

Sermon Mark S. Aites
SERIES: 7 CHURCHES OF ASIA
#1: THE CHURCH IN EPHEBUS
(Special thanks to David Pharr)

TEXT: REV. 2:1-7

INTRODUCTION:

1. In **Rev. 1:4**, the apostle John addresses the book to *the 7 churches of Asia*.
 - 1) The author has in mind here that section which we recognize as Asia Minor.
 - 2) Although other congregations did exist within this area, these 7 are specifically listed by name.
 - 3) The number 7 in sacred literature is not without significance, as it was the number associated with completeness or perfection.
 - 4) Because of this, many authors have suggested that while 7 churches are addressed in the book, it was designed to be universal in application since many congregations struggled with similar problems.
2. The time frame of John's writing is established at 96 A.D.
 - 1) John is writing at this time from the Island of Patmos, from where it is generally recognized that he was banished for the proclamation of the gospel of Christ.
 - 2) This was also a difficult time for Christians as they were under heavy persecution.
3. These letters are noted as challenges to the respective congregations, but are designed such that we can learn lessons from what the Lord says concerning each of them.

DISCUSSION:

I. THE CHURCH IN EPHEBUS.

- A. Ephesus was the capital of the area known as Asia minor.
 1. It was famous on two counts:
 - 1) The worship of Diana or Artemis, who was considered to be the mother goddess of the earth.
 1. There is reference to the great temple erected in her honor.
 2. The myth that prevailed in that day was that the image of Diana had fallen from the sky.
 - 2) It was known to be a center of emperor worship.
 1. Those who were willing to declare Caesar a god, were in good favor.
 2. Those who refused, and confessed Christ, were tortured and put to death.
 2. Ephesus also had some notoriety because of their great theater which was said to have had a seating capacity of 50,000 people.
 3. Of interest, this congregation was the closest to John's location on Patmos of the 7 mentioned.
- B. The congregation in Ephesus was established by the apostle Paul on his 2nd missionary journey.
 1. He was accompanied by Aquila and Priscilla as together they came from Corinth.
 2. **Acts 18:19** refers to Paul's stay in Ephesus, where, before his departure, he left Aquila and Priscilla to labor.
- C. Perhaps the one event that stands out more than any other with Ephesus is the burning of the books of magic (**Acts 19 and 20**).
 1. Luke's comments in **Acts 19** shed light on the converts to Christ in that locality.
 2. **19:18-20** "*And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. 19 Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and*

burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totaled fifty thousand pieces of silver.

20 *So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.”*

II. COMMENDATION.

- A. Notice who the commendation is delivered by:
- 2:1** *“To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, “These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands.”*
1. The one who delivers the commendation *holds the 7 stars in His right hand.*
 - 1) The stars are the angels or messengers of the 7 churches (**Rev. 1:20**).
 - 2) This is generally regarded by most scholars to refer to a human messenger, possibly an elder or preacher.
 2. This same one who delivers a commendation *walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands.*
 - 1) **Rev. 1:20** identifies these as the 7 churches.
 - 2) The one who delivers the commendation is therefore in the midst of the churches.
 3. In **Rev. 1:18**, the one who delivers the commendation is identified in this manner: *“I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.”*
 4. Beginning in **Rev. 1:13**, He is identified as *“one like the Son of Man,”* with references which would apply only to Christ.
 5. The Lord Himself is in the midst of these congregations; further affirmed in **vs 2**.
- B. **2:2** *“I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil.”*
1. Notice the two word opening phrase: *“I know.”*
 2. The Lord possesses what we call omniscience, a term signifying that He knows everything.
 3. On one occasion Jesus entered into a synagogue on the sabbath day, and the Pharisees were watching Him to see if he would heal a man with a withered hand:
 - 1) They were hoping to find an accusation against Him.
 - 2) But then Luke notes concerning Christ: **Luke 6:8** *“But He knew their thoughts...”*
 4. **John 2:23-25** *“Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did.
24 But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men,
25 and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.”*
 5. So when Jesus speaks of Ephesus; it is not hear say, rumor, or speculation; it is a fact!
- C. Jesus says, *“I know your works, your labor, your patience...”*
1. The church at Ephesus was a living example of another of Paul’s statements.
 2. **1 Cor. 15:58** *“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”*
- D. The sterling commendation continues: *“and that you cannot bear those who are evil.”*
1. Here again is another reminder of one of Paul’s admonitions.

