

Seven Letters To Seven Churches: Ephesus

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[0:00] Who is the person in your life that you listen to most? You have your ear tuned to this person's voice.

Or who is the person that you talk to all throughout the day? Who's the person that you plan around? Who's the person that you sing to?

Who's the person that you make to introduce? You make a point to introduce to anyone you meet. You want them to know this person. Who's the person that you love so much? You love those who this person loves. Who's the person that you long for most?

That you long to be with. That you look forward most to seeing. That person is your first love.

[1:05] And this morning you must answer this question. Is your first love Jesus? Last week we were given a glorious vision of Jesus from Revelation chapter 1 verses 9 through 20.

Jesus is risen. He's radiant fire eyes. Glowing feet. And he is reigning right here. Right now. And the risen, radiant, and reigning Jesus.

After this vision. John falls at his feet as though a dead man. And Jesus puts that right hand that would hold all the seven stars of the seven churches.

He puts it on John. And he says, fear not. He's got full authority over every square inch of creation. I mean, he's got the keys. Jingle, jingle. The risen, reigning, radiant Christ tells John to write.

[2:15] Write the things that are, in verse 19. And write the things that are to take place. This morning we are moving into chapters 2 and 3 of the book of Revelation.

And these are the things that are. Jesus is going to speak to seven specific churches. And he's going to speak into those churches.

It's prophetic forth telling. He's speaking into their situations. These are the seven churches that he names in Asia Minor.

And so for the next seven weeks, starting today, we are going to make our way through each of these seven letters. One letter per Sunday. We're going to do this because not only did the risen, radiant, and reigning Christ have something to say to those churches.

He's got something to say to our church. Before we turn to the first letter to the first church, which is the church of Ephesus, I want to make a point.

[3:23] I want to show you something that is something that's similar in each of these letters to these seven churches. It's the way that these letters are organized. They have a seven common components.

First one is this. A church is addressed. Second, Christ is pictured. And it's pictured back from the vision in verses 9 through 20 in chapter 1.

Something about Jesus is pictured to each of these churches that correspond to something going on in that church. Third, a claim is made.

I know. I know what's going on, Jesus says. Fourth, oftentimes there's commendation to this church. Fifth, more frequent than not, there is a critique, a criticism, a rebuke.

Five out of the seven churches are rebuked by the risen, radiant, and reigning Jesus. And following that critique is a correction because Jesus loves his churches.

[4:31] That's the sixth, the correction. And then they close with the seventh of a closing call to hear and to overcome. They are all, by and large, shared throughout these seven letters.

And the reason why is for us to realize these letters are not just intended for those specific churches. They're intended for all churches.

This is for the church of every place, every time, including our church. So let's now turn to Revelation chapter 2, if you haven't already.

Thank you, Vince Zanotti, for reading this morning. And what we're going to do is we're going to walk through these seven components of this letter. Because you need to see something. At the heart of this is a rebuke. And it's going to cause you to soul search. To check your heart. [5:36] To see if Jesus is your first love. So let's now look at chapter 2, verse 1, this church address. The angel, to the angel of the church in Ephesus.

The risen Christ is telling John to write something to the angel of the church in Ephesus. Which is a really interesting way to talk about it. It's common throughout all the letters.

Write this to the angel of this particular church. There is debate over who this angel is. Could it be the lead pastor of a church? Preaching to the church? I believe it's referring to an angel, a heavenly messenger.

Because for the rest of the book of Revelations, at least 69 times this word shows up, angel. It's always in reference to a heavenly messenger. Which means this. John is pulling back the curtain here.

We're in a spiritual conflict. There is an angel assigned to our church. There is an angel assigned to the churches. And what makes you realize is there is more going on than what we see on a day-to-day basis.

[6:49] Let's talk about this church in Ephesus. This church in Ephesus is a mix of Jews and Gentiles. We know that from the book of Ephesus, of Ephesians.

And this church was an established church. Now, do you know what a core sample is? Like scientists in the Arctic, they drill down into the ice and they pull out like a six-foot-long cylindrical core sample of ice.

And they're able to see the layers that have been laid down over the course of decades and centuries. And they can learn a lot about them. If we drill down into the New Testament, we could pull out a core sample of the church of Ephesus.

We're able to track progress throughout the book of the New Testament. It's a really fascinating study. But what you learn from that core sample is this.

