

- ***READ Revelation 1:9-11*** We noted this morning that we sometimes neglect careful consideration of Jesus's Revelation to John because of the presence of unfamiliar literary styles that we simply don't know exactly what to do with. However, we also noted that there is much that can be gained from careful consideration of the final book of the New Testament. I noted specifically that the words written to the seven churches of Asia are surely most especially beneficial to God's people even in 2019 because they contain great words of admonishment and encouragement on a variety of ideas, concepts, and very practical points that can and will help us in our faiths if we will give them that careful consideration.
- With this in mind, we are going to finish out this year by going through a series of lessons that look at each of the writings to these seven churches of Asia in order to dig into what was written to them by Jesus through the hand of John. We know from our considerations from this morning that the principles found in writings are timeless in their value and ability to continue to help us to be more faithful. Though we might not be facing the exact same challenges that these brethren faced, we recognize that Satan's influences continues within this world. We recognize that we are in need of admonishment and encouragement. We recognize that we might very well find ourselves in the shoes of these churches, and these writings will therefore help us in our faiths so that we might overcome and conquer this world to the glory of God.
- With these things in mind, let's begin this evening by looking at the first church that is found in **Revelation 2:1-7**. That church is the church that was found in Ephesus, and we will focus on the fact that this was the Loveless Church. An excellent resource that Austin put me onto is "*Christ's Call To Reform The Church*" by John MacArthur, and it helped tremendously in preparation for this lesson and will for the coming lessons, as well. If you are interested in a deeper consideration of what is found in **Revelation 2 & 3** then I will encourage you to pick up this book with all of the usual caveats applying of making sure to take in the meat while spitting out the bones. With these things in mind, let's read together **Revelation 2:1-7**, and then we will get into some of the historical background of Ephesus because it will greatly help us by establishing some context to the admonishments and encouragements that were written to this congregation.

I. Historical Background Of Ephesus

A. Ephesus was the epicenter of Asia Minor.

- The western portion of modern day Turkey is the area in which each of these seven churches could be found within the first century. Though Pergamum was the officially recognized capital of this region known as Asia Minor, it was actually Ephesus by all intents and purposes that behaved as the capital city. Ephesus was home to as many as 500,000 people at its greatest size, and it was referred to as the "Light of Asia" because of the dominance that it had over the rest of this particular region.

B. It was home to the primary harbor of Asia Minor.

- Shipping was a major avenue through which trade in supplies and goods was carried out, and Ephesus benefitted from being only three miles from the mouth of the Cayster River which flowed out into the Aegean Sea. It was also nearly directly across the Aegean Sea from the famed city of Athens.

C. It was the point where four major Roman trade routes converged.

- Because of this ease of access to supplies and goods through shipping, Ephesus was a natural center for the intersecting of trade routes. It was the center of commerce for the entire region, and served as the regional marketplace where people would make sure to go through if they were traveling through that particular region. It was a must-stop place.

D. All of this led to Ephesus being a major center for culture and entertainment within Asia Minor.

- The convergence of all of these people into this single city made it a hotbed for cultural growth, diversity, and entertainment. There was a theater within the city that would hold as many as 25,000 people, and the city was also know for a sporting event in the spring time that would rival the spectacle of the Olympics. Some even believe that it was these games that Paul was referring to in **I Corinthians 16:8,9** when he decided remain in Ephesus through the winter and into the spring time until Pentecost. It is evident that Ephesus was a happening city.

E. The crown jewel of Ephesus was the temple that was dedicated to Artemis, now known as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

- With all of these happening in Ephesus, this ancient city was overwhelmingly most well known for was being the location of the great temple of Artemis (Latin *Diana*). This massive structure was built out of marble and took up what we would know to be about the size of a city block. It was not a just a part of the city, but it was a focal point of the city. Of course, it served as a place of religious activity, but it also served as a museum, a marketplace, a bank for the extremely wealthy, and even a place where criminals would go to seek sanctuary.
- With all of this being true, the main function of the temple was of course worship to Artemis who was the goddess of fertility. Every day thousands of worshippers from many different backgrounds would come to worship in extremely sensual manners that included drunkenness, promiscuity, and even self-mutilation. Even contemporary Greek philosophers grimaced at what took place in this temple. One such man who lived in Ephesus in the fifth century described the actions as dark, vile, and being lower than that of animals. He went so far as to say that the Ephesians deserved to be hanged for their depravity.

