

We are in the midst of a study of one of the most precious passages in all of Scripture for a local church – the personal letters from the risen Christ to His individual, local churches.

Structure of the Letters

Jesus follows the same pattern in all 7 letters. Each letter begins with a commission to write and ends with a call to listen (**He who has ears to hear...**)

The body of each letter has 4 parts:

- The **these are the words** section -
- The **I know** section (commendations, rebukes and comforts) -
- The imperative section (commands), -
- The **to him who overcomes** section –

IDENTIFICATION
EVALUATION
EXHORTATION
MOTIVATION

You may read these letters and wonder why the Lord praises the things He praises, and leaves other things out. He doesn't mention a lot of the things we would think to be very important: Nothing is said, for example, about church unity, evangelism, elders, deacons, ministry to widows, helping the poor or spiritual gifts. It's not that those things are unimportant. They are emphasized heavily elsewhere in Scripture. But the point here is that Christ is concerned specifically with evaluating His Church in light of what is coming in ch.4-22.

The way you view the rest of the book of Revelation depends upon which shoe fits in ch.2-3. If you find more than anything the warnings apply to you, the rest of the book will come as a fearful, frightening threat – and a call to repentance. If you find all the commendations applying to you, your heart will be filled with hope and anticipation in the rest of the book.

And those of us in the middle, who identify with many of the rebukes as well as many of the commendations, we will read the rest of the book with both a healthy concern and motivation to repent, and a hopeful expectation of final victory and the full exaltation of Christ.

Also, remember that these letters are intended to be received corporately as well as personally. They speak of the condition of the churches in general, but churches are made up of individuals. If a church lacks discernment, for example, it's because the individual members lack discernment. So everything in these letters becomes intensely personal and individual. Notice the singular pronouns at the end of each letter **“HE who has an ear, let HIM hear.”**

Jesus' first letter is addressed to the assembly at Ephesus.

These are the words...

Each letter starts out with this phrase. This is the exact phrase used over 300 times in the OT that you know as the famous, “Thus says the LORD” claim to divine authorship. (Actually, a better translation would be “Thus says Yahweh.”) So Jesus begins each letter with that same phrase, but in place of “Yahweh” He puts something from the vision in ch.1 (which was a vision of Him as Yahweh). Each letter starts out with a reminder of the vision of the exalted Christ. In order for these letters to have the proper impact, the reader must have that vision in mind.

Thus saith him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands:

There is a reason why He picks the elements of the vision that He picks for each church. Holding the 7 stars showed His sovereign control, and His presence among the lampstands showed His work tending to them and making them fit for service in the Holy place. Here both elements are accentuated even more. Instead of just having (ἔχων) the stars in His hand, here it says He's the one who *grasps* (κρατῶν) the stars (same word as in Php.2 – He did not think of equality with God as a thing to be grasped).

And instead of just being among the lampstands, His movement is emphasized – He is walking around among them. His constant vigil among the local assemblies is an active one. So at the outset of this letter the Ephesians are reminded that the Speaker is the one who is tenaciously sovereign over the fate of the churches, and who is actively moving among them to make them fit for service. That's significant given the threat of the possibility of their lampstand being removed.

I know...

2 I know your deeds

It's a sobering thought.

No one else can really say that. We are so good at marketing ourselves to each other, we can fool each other, and we can fool the world, and we can even fool ourselves.

For that reason it's very difficult for us to make an accurate assessment of ourselves as a church.

But Christ begins by reminding us that He – the one with all knowledge and the penetrating eyes like flames of fire, He knows the exact story about our deeds.

It's an intensive perfect (translated like a present, because the continuing aspect is emphasized, but also implying knowing all along).

Their Effort

your hard work and your perseverance

Their Purity

I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.

6 you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Their Perseverance

3 You have perseverance and have tolerated hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

And they did it all with the right motive – for Christ's name.

The Rebuke

4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

They had a problem in the area of love.

Every virtue has within it the seed of its own destruction (Mounce). People with a zeal for the purity of the church and a holy hatred for evil men and an intolerance for error are often easily tempted to be unloving.

There is some discussion about whether this is love for God or people. I think in a context like this it would be wrong to try to divide the two. It's just Christian love, which loves your brother as yourself out of the motive of love for Christ. Love for your brother without love for God would be meaningless, and there is no love for God without love for people. So they have to both be in view.

Jesus asked Peter three times "Do you love Me?" and each time, when Peter said "yes" He said, "then feed My sheep." Peter's calling was to teach, and so that was the ultimate expression of love for Christ. And that's always the greatest expression of love – the use of spiritual gifts (because spiritual gifts are the conduit of God's grace).