The church of Ephesus was the flagship church in this region at this time in the first century. They were established. By the time that John is writing this on behalf of Jesus in the late 90s, this church has been around for at least 40 years.

[7:58] Four decades. It's established. It's seen a lot. Ministries are underway. They've seen quite a few pastors, actually.

Timothy was a pastor in Ephesus. And history says that John the Apostle was actually a pastor in Ephesus. What we get from this church here, what you need to sense is that this is a real church that Jesus is addressing.

With real people. With a real history. And Jesus is going to dial into a real problem. At the core of this church. Now, we are a real church.

Of real people. With a real history. I mean, next week. Five years as a church. That's something to celebrate. God's faithfulness. But Jesus is going to address a real issue in our church through this letter.

A real danger that we must be aware of. That's the church addressed. This is the church of Ephesus. And Jesus doesn't begin with a problem, though.

[9:17] He moves from addressing this church then to turning to himself. The Christ. To the angel of the church in Ephesus write.

The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand. Who walks among the seven golden lampstands. It's a reference back to the vision beforehand. In chapter 1, 9 through 20.

Verses 12 and 16 in particular. Now, if you weren't with us last week. You may be asking the question. Seven stars and seven golden lampstands.

That sounds mysterious. Well, the good news is Jesus explains exactly what they are in chapter 1, verse 20. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand.

And the seven golden lampstands. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. And the seven lampstands are the seven churches. And so what Jesus is reminding the Ephesian churches.

[10:14] Is that he holds all angelic beings in his right hand. It's a picture of sovereign control. Of power over all. Of unrivaled authority.

And he is walking in the midst of the lampstands. Imagine these seven churches in Asia at this time. Think of them as an apple orchard. And Jesus is the owner of that apple orchard.

And the picture is this. Jesus is walking in the midst of his orchard. Inspecting his trees. Making sure they're healthy and bearing fruit. And if there's a root problem, he's going to address it.

And he does so with this particular church. Now, the reason that the risen, radiant, and reigning Jesus. Starts off this letter with this particular aspect of the vision.

He is reminding them of this. I am right here in your midst. I am present. Because what we're going to see is the Ephesian church has forgotten about him.

[11:20] In all of their ministry busyness. They've lost their first love. And what Jesus is saying is you may have forgotten about me.

But I haven't forgotten you. I'm in the midst of you. This is the Christ. Now, you may be feeling right now today.

That the risen, radiant, and reigning Christ. Well, you know, I hear that he is right here right now.

But I don't feel like he is right here right now.

I don't see him. Well, as followers of Jesus, we walk by faith and not by sight. We walk by faith and not by our feelings.

And so when we read that the risen, radiant, reigning Jesus is walking in the midst of his lampstands. That's enough for us to say by faith.

[12:25] He is here right now. Right here. And he's got something to say. Did you notice?

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write, The words of him. That should ring something in your mind. Remember the expression from the Old Testament.

Thus saith the Lord. That's what's going on here. Thus says the Lord. Him who holds the stars in his right hand.

He was walking among the golden lampstands. This one in our midst is the risen, radiant, and reigning Christ.

And he makes a claim. Notice in verse 2. I know. I know your works.

[13:29] I pointed out last week that Jesus, when we're talking about his fire eyes in chapter 1 verse 14, that he sees everything.

He knows everything. He knows. This little phrase, I know your works, it shows up in all of the seven churches. All the seven letters. I know, I know, I know, I know, I know, I know, I know, I know.

He knows. Because he's present. And he sees. I know your works. Jesus is saying to this Ephesian church, I know your situation.

He's saying to our church, I know your situation. He says to the Ephesian church, I know what you're facing. He's saying to our church, I know what you're facing.

I know what you're fearing. I know how you're responding. I know where your heart is at. And I even know your blind spots.

[14:30] Jesus is fully present and completely aware of the real condition, the real health of every one of his churches. Then and now.

He is the owner of the apple orchard. He knows every one of his trees. He knows every one of his churches. Including our church. Now, for us, there should be this sense of comfort in that.

That the one walking in our midst knows us. That the one walking in our midst is risen. He's radiant. He's reigning. And he's the Lord of all. He's in control.

All things have been placed under his feet. He's been given dominion by the ancient of days. And currently, he's bringing all things functionally, actively under his reign.

That should comfort us. But also carries this sense of caution. Because as we're about to see our risen, radiant, and reigning Lord.

[15:37] He does not remain indifferent to his people's indifference. He is our holy one.

