

Ephesus: Labor without Love

Revelation 2: 1-7

Today I want to begin a series in which we will examine the letters to seven individual churches that Jesus gave to John in the Revelation. As we move through these letters in the coming weeks, bear in mind, these were written to literal, active churches who were gathering for worship in John's day. One other bit of information that will be helpful for each is an understanding of the seven stars and seven candlesticks. **Rev.1:20 – The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels (literally messengers) of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.**

The first church we will consider is the church at Ephesus. It was likely mentioned first due to its prominence within Asia Minor. The residence for the Roman proconsul was in Ephesus, as well as the Temple to Artemis, which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It is believed that Ephesus had a population of over 250,000 residents. It was a seaport city, boasting great diversity in commerce, religion, and culture. Emperor worship was also prevalent in Ephesus. *A temple to Emperor Domitian (likely the emperor when Revelation was written) was constructed in AD 89/90, featuring a giant statue of an emperor (either Domitian or Titus) that stood over twenty-five feet tall. The Christians of Ephesus faced enormous social and financial pressure to participate in the worship of the emperor. The city was also a center for occult and magical practices...The worship of at least fourteen other deities has been documented in the city. Ephesus was certainly a center of paganism in the first-century world. This explains why Jesus commends the believers in Ephesus for standing strong for the truth of the faith and resisting the false teachers. In addition, Ephesus had a large Jewish population, which may have led to racial and religious tensions even within the church. This could have played a role in Jesus's strong exhortation to return to love as a priority.¹*

Speaking to Ephesus, Jesus commended the church for contending for the faith, but challenged them to do so out of love. As we discuss the **admonitions** to the church, I want to consider: **Ephesus – Labor without Love.**

I. The Witness of the Church (1-3) – Jesus begins with words of encouragement for them due to their witness among the world. Even though they were opposed, they carried on for the Lord. He recognized that they were:

A. A Submissive Church (2a) – **I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil.** Jesus spoke of their: **1) Works** – that which they had accomplished for the glory of God. He had seen their works. **2) Labor** – literally toiling to the

point of exhaustion. Their labor was fervent for the Lord. They served at every opportunity. This isn't the twice a year or Sunday morning only crowd. **3) Patience** – they were undeterred by the opposition. Their focus was on serving the Lord whatever the cost.

- We need to be a submissive church – one that is diligent and fervent in the Lord's work, even in the face of adversity. Our service must be more than once a week.

B. A Separated Church (2b, 6) – *and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: [6] But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate.* The church could not bear them which were evil. They had tried the doctrine of the false teachers and rejected them. They lived among a sinful society, but refused to be tainted by their filth. Thank God for churches who refuse to conform to the ways of the world!

- They also hated the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, v.6. These are thought to be a sect that taught man's actions didn't affect his spiritual condition, a "do as you please" doctrine. The name literally means "*victorious over the people.*" It is thought they developed a "priestly order" or hierarchy among the church to control the people. The church at Ephesus wasn't deceived by their false doctrine and remained true to God.
- The Nicolaitanes had a powerful influence. Their deeds at Ephesus, v.6, became doctrine in Pergamos, v.15, *So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate.* It is important that we remain separated from the world. What we ignore today will be accepted tomorrow. We must stand for the sake of our Lord and our children. Everything we do must be founded on the Word of God. A separated church won't be a popular church, but it will be a powerful church!

C. A Steadfast Church (3) – *And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.* Even though the work was difficult and opposition was strong, they remained steadfast and didn't faint. They refused to be defeated, being fully committed to the Lord and the work they had been called to perform.

- We enjoy the faithful labor of those who came before us, establishing a firm foundation upon which to continue building, but we must not take that for granted! Let us continue to remain steadfast in our work for the Lord so future generations can worship in truth. How does the community view this local body and our efforts for the Lord? What does the Lord think about our service and commitment to Him?

II. The Weakness of the Church (4) – *Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.* Jesus applauded their witness and now He addresses their weakness. *They had left their first love.* They had left their priority love, not the first in order, but first in rank! There was a time when their love for Jesus was vibrant and consuming, but they had lost the zeal of their love. No doubt they still loved Jesus, but the deep, passionate love for Him was gone. Outwardly they were busy and steadfast, but inwardly they were cold and indifferent.