F. Even with all of this being true, the Ephesian church experienced great success.

- And yet, much of what made Ephesus awful was also what created a good place for the Gospel to thrive in it and out of it. The trade routes brought in many people who could be taught and sent on their way taking with them the Gospel that they had just learned, believed, and obeyed. There were also those individuals who had become disenchanted with Greek god worship. They might seek out to learn of the true God of heaven, and turn their lives around.
- Additionally, the Ephesian church was blessed to have many great leaders in her history. **Acts 18:18,19** inform us that Priscilla and Aquila were the ones who brought the Gospel into this city. They quickly meet Apollos, who they are able to teach more accurately the Gospel of Jesus. (**Acts 18:24-26**). Paul would shortly return to Ephesus in **Acts 19** where he is able to share with disciples of John the baptism of Jesus and reception of the Holy Spirit. For three years, Paul stays in this place and helps to grow the church to the point that **Acts 19:10** tells us, *"all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord."*

Sadly, the city of Ephesus now lies in ruin miles under water and silt that filled the once thriving harbor. But that doesn't mean that the words written by John to these brethren don't remain for us to learn from and be encouraged by. Let's close by looking at what was written to these brethren, and why these specific things were meaningful to them.

II. Jesus's Message To Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7):

A. He was aware of their commitment to truth. (vv.2,6)

1. The opening words of this message to Ephesus has to be viewed as one of great commendation. *"I know your works, your labor, and your endurance..."* This church seems to be one that had a strong pattern of faithfulness in their history up until the point of this writing. Specifically mentioned is the fact that they had "labored" or "toiled." The use of this particular word indicates that these brethren had put in much effort in their existence as a church. This church was not full of lazy or indifferent people or spectators, but they had worked in a serious way to remain strong in a place such as Ephesus.
2. One of the specific ways they had done such a thing was in their willingness to test the teachings of others. This church demanded that those who came into their midst were tested to make sure that they were true brethren in the faith. Specifically mentioned are those who came in amongst them and claimed to be Apostles. They had tested these individuals and found them to be lacking in their teaching which resulted in them being known as liars and rejected. The same would be true for those who held to the teachings of the Nicolaitans. Not much is known about these teachings except what is mentioned in **2:15** where they are compared with the teachings of Balaam which included idol indulgence and sexual immorality. The bottom line from Jesus is that He greatly appreciated their strong stand against those who would come in and try to deceive the church.

3. We might note that this is exactly what Paul had warned the leaders of this church about while he was with them in **Acts 19 & 20**. Specifically in **Acts 20:28-31** Paul warns, *“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Men will rise up even from your own number and distort the truth to lure the disciples into following them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for three years I never stopped warning each one of you with tears.”* It seems to be from the outside looking in that these brethren had given special attention to following these words of Paul.

B. He was aware of their endurance in the face of opposition and persecution. (v.3)

1. They were also greatly commended for their willingness to persevere and overcome hardships that they had faced in their faiths without growing weary. History tells us that Christians were often the target of persecutions under the demands that they participate in Greek god and emperor worship which would have been an almost certainty in Ephesus because of the presence of the great temple of Artemis.
2. We can even look back to what was written by Luke in **Acts 19:18-41** and see that this church had faced difficulties from nearly the very beginning. The Gospel was taking such a hold within Ephesus that people were taking their magic books and burning them in the public eye. It also stands to reason that those who used to buy idol monuments were no longer doing so, and that wasn't going to work for those who made their living off of such practices. Demetrius the silversmith rouses up a riot among the Ephesian citizens and lays hands upon Gaius and Aristarchus who were companions of Paul. The rioters are so worked up that no one truly knows what is going on until the city clerk shows up and tells the crowd that they need to figure out what is going on before everyone gets in trouble for rioting. The disciples are able to get away, but surely this is just a small taste of the persecutions they had suffered.
3. Jesus also makes mention of their motivation for their willingness to stand strong in the face of persecution and opposition. He states that they were willing to do so *“for the sake of My name...”* This is important to note because it shows that they were not doing anything for themselves or just for show. Jesus recognized their commitment to Him in the face of opposition and praises them for what they had been willing to do for His name sake.