And he's seeking to make us holy. And our holiness starts with our hearts. Specifically, what we love most.

And so we move from this claim to I know, to commendation. He knows us. He knows this Ephesian church. He knows what they were doing well.

And he spells a bunch of things out. I mean, this was a hard-working church. They were active in ministry. I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance.

I mean, after all, this is the church that received the letter of Ephesians. Which says in chapter 4 that the shepherds, that the elders are to equip the saints for works of service.

[16:45] To do ministry. That was 30 years before. So it's a pretty safe bet that this church, this flagship church in the region.

They were seeking to be faithful this way. Feeding the poor. Caring for widows. Caring for orphans. Serving one another in need.

Whether that's food, or clothing, or lodging, or transportation. Leading Bible studies. Meeting with younger Christians to establish them in the faith. And they were patiently enduring.

They weren't giving up. They were pressing on. They were working hard. They were also doctrinally astute.

Doctrinally discerning. In verse 2 we read, And how you cannot bear with those who are evil. Who is he talking about? Keep reading. But have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not.

[17:50] And found them to be false. Now what you need to know about Ephesus is that it was the fourth largest city in Rome at the time. It had a population of 225,000 people.

And it was in the mouth of a river. It was the leading port of the area. So you had all sorts of trade and people coming through. It was also the focal point of three trade routes coming in.

And so this was a cosmopolitan city in the first century. You had a lot of people, a lot of thoughts, a lot of ideas coming in and through. You had a lot of people claiming to be apostles coming through. Claiming to be sent by Jesus himself to exercise authority over a church. And that's what was going on here at this time. There were people claiming to be authoritative in what they taught.

And the elders of the Ephesian church at that time, they were meeting those claims.

[18:55] They were inspecting the fruit of these so-called apostles. Were they teaching truth? And did their lives reflect it? And Jesus commends them for concluding that they're not true apostles.

True apostles. This is exactly what the apostle Paul warned the Ephesians of three decades earlier. When he met them in Miletus.

Coming back from his second missionary journey. He says there's going to come a time where fierce wolves seek to ravage this church. Be on guard. They were doctrinally discerning.

They had the spiritual wherewithal and the capable leadership to identify, diagnose, and kind of get out of their church false teaching.

False practice. It's not just that. They were suffering for Jesus. Look at verse 3. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake.

[20:03] And you've not grown weary. This church, they weren't shrinking back. They were stepping up. They weren't hiding out. They were stepping in.

They weren't compromising. They're staying true. And then in verse 6, we learn something else they're commended for.

Now notice that this commendation, verses 2 and 3 and verse 6, they actually surround Jesus' critique and correction of this church. He's a class act.

And to these Nicolaitans, he's talking about a group of false teachers. It may have been connected to these apostles. But in the church of Pergamum, in chapter 2, verses 14 through 15, we learn something about them.

Jesus says they're connected, associated with the teaching of Balaam, who is a prophet from the Old Testament. And who is hired out to consult one of Israel's enemies and to tell them how to defeat Israel.

[21:11] And what Balaam said is, here's how you do it. You cause them to be unfaithful to their God by mixing in with them and causing to be idolatrous and committing sexual immorality.

That's how you move them away. You blend them with everyone around them. So what it seems the Nicolaitans were doing were they're taking some doctrines of the Christian faith and making them permissive of grievous sin in God's sight.

Now, this teaching had taken root in the church in Pergamum. And Jesus has some very specific things to say about that. But because of the doctrinal wherewithal of the church of Ephesus, they've sniffed it out.

They haven't let it take root. And Jesus commends them for it. He commends this church. But at the heart, in the middle of it, is a critique.

A rebuke. I mean, if you're just to look at the Ephesian church on paper. I mean, ministry active.

[22:25] So many people in the church are kind of getting it done for ministry and doctrinally astute and discerning. They're enduring for Jesus.

They hate the immorality of the Nicolaitans. Staying pure. On paper, man, this church looks great. I mean, let's go visit this church if we're going through Ephesus.

There is an internal problem. And the one walking in the midst of the lampstands sees it.

He rebukes them in verse 4. But I have this against you. Could you imagine sitting with Jesus in a coffee shop? And you're having a conversation.

And he says to you, but I have this against you. Could you imagine the Ephesian church hearing this for the first time? But I have this against you.

[23:30] He has one rebuke. And this one rebuke affects everything else. You have abandoned the love you had at first.

