<u>The Seven Churches – Ephesus</u> Revelation 2:1-7 ABC 9/26/21

Do you all remember actual letters where thoughts were expressed in words written by hand on an actual piece of paper? Muriel & I dated long distance for a number of months & letters were our lifeline to each other. We'd (or at least I would) eagerly wait for the postman each day. Now imagine you received a personal letter from Jesus Himself. Would you eagerly read what He had to say? Would you change anything if He asked you to? What about if He wrote a letter to us as a church? How would we respond? We get to answer that guestion over the next several weeks as we look at 7 early churches in today's Turkey. The world is full of churches. In almost every American town there's usually a church of some kind. Some are formal & liturgical while others are more relaxed. Some sing only traditional hymns, while others are more contemporary. Some have a band, others sing to recorded piano. Some have chairs while others have pews. Some are so full they have people standing in the back, while in others the only seats taken are in the back. Some churches are committed to the truth of God's Word while others are more concerned with entertainment. Regardless of what a church looks like, how many people attend, or what the service entails, the only true church is made up of individuals who've embraced lesus as their Lord & Savior. The important guestion about a church isn't what it looks like in regards to the building, seating, style of service, or music, but what it looks like to lesus Himself. Let me put it this way: What would lesus say about our church, about ABC? While we may have to guess at what He'd say about our church, this morning we begin a short series looking at Rev 2-3, where Jesus evaluates 7 churches in Asia Minor that highlight the characteristics that our church, & every true church, should & should not have. These are 7 real churches & the apostle John had previously ministered to these churches prior to his exile on the Island of Patmos. The things written about these churches, both good & bad, have always been true of churches & will continue to be true of them until lesus returns. The letters are addressed to 7 churches, but each letter is to be read by those in the other cities as well (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). This means we should read each letter & ask if the characteristics of that church are found among us & then adjust accordingly.¹ We begin by looking at the message to the church in Ephesus. Open your Bibles to Rev 2:1-7 where we see what Jesus had to say about the Ephesian church. <u>1-7</u>

<u>1. The Charge</u> is recorded for us in vs 1 where John records, **To the angel of the church in Ephesus write**... Notice this is written to an **angel**. The term **angel** can be translated *messenger* (Lk 7:24; Js 2:5). So the letter is addressed to the *messenger* **of the church in Ephesus**. Who is the **angel** or *messenger* **of** that church? Could be an angel, perhaps there's one over every true church, but I think John is probably referring to an elder or leader of the church. It's entirely possible that John was able to receive visitors while in exile & these leaders would then carry these letters back to their churches, being literal messengers. After all, someone did this or else we wouldn't be reading them today.

<u>2. The City</u> Ephesus was dominated by worldliness, paganism, & idolatry. While Pergamum was the capital city of the region, Ephesus was the true center. Home to up to ½ a million people, it was called the *Light of Asia*, & it dominated the region.² What do we know of Ephesus?

It was a city of geographical significance being located on the Cayster River with a harbor on the Aegean Sea. Those arriving there would travel along a magnificent, wide, column-lined road called *The Arcadian Way* leading to the center of the city.

Ephesus was also a center of culture & entertainment. The theater could hold 25,000 people, & every spring they hosted sporting events that rivaled Greece's ancient Olympics.

The city was also a city of political importance. It served as home to the Roman governor of the province & possessed the status of a free city, meaning it was self-governing & free from Roman control.