If we're reading this for the first time then we're probably thinking that this church seems to have everything working out well. This seems to be a very faithful church that was doing exactly as God and Jesus wanted for them to do...and yet we'll notice that our understanding of things is not always in line with God's understanding of things.

C. Yet, He chastises the Ephesian brethren for their lack of love for God. (v.4)

1. Though this church seems to have been a church that possessed a great zeal and love for God, Jesus states that they had abandoned the love they had at first. We might better recognize this being Jesus saying that they had left their first love. The love of God that this church had once had was faded and flickering. Their passion had cooled because that fiery passion for God was no longer present among them. If you're like me then you might be wondering how such a seemingly faithful church could have such a thing said of them.
2. This tells me that it is possible for a church to be doing all of the right things without doing them for the right reason or with the proper motivation. A church might check all of the boxes in our mind as far as their beliefs, practices, and expressions of faith...and yet they still not be as God wants them to be because they are only doing these things because maybe that is simply the way things have always been done. The church is “doing” all of the right things, but they are “doing” them without a heart that is passionately loving God in the process. Loveless patterns of piety and service are nothing before God because the motivations are lacking. The Ephesians were in need of putting as much effort into their hearts as they were into their actions.

D. He warns them to repent and remember their first love or their lampstand would be removed. (v.5)

1. However, this did not mean that all hope was lost for Jesus was willing to warn them of the way in which they were falling short so they might repent and do better. One of the things that Jesus believed would help these brethren understand their need to repent was for them to remember what it was like

for them while they were serving God with hearts full of love. It was their love and dedication to God that got them to the place where they were so greatly commended as faithful before God, and they needed to be reminded of what that was like so that they would be motivated to return to that place.

2. Again, this shows the interconnectivity between our minds and our actions and how they need to be in sync with one another if we want to be at the absolute best we can be. Their loving motivations in serving God propelled them to great heights and they needed that flame to be reignited so that they could return to those heights of faithfulness. Greater devotion to God was absolutely possible through renewed passion, zeal, and love. That remembrance and renewal was the perfect breeding ground for true repentance, and that was exactly what Jesus wanted to be accomplished among these brethren.
 3. Jesus also gives another boost of motivation by laying down the ultimatum that they either do this or their lamp stand would be removed from its place among them. There are varying understandings of what this meant. Some would take it to mean that the church would simply cease to be recognized as a group of people of God, but others would state that this means that the literal congregation would cease to exist. Maybe there was some sort of divine protection that was watching over this church in this wicked city so long as they were faithful. We can't say that for certain, but we do know for certain that Jesus truly meant these demands for renewed service if these brethren wanted to remain in Him.
- E. Their willingness to repent and conquer would lead them to be able to eat of the tree of life. (v.7)**
1. Yet, it wasn't just that their service would result in them remaining in Jesus...it also came with the benefit of being able to have access to the tree of life. The words, "Let any who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers..." are repeated after each of the messages to the seven churches in some form or fashion, but the meaning remains the same. Jesus wanted these people to listen to His admonishments and encouragements so that they would be benefitted. Through their listening and obedience they would be granted experience great rewards that would make all of their struggles well worth it.
 2. To Ephesus, Jesus states that their conquering would result in them being able to eat of the tree of life. This could only take the minds of the hearers to **Genesis 2 & 3** where God gives Adam and Eve free access to the tree of life, and then He takes away that access based upon their rebellion and sin. This along with the writings of John in **Revelation 22:1,2** tells me that Jesus is alluding to the fact that those who conquer will be those who are able to be in the presence of God for all eternity and have life through Him and the tree of life. These final words are pure words of encouragement for these brethren to pick up the zeal within their lives and remember why it is that they were doing what they were doing so that their honor might be laid at the feet of Christ.

Jesus's words to Ephesus ought to serve as strong reminders that outside appearances don't always match up with what is going on inside of a person or group. Whereas we are only able to judge outside appearances, Jesus who has eyes like fiery flames is able to look into the heart and soul to determine whether or not things are as they ought to be. May we be like these brethren at the onset of their faiths and be a people who are motivated to the glory of God's name to defend the truth and persevere to the end. If we are in need of repentance for a lack of love then may we recognize that as well so that we follow the admonishments of Jesus and be people who hear His words and conquer the world before us. In doing so, I believe that Jesus words remain true...we too will be able to be fellow partakers of the tree of life in eternity with God.