The New International Version translates this. You have forsaken your first love. Commentators differ on what this first love is.

Some say that this is the love the Ephesians had for one another at first. One respected commentator says that this is the Ephesians' love for those outside of the church.

But I believe, as other commentators do, that Jesus is talking about himself. You have forsaken me, your first love.

And here are the two reasons why. The book of Revelation is all about Christ. His call to endure hardship for him because of who he is.

[24:40] This book, from beginning to end, is about fidelity to Jesus. That's why we are given such glorious visions of him and then called to endure for him.

The book's about Jesus. Him being foremost in your life. And secondly, in related, it's where this book ends.

And it ends talking about the church in an important way. It talks about the church as the bride of Christ. Revelation 19, the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Revelation 21, two instances of seeing and beholding the new Jerusalem coming down in its glory. And seeing the bride of the Lamb. And when you read back chapters 2 and 3, the vision for the bride of Christ.

You start understanding that this first love language has everything to do with Jesus being the groom. And the church being the bride.

[25:48] But I have this against you. That you have forsaken me. You've forgotten about me.

I'm no longer foremost in your heart. This mature church. Active in ministry. Doctrinally discerning. Morally pure.

Enduring for Jesus' name. They had substituted these things for Jesus himself. So could this first love language be addressing love for other Christians and loving those outside?

Yes. But as outworkings of our first place love for Jesus. We as a church, we're living practically 2,000 years since this letter was first written to this church.

But we have so much in common with the Ephesian church. Many of you in this room are working hard in ministry. You're showing up. You're putting time in. You're wanting to help other people.

[27:03] You're wanting to see this church succeed. You're wanting to see the gospel go out. And we are committed to doctrinal purity here. We are committed to rightly handling God's word and understanding what it teaches.

And then living in the light of what it teaches. We're committed to that. And we're committed to not conforming or compromising with this world's idolatry and immorality.

We're committed to that. Now, what we're in danger of is substituting these good things, even important things, for the one we can't live without.

Jesus. The risen, radiant, and reigning Christ. So Christ the King Church, if there is a burden to this text, you've got to hear Jesus.

I'm your first love. I'm your first love. We are not to substitute good things for best things.

[28:23] Now, you may be wondering, how do I know? How do I know if I've lost Jesus as my first love? I don't know if I've forgotten him or forsaken him.

How do I know? I've got a seven-point diagnostic test for you. You ready? Do you listen to Jesus? Is your ear tuned to his voice? And are you tuned to his voice in order to obey what you hear? That's question number one.

Question number two. Do you talk with Jesus throughout the day? Question number three. Do you make your plans with Jesus in mind? Or is Jesus an afterthought?

Or no thought? Question number four. Do you sing to Jesus? Paul McCartney just released a new album. He wrote that song, Baby, I'm Amazed.

[29:27] Baby, I'm Amazed. Wrote it to his wife. They're divorced now. Not the best illustration. But you get my point. We sing to Jesus.

Because we love him. Fifth, do you introduce others to Jesus? Do you enjoy introducing others to Jesus?

When you meet people, are you thinking, man, how do I get them connected with Jesus? Do you, six, do you love those whom Jesus loves?

Do you love those he's purchased with his blood? Do you love those in whom he came to die for? Seventh, do you long to be with Jesus?

At the end of this book, there's this, come Lord Jesus. I want to be with you. I want to see you. Is that the longing of your heart? The danger we face is replacing Jesus, our first love, with good things.

[30:44] Important things. But compared to Jesus, secondary things. So here is Jesus walking in the midst of his lampstands, saying to this church that has forgotten him, I am here.

And you must love me first. That's the critique.

And then comes the correction. In verse five, we read, 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. What you need to understand about this correction and even the rebuke, this is love.

This is Jesus loving us. He loves us with himself. So this correction starts with a call to remember.

[31:52] For those of us who forget about Jesus, the call is to remember. Keep remembering who Jesus is. Remember from where you have fallen.

It compares this sin to having fallen. And says, get back up. Remember. Remember. Remember who your Jesus is.

Remember he is risen, radiant, and reigning. Remember what he has done for you. That he gave himself for you because he loves you.

I love singing that song earlier. How wonderful is my Savior's love for me.

Remember who your Lord is. Remember him. And his great love for you. And that he's worthy of first place in your heart.

[32:56] So remember. And then there's a call to repent. Repentant.