2. *"And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness..." (Eph. 5:11).*
- E. **2:3** *"And you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary."*
 1. The brethren had persevered and endured the trials of the day.
 2. They are commended for their patience which would embrace steadfastness and endurance.
 3. And they had not become weary which reminds us of another of Paul's statements:
Gal. 6:9 *"And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not."*
- F. Now in the commendation, note also **2:6**: *"But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."*
 1. We know very little of the Nicolaitans, except to say they were noted for false deeds.
 2. Of interest: here is something which is clearly identified as something which the Lord hates.
 3. Whatever those deeds were, the Lord was greatly displeased with them.
- G. With all of this wonderful commendation, the Lord now makes us aware of the problem.

II. THE PROBLEM (2:4).

- A. *"Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love."*
- B. With all the possible explanations that have been offered for this passage, it is clear that the Lord is exposing a problem with their hearts.
 1. On one occasion Jesus was dealing with the Jews, who were infuriated with Him because of His teaching regarding the sabbath and Himself.
 2. **John 5:42** *"But I know you, that you do not have the love of God in you."*
 3. As one author put it, "The Divine indictment says nothing of error in teaching, nor of innovations in practice. Immorality is not the charge. Simply stated, Jesus says, *"I have looked into your hearts and I see that you don't love Me like you once did."*
- C. Several yrs ago, a preacher friend of mine, bro. David Pharr, offered some possibilities and lessons which we can draw from the problem. (Special thanks to David Pharr for the following material!)
- D. #1 -- "It may be that they had more interest in debate than revival."
 1. Continuously combating false teachers and false doctrine can have detrimental affects.
 2. This is not to suggest that error does not need to be faced and combated.
 3. But it is suggested that at Ephesus there may have been "more enthusiasm for exposing sin than there was for saving souls."
 4. Bro. Pharr notes: "It is possible...that we may find more satisfaction in fighting error than in helping those who are in error."
 5. And then makes an important notation: "Love for Christ that defends His truth puts one into honorable conflict; but heresy hunting as a hobby is dirty business."
- E. #2 "That they may have been more impressed with themselves as a church than with Christ as a Savior."
 1. As a church they could have been more impressed with themselves than is healthy; considering their "greatness," speaking of their soundness and

- successes.
2. Bro. Pharr notes: "There is a point when people are more impressed with the greatness of "their church" than they are with the greatness of God.
 3. Perhaps **Rom. 12:3** should be considered in application: *"For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith."*
 4. One of the most important notations I saw in bro. Pharr's writings: "Some people seek out a big congregation. They justify themselves by claiming advantages, but how often is the real reason pride? We should be thankful to be in a good congregation; but never proud of the church **we** are and the great things **we** do. A congregation of 50,000 would still be only 50,000 "unprofitable servants," on the same level of every brother, all sinners redeemed by the blood of the Lamb."
- F. #3 "Men may know a lot of Scripture and still have no personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Some may preach powerfully in public, but pray poorly in private."
1. The Psalmist states: *"My soul thirsts for God"* (**Psa. 42:2**).
 2. **Acts 4:13** *"Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marveled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus."*
 3. Again bro Pharr notes: "Brethren are astonished when they hear that a noted and effective preacher has fallen into sin. "How can a man who knows so much and has taught so many do something like that? It may be doctrine without devotion. So far as we know Demas was sound in what he knew, but his love got turned around" (**2 Tim. 4:10**)."
- G. #4 "In earlier times the elders had such affection for their brother Paul that they had embraced him and wept unashamedly when he had to leave. In Paul's letter to them he commends their *"love unto all the saints"* (Eph. 1:5)...Was their loss of first love manifesting itself in **less affection for their brethren?**"
1. It is not unknown for people to profess to be the children of God, and have little to no love for their brethren.
 2. It runs contrary to Paul's admonition: *"Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep"* (**Rom. 12:15**).
 3. **1 John 3:16-17** *"By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.
17 But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?"*
- H. #5 "Worldly sophistication replacing genuine spirituality."
1. Although there is nothing said that would convey this thought, it none the less does occasionally happen to a congregation.
 2. Citing bro. Pharr again: "Ephesus had become an established, solid congregation. No doubt, if they had been in our culture, they would have a fine building, a capable staff, and a respectable community standing. Members would dress fashionably. Conversations before and after worship activities would be on things like fashions, finances, world events, recreation, and sports."
 3. Occasionally one may sing, or may have heard the words of the song: *"I'd rather have Jesus than silver and gold."*
 4. Remember Jesus' warning: that some in receiving the seed, the word of God,

