

From the Pulpit of Keith Miller
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To the Church in Ephesus

Revelation 2:1-7

Introduction

I believe the book of Revelation is intentionally shaped by the rhythm of the seven Jewish feasts, with deep echoes of the Exodus and Israel's wilderness journey woven throughout its visions. We have already seen how this works in chapter 1, where the imagery echoes Passover. Passover marked Israel's deliverance from slavery through the blood of a substitute—and in Revelation 1:12–16, that substitute is revealed in all His risen glory. Jesus stands among His churches as the victorious Lamb who was slain and now lives forever.

Because of His sacrifice, the Christian belongs to God. If you have been redeemed by Almighty God through His Son, what is there to fear? Jesus Himself answers that question: **“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades”** (Rev. 1:17–18). Our confidence is not rooted in our circumstances, but in the One who has conquered death itself.

As we move into Revelation 2–3 and read the seven letters to the churches, the dominant echo is the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which immediately followed Passover. This feast called God's redeemed people to live holy lives, set apart for Him (Lev. 11:44–45; 1 Pet. 1:16–17). Israel removed all leaven from their homes as a visible reminder that they belonged to the Lord and were no longer to live under the old patterns of corruption. That same call still comes to us today: **“You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body”** (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

Each of the seven churches faced real and pressing challenges in their own day—and what they struggled with are many of the same things we struggle with today, just dressed differently.

While we will look at each church individually, here is a brief snapshot of what we will encounter:

- The church in Ephesus had lost its first love.
- The church in Smyrna was about to suffer “tribulation” for ten days.
- The church in Pergamum struggled with faithfulness to sound doctrine.
- The church in Thyatira tolerated a false teacher within the congregation.
- The church in Sardis was spiritually lethargic and nearly dead.
- The church in Philadelphia faithfully clung to the word of God.
- The church in Laodicea was lukewarm and missionally useless.

In every one of these churches, there was the danger of leaven—sin quietly working its way through the house. And the call of Christ was to remove it: through renewed love for Jesus and for one another, faithful endurance in suffering, a commitment to truth, intolerance for evil, vigilance against spiritual apathy, unflinching obedience to Christ, and a wholehearted devotion to the mission of God.

About forty years before Revelation was written, Paul wrote about God's expectation for His church: "**Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God**" (Eph. 5:1-2). Revelation 1 is about the One who makes our salvation possible. Revelation 2-3 addresses the kind of people He calls us to be. So, when we come to Revelation 4, we encounter the One on the throne who is holy, holy, holy!

The City of Ephesus

When the gospel came to Ephesus, it was a wealthy and influential trading city, best known for the Temple of Artemis (also called Diana), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The city's economy, culture, and moral life centered on the worship of this goddess. Artemis worship was deeply sexualized and demonic, marked by ritual immorality and idolatry (1 Cor. 10:20). Ephesus was a place where spiritual darkness was not hidden—it was celebrated, institutionalized, and profitable.

Into this city, the gospel came with unmistakable power, as it always does in God's timing and in His way. What we read in the epistle to the Romans was experienced in Ephesus: "**For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...**" (Rom. 1:16). When the apostle Paul preached Christ in Ephesus, lives were transformed, and the worship of Artemis was directly challenged. So disruptive was the gospel that those who profited from idolatry feared economic collapse, admitting that Paul had persuaded many that "**gods made with hands are not gods at all**" (Acts 19:26). Paul spent over two years there, and in this spiritually hostile environment, God birthed a faithful church—the same church later addressed by Christ Himself in Revelation 2. What makes Jesus' words to Ephesus so sobering is not the city's darkness but the fact that a church born in such devotion, perseverance, and truth would later be warned: "**You have abandoned the love you had at first**" (2:4).

So what happened? To answer that question, we need to first recognize the many things Jesus praises the church for.

What the Ephesian Church Was Doing Right

The Ephesian church was commended for many things by Jesus such as their toil, patient endurance, and intolerance for evil. Heraclitus, a native of Ephesus and philosopher, spoke with open contempt of his city's moral corruption—so severe that later writers summarized his view

by saying no one could live in Ephesus without weeping.¹ The fact that the church was able to endure for forty years in a city known for its sexual promiscuity and demonized idolatrous worship, while holding on to biblical orthodoxy, is staggering!

Because of their orthodoxy and fidelity to the Word of God, the church was intolerant of evil, refused to ignore false teachers, and shared Jesus's hatred of the Nicolaitans. Forty years earlier, Paul warned the elders of the Ephesian church: "**I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears**" (Acts. 20:29-31). This is what the church did well, and Jesus praised them for it.

Now, notice what Jesus does not say to the church in Ephesus. He does not say they were being too orthodox. He does not say they were too truthful, or that their intolerance of evil, false teachers, and the works of the Nicolaitans was too extreme. Jesus does not tell the church to dial it back but instead celebrates these as examples of what they were doing well. What the church did well was refusing to yield to the pressures from their city to conform.

Before we look at what the church got wrong, we need to address who the Nicolaitans were and why Jesus hated their teaching. From what we know, the Nicolaitans were a heretical "Christian" sect associated with the teaching of Balaam (Rev. 2:14-15). They taught that the grace of God permitted freedom to engage in the kinds of things their pagan neighbors enjoyed, such as sexual immorality and full participation in pagan temple feasts. Why? Because grace covered it all.