It was also of commercial importance. It was one of the oldest & largest cities in Asia, located at the intersection of 4 of the most important Roman roads. It served as an important trade center & was known for its great library, luxury, & wealth.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, Seven Churches, Four Horsemen, One Lord: Lessons from the Apocalypse, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, p 66

² John MacArthur, Christ's Call to Reform the Church: Timeless Demands from the Lord to His People, p 57

Ephesus was also of religious importance. They primarily worshipped Artemis/Diana, the most sacred goddess in the ancient world. Her temple in Ephesus was 1 of the 7 wonders of the ancient world, dating back to the 6th century BC. It served as a museum, marketplace, bank, & even a sanctuary for criminals. But the primary function of the temple was the worship of this pagan goddess. Every day, the temple was overrun with thousands of priests, eunuchs, temple prostitutes, musicians, dancers, & other worshipers. The worship itself consisted of drunkenness, debauchery, & deviance. Heraclitus, a pagan Greek philosopher who was born & lived in Ephesus in the 5th-century BC, was horrified at the perversions in his city. He described his culture as dark & vile & said the morals of his fellow citizens were lower than animals. He wrote, *The Ephesians deserve to be hanged, every last one of them.*³ He was of the opinion that no one could live in Ephesus without weeping at the immorality all around them.⁴ He said the inhabitants of Ephesus were fit only to be drowned.⁵ The moral climate of the city was obviously spiritually bankrupt.

<u>3. The Church</u> What about the church in Ephesus? Perhaps no church ever had as rich a heritage as it did. According to Acts 18:18-26, the gospel was probably 1st introduced by Paul's friends & partners in ministry, Aquilla & Priscilla. They were soon joined by Apollos, a Jew from Egypt who was **mighty in the Scriptures** & **fervent in the Spirit** (24–25). Paul 1st visited the synagogue in Ephesus at the close of his 2nd missionary journey (Acts 18:19-21), but it was on his 3rd missionary journey that he ministered there at length. Read Acts 19-20 for the details. It was during this period that the other churches in Asia Minor were planted as the gospel poured out of Ephesus. During Paul's 1st Roman imprisonment he wrote his letter to the Ephesian church, emphasizing the nature & purpose of the church. Not a bad pedigree for a church, but it doesn't end there. According to 1 Tim 1, Paul's understudy, Timothy, served the church in Ephesus (3). After that, Onesiphorus (2 Tim 1:16, 18) & Tychicus (2 Tim 4:12) served there. &, according to church history, John himself served as elder of the Ephesian church prior to his arrest & imprisonment on the Island of Patmos. The church had been in existence for 40+ years when Jesus had John send His letter to it.

³ Robin Waterfield, ed., The First Philosophers: The Presocratics & Sophists, p 45

⁴ Richard Mayhue, What Would Jesus Say About Your Church?, p 46

⁵ William Barclay, Letters to the Seven Churches, p 7

4. The Correspondent of the letter to the Church in Ephesus is the One who holds the 7 stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the 7 golden lamp stands says this... (1). Who's this? None other than the living Lord, Jesus Christ. Two pictures of Jesus are highlighted here: 1st, Jesus has complete power over His church. He identifies Himself as the One who holds the 7 stars in His right hand. This imagery is drawn from the vision of Christ in Rev 1:16. The 7 stars are explained in Rev 1:20 as being the 7 angels of the 7 churches. 2nd, Jesus has a continual presence in His church. He identifies Himself as the One who holds the res taken from Rev 1. In the vision there, Jesus is evidently standing but here we see not just His presence but His active ministry. These 7 lamp stands symbolize the 7 churches written to (20). Just as a lampstand was used to brighten a room, God has called His church to be the lights in the world (Phil 2:15). That they're made of gold shows how precious the church is to God. In fact, there's nothing more valuable & nothing bought at such a high a price (Acts 20:28).

The emphasis here seems to be on Jesus' continual presence in the midst of His church just as He promised in Mt 28:20, where He said, & **lo**, **I am with you always, even to the end of the age.** He knows His church in all its locations & is able to speak to their condition. Jesus has sovereign authority & control over His church. He's in complete control of it & continually present in the midst of it. When this letter was hand-delivered by men from the pen of John, the Lord Jesus Christ unquestionably identifies Himself as its author. These are His direct, authoritative words.

5. The Commendation Christ commends the church in Ephesus in vss 2-3.

Jesus said, I know, meaning He knew everything both good & bad. It stresses His omniscience & interest. Nothing escapes Him. What does Jesus praise them for?