- How tragic for a child of God to grow cold toward the Lord. Our activities and works may please the Lord, but a loving heart is what He really desires. Do you remember the day you were saved, the love that abounded in your heart? You loved to read the Word, come to church, and pray. You were thrilled to be a new born Christian. Sadly, our love tends to fade with time. The zeal we had is no longer there. Do we attend out of love or habit? Do we serve out of devotion or obligation? Oh, how we need to regain our first love! If you aren't as excited and devoted as before, you've lost your first love.

III. The Warning to the Church (5-7) – Jesus has spoken of their witness and weakness and now He offers a warning to heed. Notice:

A. Jesus Spoke of Remembrance (5a) – *Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen.*

Jesus reminds them of the day that His joy abounded in their hearts; when His light beamed from their lives. This was a time when they walked close and shared an intimate fellowship with Him. Now that light had faded; they no longer stood where they once did. The flame had faded into a dying ember.

- We need to remember what Jesus has done for us and have His light rekindled in our hearts. We need to remember the love we once had and seek to regain our passion, allowing Jesus priority in our lives.

B. Jesus Spoke of Repentance (5a) – *Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works.* A genuine remembrance of our former relationship ought to bring about repentance. This is literally an urgent appeal for an immediate change of attitude and conduct before it's too late. Jesus commanded they repent for their lack of love for Him!

- Repentance has fallen by the wayside in the modern church. Hearts have grown so cold that many no longer see a need for real repentance. Altars that were once filled with the tears of those desiring a closer walk with God are now empty. Few ever come and bow before a holy

God in an attitude of repentance. Sin doesn't just go away; it must be dealt with. Repentance is the only way!

C. Jesus Spoke of Renewal (5) – Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works. We are told to do the “first works”. It is time to do the things we used to do for the Lord before our love for Christ faded and we became complacent. Do you wonder why many churches have grown stagnant and attendance has declined? Many are no longer doing the first works, the priorities, those things pleasing to God.

- Genuine commitment is no longer a priority for God's people. We can serve or stay at home; it doesn't matter either way. We can go for days without prayer, Bible study, or even mentioning the Lord. The first works are key to revival and renewal among the body of Christ. When Jesus is the priority, He will manifest Himself in our midst. We will then experience His power among us again. It is time we return to doing the first works, those works that are compelled by love and devotion for Christ!

D. Jesus Spoke of Removing (5) – or else I will come quickly, and remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. Jesus gives a solemn warning to the church, including our congregation. He says we must **remember, repent, and return** or else He will **remove** our candlestick.

- The church at Ephesus failed to heed the warning and He removed their light. Unfortunately, many churches have lost their light for Jesus. They are still meeting, but there is no power, no conviction, no joy, or praise. They have a form of religion and that is all. We have a wonderful privilege to shine in this dark world. We must heed the voice of God if our light is to remain. I certainly don't want to be responsible for our light being removed.

E. Jesus Spoke of Redemption (7) – He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God. His words were not received by all. Only those who have an ear for the spiritual things of God can discern His will. Many in our day have an ear, but they don't have an ear to hear from the Lord.

- Sadly, all who are in our churches are not saved. We must **overcome** to partake of the tree of life in the paradise of God. We cannot overcome the sin and weakness of the flesh apart from the Lord. Our faith must be founded in the Lord Jesus Christ. Many will be deceived

and led away by false doctrine, but the pure in heart will receive the eternal reward. Ultimately our salvation is of utmost importance. We must have that settled above all else!

Conclusion: The church at Ephesus had good intentions. They were diligent in their labor, but their love had grown cold. Where is our love today; who or what is our priority? Do we love Jesus as we should; is He our first love? A busy life doesn't always mean a right relationship.

I fear that we too have been guilty of labor without love. I want our light to shine brightly for the Lord. If you're not as close to the Lord as you once were, why not come and rededicate your life to Him. If you are yet unsaved, come to Him in repentance and faith unto salvation.

ⁱ Duvall, J. S. (2014). [Revelation](#). (M. L. Strauss & J. H. Walton, Eds.) (p. 41). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.