We will come back to Balaam when we look at the church in Pergamum, but for now what you need to know is that Balaam is known for his false teaching that served to seduce the men of Israel to engage in sexual immorality with the daughters of Moab that also resulted in the worship of their gods in place of obedience and worship of Yahweh (see Num. 25). The Nicolaitans did not deny Jesus, they just reinterpreted what obedience to Jesus really meant, in that you could both be loyal to Jesus and actively pursue and participate in the kinds of things the Word of God commands the people of God to flee from. The Ephesian church was rightfully commended for their hatred and intolerance of the works of the Nicolaitans because Jesus shares their hatred for the same reasons.

Listen carefully. Jesus does not merely *disagree* with teachings of the Nicolaitans—He hates them. He hates any belief that suggests a person can remain loyal to Him while willfully embracing the very sins He died to free us from. The cross was not a license to make peace with sin; it was God's declaration of war against it. To claim Christ while pursuing what nailed Him to the tree is not freedom—it is self-deception. Christ did not die to make sin safe, but to make His people holy.

¹ Richard D. Phillips, *Revelation*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 91.

What the Ephesian Church Got Wrong

So what was it that the church in Ephesus lost? Well, we know it wasn't the church's orthodoxy. It was the love they had at first. What love did they have at first? I believe the love the church lost was a combination of their love for Jesus and others. I believe this because of what the apostle Paul wrote in his epistle to the Ephesians and what Jesus said the church needed to do to regain the love they had lost. First, let's look at Jesus' criticism in verses 4-5, "**But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember 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.**"

The way back to regain what they had lost was to first remember where they had fallen or had lost sight of their love, then to repent by doing the works they had done at first. What were the works they had done at first? We are given a few clues in Ephesians about the church from what Paul says at the beginning and the end of his epistle to the Ephesians.

1st Clue: "For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers..." (Eph. 1:15-16)

2nd Clue: "Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible." (Eph. 6:24)

I believe that the love the Ephesian church lost had to do with the love they had for Jesus and for one another. The New Living Translation captures this in their translation of Revelation 2:4, "**But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first!**"

When a group of religious leaders asked Jesus to identify the most important commandment, His response was clear: "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself**" (Matthew 22:37-39). Genuine love for God leads to love for others—you cannot claim to love God while refusing to love those who bear His image. As our love for God grows, it overflows into love for those around us, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ. If you find this hard to accept, consider the words of the apostle John: "**If someone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, that person is a liar; for anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen**" (1 John 4:20).

I believe the Ephesian church, first known for their faith in Jesus and their incorruptible love for Him, became the catalyst that fostered in them a love for one another, which they were known for in the early days of the church's existence. Their love infused their faith in Jesus, and their love for all the saints was the cocktail God used to push back evil and transform lives!

What Revelation 2:1-4 teaches us is that Jesus wants our obedience, but He also wants our hearts! In fact, if Jesus has your heart, He will have your obedience.

Conclusion

I believe the Ephesian church is listed first among the seven churches because of the danger we face when what we believe and what we do are no longer tethered to a living love for Jesus and His people.

Listen carefully. Rather than criticizing the Ephesian church for its zeal for the truth of God's Word, Jesus praised them for it. Orthodoxy is essential to the spiritual health of both Christians and the church as a whole. When believers abandon orthodoxy, spirituality does not become freer or deeper—it becomes hollow and lifeless. So do their churches. But love keeps orthodoxy from hardening into something Jesus also hated. When truth is severed from love, orthodoxy collapses into legalism. And legalism is not holiness; it is a corruption of orthopraxy—right living.

Christian, we are called to be holy as our heavenly Father is holy. Scripture commands us: "**As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'"** (1 Pet. 1:14–16). But the way we pursue holiness is not through cold precision or moral superiority. It is through the kind of love the Ephesian church once had—and then lost. This is the first of seven ways Christ calls His people to cleanse His house of leaven.

What is that love? Scripture defines it plainly: "**Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude... it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth... Love never ends**" (1 Cor. 13:4–8). This is the love Jesus spoke of that must be true of His followers: "**By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another**" (John 13:35).

We live in a nation deeply fractured—so fractured that many believe we are in a cold civil war. Civil conversation between the left and the right is nearly impossible. But it must not be that way in the church Jesus redeemed from the world. Our love for Christ must overflow into genuine love for one another—strong enough to allow disagreement without division, conviction without contempt, and truth without hatred.

Let me take this one step further. If you love the Jesus who died to ransom people from every tribe, language, people, and nation, then you must be liberated from the partisan blindness that grips both the left and the right. Christian, you belong to another kingdom. Your allegiance is not to a political ideology but to King Jesus. Please hear me: the world will not see, hear, or receive the gospel from the left or the right—but only from Jesus Christ Himself. By God's design, His gospel is not entrusted to government but to His church. The mess in the White House, our

nation, and the world is evidence that what people need is the One who makes the Gospel the Gospel—namely, Jesus!

If you cannot see that—if you cannot believe that while still calling yourself a Christian—then you are in danger of the very thing that threatened the church in Ephesus. You have lost your first love.

So I leave you with the same words Jesus spoke to them: **“He 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.”**