<u>A. Their Deeds</u> He begins by informing them that He knows their **deeds**. Certainly Jesus, God in human flesh, possesses a full & complete knowledge of all things including everything there is to know about a church. The term **deeds** is a general term summarizing all that follows. The 1st deed Jesus commended them for was their **toil**, their spiritual labor to the point of sweat & exhaustion. This is an all-out effort physically, mentally, & emotionally. The Ephesian Christians were diligent workers in the church. In the midst of the pagan darkness that surrounded them, they were doing

the work of the church. They toiled for the sake of God's kingdom & expended themselves fully for His gospel. They weren't lazy or indifferent, but busy, giving everything they had for the cause of Christ. This church wasn't full of spectators. They understood they'd been called to work hard for Jesus & His kingdom. As believers in Christ, as members of His body, we can learn a lesson from them. Not all Christians work hard. Some of us are lazy & none of us are as diligent as we could be. It's also possible to be so caught up in our Christian work that we neglect things that are of greater value, as Martha did by laboring over the meal while Mary chose to listen to Jesus teach (Lk 10:38–42). The 2nd deed Jesus commended them for was their **perseverance**, from 2 words meaning to abide under. This is triumphant fortitude,⁶ patience in trying circumstances. It pictures courageous acceptance of hardship, suffering, & loss. Jesus makes another statement about perseverance in vs 3, where He says, **you have perseverance & have endured for My namesake**, **& have not grown weary**. The church in Ephesus continued to persevere in God's kingdom work even with pagan darkness surrounding them. They'd endured hardship, suffering, loss, & criticism without growing weary. Likewise, as believers, we need to persevere in the work of Christ in the midst of the pagan world around us. Jesus praised them for their **deeds** & for ...

<u>B. Their Discernment</u> Jesus tells them in vs 2, you cannot tolerate evil men, & you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, & they are not, & you found them to be false. This church had a high standard of holiness, being sensitive to sin, & avoiding false doctrine. They knew they had a duty to preserve the truth & to judge & reject false teaching (1 Jn 4:1). They knew that the standard to judge teaching as true or false is by God's own Word (2 Jn 9-10). From the beginning, the early church was under assault from false teachers. False gospels & heresies abounded in their world. In his 2nd letter, which was probably written while in Ephesus, John warned believers: many deceivers have gone out into the world.... If anyone comes to you & does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, & do not give him a greeting (7, 10). Jesus identified the threat presented by false teachers in His SOTM: Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's

⁶ Barclay, p 10

clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves (Mt 7:15). As Paul prepared to leave the Ephesian church

he gave this warning to the elders:

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; & from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night & day for a period of 3 years I did not cease to admonish each of you with tears (Acts 20:29–31).

The believers in Ephesus took those warnings seriously & acted upon them. The Ephesian church

also tested those claiming to be apostles & strongly dealt with those who proved to be false. This

church wasn't fooled by false doctrine or false teachers. The early church father Ignatius, writing

not long after John wrote the book of Revelation, also commended the Ephesians for their vigilance:

You heed nobody beyond what he has to say truthfully about Jesus Christ.... I have heard that some strangers came your way with a wicked teaching. But you did not let them sow it among you. You stopped up your ears to prevent admitting what they disseminated (Eph 6:2; 9:1).⁷

Through all the difficulties the Ephesians faced over 40 years, through all their hard labor & patient enduring of trials, their refusal to tolerate evil, & their spiritual discernment, they persevered.⁸ In our day, there's much false doctrine & heresy being taught. There are false teachers who deceive Christians. We must guard against them & have a commitment to sound doctrine. Why do we need such spiritual discernment? Because, Jesus hates false doctrine being spread within His church.

