't recall any of these inspections ever resulting in lost jobs but there were several tongue lashings and ultimatums given when the standards were not being met. I do vaguely recall a time or two when I was called on the carpet for not following through with certain standards, but I also recall a few occasions where I was unaware that I was falling short and/or I had let some company practices slip by the wayside without realizing it.

This same aspect of letting things slip unaware happens with professional athletes, especially baseball players. A player will at times go through what is called a slump, where they are not hitting or pitching the ball with the same success as they normally do. After an extended period of time the players and coaches go back and review video tape of when they were doing well and compare it to the present. Often, a somewhat imperceptible change has occurred in their batting stance or the release point of how they throw the ball, and these small changes make all the difference in the world in their performance on the field. They weren't even aware of the change that had caused them to get off track.

Just as I occasionally let some important business practices go by the wayside and as professional baseball players allow some important mechanics of their game to slip away, individual Christians and entire churches also allow some very important aspects of their spiritual existence to get brushed aside. This is the case with the church at Ephesus in the first of our Lord's letters to, or spot inspections of, the seven churches.

Turn with me in your Bibles to the Book of the **Revelation**.

Revelation 2:1-7

Let's pray.

This is the first of seven letters John in essence took dictation on from Jesus, directed to seven specific churches in what is modern day Turkey. There is plenty of speculation as to why these seven were singled out, since there were at least three other churches mentioned in the New Testament in the same area. Some say the progression represents the state of the church in general throughout the history of the church; with Ephesus representing the early church all the way through Laodicea representing the state of the church today. Others get even deeper in thought and much wilder in their conclusions, but all are mere speculation when you get down to the bottom of things.

When I read through the commendations and the warnings given to these seven churches, I see characteristics that fit into most churches at any given stage of their existence. Not

every church takes on every characteristic listed in these two chapters and not every church goes through these stages in the same progression listed here. So my approach over the next few months as we study the letters to these churches one at a time is to look at how each applies to us today. I want us to see the warning signs of the pitfalls these churches fell into and I want us to be wary of changes we may need to make before we trip and fall. I also want us to understand why these two chapters are even included in the Book of Revelation.

Revelation 2:1

As I mentioned last week, the word translated as angels in the NASB could just as easily have been translated messengers; and since the call is for repentance on the part of the churches and the messengers, it is much more likely that these angels or messengers represent a leader and/or pastor of these churches.

Each letter begins with a title or description of Jesus as the One from which the letter originates; most of these descriptions are also found in **chapter 1** if they seem familiar to you.

In this letter to the church at Ephesus, Jesus is once again described as **the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands.**

We know from **1:20** that the **seven stars** are the messengers or pastors of the churches and the **seven golden lampstands** are the seven churches. When it says that the Lord **holds the seven stars in His right hand**, the word translated as **holds**, means *to take hold of, to get possession of, to obtain, to hold fast*. The sense of the word and the phrasing also means that the seven stars are engulfed in His hand. This is not a loose or unsure holding, this is a firm and sure grasp with a measure of complete security; the messengers of the churches are not dangling by any means.

The literal Greek used this word to describe strength and power and the sense of absolute sovereign rule. It can also be used as to take hold of forcefully. When your Bible speaks of how the Pharisees wanted to take hold of Jesus, this is the same word being used.

In **John 10:27-29**, Jesus says, **“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them all to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”**

In this passage, Jesus is speaking of the security of our salvation; which, by the way, if any of you struggle with whether or not you can lose or forfeit your salvation, Jesus simply cannot be any clearer than He is here. To lose your salvation would mean someone is stronger than God the Son and God the Father, and can thus pry open their hands and steal you away; and if you could forfeit your salvation it means you are the one stronger than them to pry their hands open.

The point of all of this is that **the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand** has them securely. It is a beautiful picture of complete and utter possession and ownership. So the commendations and the warnings that follow in these letters are from the One who loves and cares for them like no other. Jesus and only Jesus has the right and the authority

to issue these proclamations, and thus, when He does make these proclamations it is time to straighten up and pay careful attention.

Jesus Christ has complete control over His church. When the church submits to that control, it will never go wrong. And make sure you understand that Jesus has control over His entire church, so when we put up partitions or divisions between our local church and some other local church, we are doing something Jesus would never do, and never intended for us to do; and I am obviously talking about true and genuine churches that stand on the Bible and only the Bible.

The next phrase, **the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands**, refers to the intimate and intricate involvement and watch care Jesus has over His church. Nothing escapes His watchful eye. Jesus is aware of and concerned with each and every thing His church does or does not do.

This means:

- Jesus is present and in the midst of Grace Church this morning
- Jesus sees and knows about every aspect of Grace Church
- Jesus is present to teach and to grow Grace Church
- Jesus is present to protect and provide for Grace Church
- Jesus is present to guide and direct and lead Grace Church
- Jesus is present as the Light of the world to give His Light through Grace Church

Revelation 2:2a

“I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance...” Since Jesus knows every detail about His church this is only natural that He knows their deeds and their toil and their perseverance, or should I say our deeds and our toil and our perseverance (or lack thereof) but by making mention of these things Jesus is commending and recognizing the way they have faithfully endured under trying and difficult circumstances.

The sense of the Greek words employed in this portion of **verse 2** means *to labor to the point of sweat, weariness, and exhaustion; to work and labor to the limit of one's ability*. The Ephesian church was a working church, a laboring church, a brave and devoted church, and a church committed to serving the Lord to the fullest extent.

The application point for us to consider in this first phrase is that there is no room for laziness in the ministry of the church. Jesus keeps an account of our work and our labor; He knows every ounce of energy we expend; He knows when we have reached the limit and can go no more, but He also knows when we could go more and don't.