Repentant is simply a U-turn. You know, you're driving down the street and you're looking for a place and you go buy it. And you're like, oh, I missed it.

What do you got to do? You got to do a U-turn. We're driving through life. We get kind of consumed with where we're at. And we realize, I've just driven by Jesus seven times. Do a U-turn back to him.

Return to him. Confess him. Here's what you may need to do. You may need to confess this. Oh, Lord Jesus, forgive me for making ministry my first love.

Oh, Lord Jesus, forgive me for making doctrinal precision my first love. Oh, Lord Jesus, forgive me for making moral purity my first love.

You alone are worthy of my first love. You got to repent. We all regularly repent of these things because we all tend to drive by Jesus.

[34:03] We all need to do U-turns throughout the day and week. Remember, repent, redo. Do the works you did at first.

Listen to Jesus speak. Tune your ear to his word. Talk to Jesus throughout the day.

Make plans with Jesus in mind. Sing to Jesus and sing loud with joy in light of who he is and what he's done. Introduce others to Jesus and love those whom Jesus loves.

Long to see him. Lord Jesus, make me long to see you. These are the means of placing Jesus first and keeping him first in your heart.

Who in the room right now? Who in the room right now must repent of forsaking Jesus as your first love? If you know it's you, all you need to do, remember who he is.

[35:19] Just repent of making something else your first love and redo. Start afresh. There's this sober warning attached to this.

That Jesus will come and remove this church from its place if it does not repent. If it does not make Jesus their first love.

He's going to come and remove them. If you lose Jesus as your first love, it's just a matter of time before you cease being a church.

If we lose Jesus as our first love, it's just a matter of time before this building get used for some real cool coffee house.

There are all sorts of shells of buildings around our nation. Of churches that have died because they've lost Jesus as their first love.

[36:28] It's Jesus purifying his church. It's a loving correction. Jesus loves you.

He knows what's best for you is if he's your first love. This loving correction is followed by a closing call.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. That is repeated throughout all seven letters. To the one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

In other words, what you've just heard Jesus say, take to heart. It's not just for this church.

It's for the church of Christ of all time in every place. Including our church. So you need to take this rebuke to heart.

[37:35] Are you loving Jesus first? And then secondly, Jesus says, take this to heart.

And then he says, set your heart on this. And he paints a picture for us. To the one who conquers. To the one who overcomes. To the one who keeps Jesus' first love in their heart.

To that one I will grant to eat of the tree of life. Which is in the paradise of God. Now when you hear tree of life, you're thinking Genesis 2, aren't you? Tree of life in the paradise of God.

The garden. Where it all started. Adam and Eve blew it. They got kicked out. And God prevented them from accessing the tree of life. But that all changes now. Because in Christ, we have access to the tree of life again.

It's coming. For those who conquer. Who overcome. Who keep Jesus as their first love. We are promised to eat of the tree of life.

[38:45] And it points us to Revelation chapter 22, 1 and 2. It's a picture of the new Jerusalem. And in the middle of the new Jerusalem is a river flowing. And over that river is the tree of life.

Bearing fruit monthly. For us to eat together in the presence of God. It's a picture of eternity. In the presence of God. In his place. With his people.

It should make your heart rise. Yes. I can't wait to eat of that fruit. In that place. With God's people. This morning. We looked at the first letter. This letter to the church of Ephesus. And Jesus ends it with.

The risen, radiant, and reigning Lord Jesus. Not only rebuking us. But reminding us of what's to come.

[39:50] Our first love is in our midst. And we may not see him right now. But he's here. And there's coming a day.

When we will be in his presence. Eating from the tree of life. So this morning's call is this. Christ the King Church.

Love Jesus. With all you got. He is worthy.

And he is to be first. Now. And always. Let's pray. Lord Jesus.

We are your church. You have purchased us with your blood. And your blood covers. Even our abandoning of you. Our forsaking of you.

[40:53] Our forgetting of you. You paid for those. At the cross. Because you love us. Lord Jesus. We would ask for you to do a work.

In our midst. That you would be. Our first love. Individually. And corporately. That Lord Jesus. Our ears would be tuned. To your words. That we would talk to you. Throughout the day. That Lord. We would plan with you in mind.

That we would sing to you. With all of our hearts. All these things Lord. All these things. Introducing others to you. Loving those whom you love.

Longing to see you. God would you make these real. In our individual lives. That you would be foremost. For the glory of your name.

[41:54] Amen.