We see this in vs 6 where the Ephesians stood up against the Nicolaitans. <u>6</u>

This error is mentioned only twice in the Bible, here & in vs 15 in the letter to the church in Pergamum. Since we have no other reliable information about Nicolaitans, no one is certain what their error was, though it would have been clear to those who 1st read this letter. In the letter to the church at Pergamum their false teaching is linked with the idolatry of Balaam, perhaps indicating their worship included idolatry & sexual immorality (14-15). What little else we know comes to us from the writing of the early church fathers. Irenaeus recorded that the Nicolaitans *lived lives of unrestrained indulgence*,⁹ while Clement of Alexandria said they abandon *themselves to pleasure like goats, as if insulting the body, & lead a life of self-indulgence*.¹⁰ Whatever it was,

⁷ Cyril Richardson, Early Christian Fathers, 89, 90

⁸ MacArthur, p 60

⁹ Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, p 61

¹⁰ Clement, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, in Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:373

the Ephesians had the godly discernment to avoid their corrupting influence. They were right to hate this heresy because Jesus did too. Where did they get such wise discernment? From knowing God's truth. This was a well-taught church. They sat under the instruction of some of the sharpest & most godly minds in the early church. But they didn't rest on that legacy; they didn't assume their heritage alone would protect them. They put into practice the teachings & doctrines handed down to them & faithfully guarded the church from false teaching. This apparently continued as Ignatius wrote to them at the beginning of the 2nd century, *You all live according to truth, & no heresy has a home among you; indeed, you do not so much as listen to anyone if they speak of anything except concerning Jesus Christ in truth.*¹¹

If Jesus stopped here it would all be good news for this church. It looked like a model church. On the surface it was a body of faithful, mature believers. But the Lord's eyes are **like a flame of fire** (1:14). Nothing escapes His penetrating, omniscient gaze, as we saw in our time in the psalms. This is both reassuring & threatening. The Lord's presence means inescapable, penetrating knowledge. Everything is naked & exposed to His gaze (Heb 4:13). Deep down, below the surface, the Ephesian church carried a spiritually fatal flaw.

<u>6. The Condemnation</u> There's a criticism given to this church by Jesus & it's a serious one. <u>4</u> Jesus begins with the word **but** or **nevertheless** (KJV), meaning despite all the good in the Ephesian church, He still had something against them. All the good in the church didn't cancel out the bad Jesus is about to describe. Though they maintained their doctrinal purity & continued to serve Christ, their **deeds** had degenerated into duty. Jesus had their heads & their hands but not their hearts. Their present works (2), which weren't lacking in quantity, differed from their 1st works (5) by the absence of the love which had earlier motivated them. They'd become so engrossed in religious work they neglected the one thing needed (Lk 10:42). No amount of religious rightness, labor, or loyalty can make up for a deficit in Christian love (1 Cor 13:2–3).¹² The burning hearts of love they once had for Jesus had flickered & faded in time. Four decades had passed between the