- would be *choked by the "cares and riches and pleasures of this life"* (**Luke 8:14**).
- I. #6 Some have suggested that the loss of love was due to "the fact that by now the congregation consisted of many second and third generation Christians."
 1. Some may be aware that there is sometimes a difference between those who have grown up in the church vs those converted out of religious error.
 2. Sometimes, those raised in the church will lack the commitment that was evidenced in their parents or grandparents.
 3. Once again bro. Pharr notes: "For many the pressures of traditions may keep them affiliated, but their hearts are not in the church of Christ. Witness some of the out-landish teenage and young adult programs, often orchestrated by paid youth ministers, and smiled upon by condescending leaders. There is a spirit of iconoclasm that ridicules and wants to distance itself from the old ways."
 4. **Jer. 6:16** "*Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.*"
 5. Now this does not suggest that everything done that is new is bad, nor that with every second or third generation there is going to be problems.
 6. The point that is important: "What must be recognized is that unless religion is from the heart that is absorbed by love for Christ, whether in young or old, apostasy will soon follow. Such love is not passed on by inheritance."
 - J. #7 Is probably not the case with Ephesus, but Jesus warned that it could happen: **Matt. 24:12** "*And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.*"
 1. Sin will take away the love that we have for the Lord.
 2. **Matt. 6:24** "*No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.*"
 3. It is a fact that some people will leave the Lord because they fall in love with the pleasures of sin.
 4. Paul warned that there would be "*lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God*" (**2 Tim. 3:4**).
 - K. Regardless of what the reason was for the problem at Ephesus, the root of it still can be traced to a loss of love for the Lord.
 1. This is the first and most important commandment because all of the others stem from it.
 2. "When people truly love God His commands become simply guidance for the experience of love" (**1 John 5:3**). Without such love obedience to any commandment is meaningless." (Ibid.)

III. THE PRESCRIPTION (2:5).

- A. The prescription for the problem is as follows:
2:5 "*Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent.*"
- B. They needed to *remember* where they once stood in relation to God.
 1. "Two longtime members were discussing the zeal of a new convert. One of them cynically observed: "Don't worry about it; after he's been with us for a while he'll

- calm down.” (Pharr)
2. Perhaps the RSV does capture the thought of **Rev. 2:5** -- “...*you have abandoned the love you had at the first.*”
 3. One of the beauties of new converts is that they radiate with joy and enthusiasm; we describe them as being on fire for Christ.
 4. They are ready to tell their family, their friends, and everyone they can about the salvation they have in Christ.
 5. But in time something happens to them, as it did with God’s people long ago. Bro. Pharr described it this way: “their backsliding showed that the honey moon was over” (**Jer. 2:2ff**).
- C. In this lesson, I have cited a number of quotes from my friend bro. Pharr, but perhaps none as important as this one:
“We have adopted shortcuts to revival. The symptoms are treated but the cancer is not removed. Sermons on the letter to Ephesus have concluded with little more than admonitions to attend regularly and give better. Calls for revival have seemed little more than “Come forward... we’ll pray...and be here Sunday.” We set attendance goals; visit those who have missed more than twice; have an occasional evangelism workshop; and beat people over the head with Heb. 10:25. All of this is not bad; but we have been hacking at the branches when the poison is in the roots. Jesus said the problem is in the heart. The love is cold. Until this is changed we are only putting Band-Aids over a malignancy.”
- D. Jesus, who knows the thoughts and intents of all men’s hearts, knew that the problem with Ephesus went deep.
 - E. And again, “Someone has illustrated our approach as being like having a car with a blown engine and having the mechanic only recommend a paint job; or like a doctor telling someone with cancer he just needs a haircut.” (Ibid.)
 - F. Today the church is suffering because too many sermons are addressing the symptoms and not the root of the problem.
 - G. Jesus warned Ephesus that without repentance he would remove their lampstand. History will show that in time the lampstand was removed.

CONCLUSION:

1. This evening, perhaps a revival needs to happen in your life.
2. Have you forgotten your first love? Is your honeymoon with the Lord over?