This is not an admonition for you to get busier and busier but it is an admonition to give your all to the tasks Jesus calls you to. If it is your calling to clean the church on any given week, do so with a passion and a commitment to do the very best job you can do. If it is your calling to teach the children this month, then you put in the hours of preparation and you teach those kids as if their very souls depended on it. If it is your calling to help with the pregnancy center, or help with the food bank, or help with the ladies ministry or men's ministry, or any number of other ministries God may lead you into, then jump in with both feet and expend yourself for the glory of God!

Everything you do as a child of God is to be done to the very best of your abilities, and you should be asking the Lord to increase your best and for the Holy Spirit to work in and through you so you can do better than the best of your abilities.

When the time comes, meaning when you meet Jesus face-to-face through physical death or when He raptures His church to meet Him in the air, do you really want to have something left over? Do you want to reach heaven with more in the tank that could have expended here on earth? Do you want to come into His presence well-rested because you saved all of your energy on earth and did not **toil** for His name's sake?

Don't slouch, don't put in a half-hearted effort, and don't give less than your absolute best in every aspect of ministry and every facet of your life. If you aren't going to do your best, then why bother at all; that's the sense of what Jesus is commending the Ephesian church for.

Revelation 2:2b

"...and that you cannot tolerate evil men..." Ephesus was a pagan, idolatrous, sensual, and wicked city. The temple of Dianna, or Artemis, was the focal point of the city and one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. Worship at the temple was vile as thousands of "priestesses" (a better description would be temple prostitutes) sold their bodies in what was called a worship ritual.

The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, was known as the weeping philosopher because he said no one could live in Ephesus and not weep over its immorality.

Huddled in the midst of this pagan city was a faithful group of believers in a church started by the Apostle Paul and pastored by Timothy and later by the Apostle John. The Christians in the church at Ephesus were surrounded by a society and a culture that was full of evil practices and evil people. It would have been easy for them to ignore the evil and say nothing. It would have been easy for them to just go with the flow. But by their words and by their lives they simply would not put up with evil or participate in it.

Maybe we don't have a pagan temple in our town and maybe we don't have legalized prostitution, at least in most parts of this country, but we do live in an evil society and culture. Crude and profane and immoral lifestyles are celebrated and protected by law. The question we must ask ourselves is would we get the same commendation from the Lord as the Ephesian church did? Would we be commended for not tolerating the evil in our society and culture or would there a lack of evidence in our words and deeds to support that stance? Have we accepted our nation's call to tolerance when it comes to the things God calls evil?

Hold your place in **Revelation** and turn with me in your Bibles to the Book of **Ephesians**.

Ephesians 5:11-12

Do not participate in (or have fellowship with) **the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead expose them.** The implication of this verse is that taking no action against the sin is actually participating in that sin. It is like the laws we have concerning being with someone who murders someone else; you are an accessory to that murder if you did nothing to prevent it or you did not immediately report it. It doesn't matter that you knew nothing about it beforehand or that you had no part in pulling the trigger, if you are aware of the crime and do nothing about it you can be charged as an accessory to the crime.

That is what this verse is telling us in regards to sin; if we are aware of the sinful and evil practices going on around us but stand idly by we are in essence an accessory to that sin. We are an accessory to the sin when we conceal it, when we commend it, when we consent to it, or when we counsel that it is okay. Any participation by action or neglecting to take action is having fellowship with **the unfruitful deeds of darkness**.

Still holding your place in **Revelation**, turn with me in your Bibles to the Book of **2 Corinthians**.

2 Corinthians 6:17-7:1

We obviously must rid ourselves of committing the sin also. It's one thing to be an accessory, by our tolerance and lack of action, but it's another altogether to blatantly commit the sin. We are called to come out from among the world and be separate, be sanctified, be holy, be different.

Revelation 2:2c

"...and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false." The television and radio is chock full of false apostles and/or false teachers. Unfortunately many of our churches are filled with them as well. The reason there are so many is because they are never put to the test and stopped.

1 John 4:1 says, **"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."** John doesn't say there are a few out there in the world, but many.

1 Thessalonians 5:20-22 says, **"Do not despise prophetic utterances but examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil."**

Paul says to not automatically dismiss prophecies but to carefully examine what is being said. Hang on to all that are good and abstain from all others. Paul goes so far as to call unfulfilled and unsubstantiated prophecies evil.

Jesus has the ultimate test.

Again, hold your place in **Revelation** and turn with me in your Bibles to the Gospel of **Matthew**.

Matthew 7:15-20

The ultimate test for those who claim to be apostles and prophets is the fruit they produce. Their words must match up with the Bible but more so they must produce disciples according to God's definition of a disciple, which is everyone who believes in Jesus Christ and adheres to the teaching of Jesus Christ. You cannot be a genuine apostle or prophet if you are creating followers of you; you must be producing followers of Jesus Christ.

There are a lot of influential and captivating teachers out there who have huge followings, but they do not pass the fruit test. They have lots of followers but very few, if any, followers of Jesus Christ. So be careful who you follow.

Revelation 2:3

“...and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary.” This is the picture of a devoted church; they have worked hard and struggled physically, mentally and spiritually. But difficulties and affliction and opposition had not caused them to back down or lose their zeal for the Lord.

How often do we get offended and walk away, or go through a difficulty and fall away? What was the difference with these believers?

They endured for the name of Jesus Christ. They got their attention off of themselves and focused on the Lord. They endured and persevered for the sake of proclaiming the Lord. They knew their witness and testimony would be shot if they buckled under the pressure of trial and tribulation. It didn’t matter if they were maligned or mistreated, they simply wanted to ensure that they came out of it with their testimony intact.

But as much as this church is commended, and there is another commendation to come, they had a major problem that Jesus has to warn them about. And that deserves our attention and a separate treatment next week.

Let’s pray.