¹¹ John Stott, What Christ Thinks of the Church, p 21

¹² Steve Gregg, ed., *Revelation: Four Views; A Parallel Commentary*, p 65

early days of the church under Paul & the writing of this letter. The passion of that 1st generation had cooled & now they simply followed the pattern passed down to them. While they maintained the right external behaviors & held to biblical doctrinal, their service to the Lord was no longer prompted by love for Him. It's interesting that Paul closed his letter to them this way: Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with incorruptible love (Eph 6:24). They had left that love. They didn't *lose* it but **left** it. Something can be lost by accident, but leaving is a deliberate act, even though it may happen gradually. When we lose something we don't know where to find it; but when we leave something, we know where to find it. They purposely left their love for the Lord, which resulted in dutiful deeds. We see this same pattern repeated throughout the OT with Israel. Israel was rebuked by Jeremiah (2:2-13) & Ezekiel (16:8-15) & others for this. Despite its outwardly healthy appearance, a spiritual cancer was growing inside the Ephesian church. They still possessed sacrificial works & spiritual wisdom, but they'd been so busy doing the work of the Lord that they forgot the Lord of the work. They'd forgotten to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, & mind (Mt 22:37). The lack of a love relationship with lesus opened the door to spiritual apathy, indifference to each other, love for the world, & ultimately, with the death of the church. This is recorded for us in church history. By the 5th century AD the Ephesian church would be no more. As believers, we need to continue to remember Christ's commandment, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, & with all your soul, & with all your mind, & with all your strength (Mk 12:30). This love for God shows itself in love for others (1 In 4:7-8) & obedience to Jesus' commands (In 14:15, 21). None of us has ever perfectly fulfilled the 1st, most basic of all God's commandments for as much as an hour. But our inability to fulfill God's command perfectly doesn't absolve us from the duty of pursuing the standard it sets. Greater love for Jesus should still be the goal of every believing heart. We must faithfully guard against distractions & temptations that divide our hearts & diminish our love for Him. This fading love is a danger for every one of us & for every church. Just as we need to toil at the work of God, we need to work to fan the flames of our love for Him. We must never be satisfied with cold-hearted, robotic service rendered unto Him. We can't allow

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our hearts to cool toward our Savior. The cost is far too high.¹³ We must remember that our work for God in the church should be the result of our relationship with Jesus & of our love for Him, & serve the purpose of honoring Him.

7. The Counsel What counsel does Jesus give this church to correct this problem? 5

What must they do? A. Remember The Ephesian church was told to remember from where they had fallen. They were to remember the glorious freedom from sin & its penalty their salvation had brought. They were to remember the joy & gratefulness they had at being redeemed. They were to remember the love they 1st had for God & His people & their insatiable hunger for His Word. We too must remember God & who He is & what He's done in love for us. If we don't, our love will grow cold. Forgetfulness results in spiritual decline. The Prodigal Son had known the father's love &, at one time, had probably loved him back. But he'd forgotten this love by the time he took his inheritance & left home. His spiritual recovery began when he remembered his father's house. The text says, when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!' (Lk 15:17). We need to remember the joy of our salvation & recover our 1st love.¹⁴ The Ephesians were to recall their past commitments & reevaluate their present compromise. They needed to remember their spiritual heritage & the love for God that they 1st had. As believers, we should also remember & rekindle our love for the Lord. **B.** Repent The Ephesian church was also instructed to repent (5). They weren't loving their Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, & strength. Yes, they'd done some great works, but their motivation was wrong. Their heart was deficient. They needed to repent & seek His forgiveness & make the necessary changes in their lives. They needed to reject their sins, turn to lesus, & demonstrate their repentance with true love. As believers, we're also called to repent of our sins. When we recognize we've fallen into sin, we need to come before the Lord with a contrite heart, confess our sin, & make the necessary changes in both our attitude & actions. When Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, the top one read, When our Lord &

¹³ MacArthur, p 67

¹⁴ Boice, p 75

Master, Jesus Christ, said 'repent,' He meant that the entire life of believers should be one of repentance.¹⁵ We don't cease to be sinners when we're justified by God's grace & saved by His Son's death. Therefore, we must always be repenting, & never more so than when we've forsaken our 1st love for a love of the world, the world's way of doing things, & worldly success. Remember, repent, & now...

<u>C. Resume</u> The Ephesian church was instructed to return to & resume the **deeds** they'd done at 1st (5). There's no better way to demonstrate true repentance than to return to the godly things you've forsaken. For the Ephesians, that meant rediscovering the richness of their devotion to God, His Word, & the work of His kingdom. They needed to demonstrate their repentance was genuine by doing what they'd done at 1st. They needed to resume serving the Lord with a burning heart of love. They needed to return to the deeds that demonstrated their love for the Lord. They were to have a commitment to Christ not merely to good works. They were to have a living faith, not dead deeds.

This letter doesn't say how this love may be increased, but John tells us in his 1st letter. He says, We love, because He 1st loved us (1 Jn 4:19). This prior love of God took Jesus to the cross to die for our sins. There He gave Himself for us with self-giving love, as He bore our sins in His own body. We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us (1 Jn 3:16). The cross is the blazing fire at which the flame of our love is kindled, but we have to get near enough to it for its sparks to fall on us. As we remember what our God has done for us in love we can't help but see our love for Him grow.

What would be the result for the Ephesian church if they didn't follow Christ's commands? Jesus would come & will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent (5). Their refusal to repent would result in their removal as a church. Loveless churches eventually lose their ability to shine in a dark world. The Ephesian church closed their doors in the 5th century. They lost their ability to shine & their lamp stand was removed. Here at ABC, we all need to be committed to

¹⁵ Sinclair Ferguson, The Grace of Repentance, p 11

Christ with our entire being. We all need to demonstrate & grow in our love for the Lord. If we don't, the Lord may remove us.

8. The Challenge Finally, Jesus issues forth a challenge in vs 7.

This isn't a closing remark for the Ephesians alone; it's a word of counsel to everyone who reads this. The phrase, he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches, is repeated in all 7 letters. The implication is these letters were never intended to have a single audience or a short shelf life. They stand as warnings to all believers & all churches everywhere. We need to feel the weight of these words. This challenge is a promise given to those who overcome. In 1 In 5:4-5, John identifies overcomers as true believers. If you're a believer, you're an overcomer. What's promised to those who overcome? Christ says they will eat of the tree of life. The tree of life is 1st referred to in Gen 2:9, where it stood in the Garden of Eden. Access to it was lost due to man's sin (Gen 3:22). The tree of life appears again in the New Jerusalem in Rev 22 (2, 14, 19). Here it symbolizes eternal life & the Paradise of God is speaking of heaven (Lk 23:43; 2 Cor 12:4). The promise that's given to the overcomer is that of eternal life with God in heaven. What a precious promise for those in Ephesus who were true believers & hadn't left or had returned to their 1st love. What a precious promise for those who'd heed Christ's counsel to remember, repent, & resume. All who overcome will receive the blessed reward of a glorified body & live eternally with God in heaven. If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, you're an overcomer & you won't have left your 1st love. As overcomers, we'll share in this precious promise of eternal life with God in heaven.

Think about what it might have been like to hear this letter read for the 1st time in the church at Ephesus. Imagine the horror of knowing Jesus Himself was threatening to shut down your church & drive it out of existence if you didn't repent & return to your love for Him. You'd be panic-stricken. So Christ closes with this comforting eternal promise for His church. Just as we must heed Christ's words of warning to His churches, we need to rest in the security of our salvation, knowing that nothing, not even our own sinful failures, can separate us from the love of God (Rom 8:38–39).

In Rev 1:16 John gives a detail about Christ's appearance, saying, **& His face was like the sun shining** in its strength. Looking at the Lord's face was like staring directly into the sun at high noon on a clear day. John may have borrowed this expression from Judges 5:31, which says, **Let those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might**. Mt 13:43 echoes the idea: **The righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father**. The glory of God, in the person of Jesus Christ, shines through His church, & thus God's people reflect His glory to a watching world. Paul makes that point in 2 Cor 4:6 where he wrote, **For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ**. Through the transformed lives of you & I, the Lord is making His gospel attractive to the world around us. He's drawing people to Himself through the godly character of His church. Christ Himself established that pattern in Matthew's gospel, saying, **Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, & glorify your Father who is in heaven** (Mt 5:16). This is the reality of the church: God redeems sinners to build His church & uses their transformed lives to reflect the majesty of His glory, whereby He draws more sinners to Himself. The awesome, blazing glory of the Lord shines through the church, illuminating a lost & dark world.

So, back to our initial question. What would Jesus say about ABC? Are we reflecting His glory, loving Him, each other, & the lost around us? I hope & pray Jesus would commend us, not only for our sacrificial works & spiritual wisdom, but also our love for God. Let's pray toward that end.