1 Peter 4:10 Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

The gifts are the way we love each other supernaturally. That's why 1 Co.13 comes right in the middle of 12 and 14, which are all about gifts. So most likely in Ephesus they were experiencing a failure on the part of the people to use their gifts to serve one another.

This is exactly the kind of thing Jesus warned us about when He spoke about the end times.

Mt.24:10-13 At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, 11 and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. 12 Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, 13 but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Persecution often has a purifying effect, but not every result of persecution is good. Suffering can lead to people getting on each other's nerves. The suffering of the Tribulation will result in the love of most growing cold, and we will betray each other and hate each other and many will end up turning away.

First love

What is the significance of the word first? The way this phrase came out of Christ's mouth in Greek emphasizes the idea of first more than love. And that becomes apparent when we see the remedy. Christ doesn't tell them to repent and return to their first love. He doesn't say anything about love. He tells them to repent and do their first deeds. So first love is the same things as first deeds. The point is to emphasize their former condition – their whole Christian life, whether it's summarized by their love or by their deeds.

The point is that they were the opposite of the church in Thyatira:

Rev.2:19 I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that your last deeds surpass your first.

This word first usually means first in order or "primary" or "chief," but in some contexts it can simply mean "prior." (Heb.9:1). That's what it means here.

The word forsaken is a fascinating word. It's *aphiami*, and it's the normal NT word for "forgive." It is also translated "divorce" (1 Co.7:13) or "abandon" (Ro.1:27) or "leave" (Acts 14:17). It's also very often translated "permit" or "allow." At it's root the most basic meaning of *aphiami* is "to let go." That's why it can mean "to forgive" or "to divorce." So the idea is that they have released their grip on the love they formerly had. They stopped clinging to it – and just...let go. If we want the fullest picture of what went wrong in Ephesus, we shouldn't limit ourselves to this one phrase. The Lord states their problem in three ways:

1. They let go of their former love.
2. They fell from a higher point.

3. They ceased doing their former works.

We get puzzled at why there is such a drastic warning given to this church, because it doesn't seem like they had fallen very far. But the issue with Jesus is not how far down they have fallen. It's *that* they were falling. He doesn't make a point about how much they had declined, just that they had declined, and if they didn't repent, would fall all the way.

The road to apostasy takes several forms. How does a person backslide away from God? There is one sense in which it is a letting go. You just stop hanging on to Christian love and let go. There is another sense in which it is falling. You become passive and allow gravity to act on you. You just allow the pull of the world, the flesh and the devil to act on you without resistance.

But it's not only internal. It is always accompanied by a failure to do the kinds of works that accompany a deep love for God and others. We don't know what they were like when they started, or how much progress they have made, but Christ was pleased that they were making progress. MacArthur: "God is not so much concerned with the perfection of your life as much as the direction of your life." Far more important than your location on the journey is your speed and direction. It's not important how well you know Scripture others. What matters is how well you know it compared to last year. It's of no consequence how passionately and genuinely and fervently you pray in comparison to others. It matters what your prayer life is like compared to 6 months ago. It's a non-issue how your level of faith and devotion compares to the person next to you – but it's a big issue how it compares to that person you saw in the mirror several weeks ago.

I really think we are missing the point when we read about the Ephesians and talk about "the church of loveless orthodoxy." As if Christ would praise them for that! If they had no love at all, all those other works would be worthless, and a matter for condemnation, not praise from Christ. There is no way you can say those people had no love for God given the way Christ commends them. They loved Him, and no doubt loved one another. The problem was that love was on the decline. It was cooling rather than heating up. It was at a lower level in 95 AD than it was in 60 AD. And all Christ is doing is extrapolating that out... That's important, because we tend to fail to do that. When we are tempted to sin, or when we simply drift from God, we always assume "It's OK – I'll get back on track sooner or later."

That's the wrong way of looking at it. When you get going the wrong direction, the only way to be restored is to turn around. And the longer you go in that direction, the more difficult it will be to turn around. And Heb.6 says there comes a time when it's impossible to turn around. Jesus is simply pointing out to these people what is at the end of the road they are on. There is no stagnant Christian. The Christian who is not progressing and growing is declining and must either repent or end in disaster.

The Command

Jesus tells them to do three things to recover:

5 Remember the height from which you have fallen!

Remember is a progressive tense, and repent is in the aorist tense, so the idea is to spend some time remembering, and then make a decisive break and make the turnaround. The word **fallen** is a perfect tense, which has a chilling finality to it. It points to an action that was completed in the past, and that has continuing results. He speaks of it like an event: "You fell." That's the value of remembering. When we drift from God, and gradually cool, the process is often so slow and so subtle that we don't even notice.

But if we spend some time thinking back – remembering what things used to be like, that slow, imperceptible process can be seen as a decisive event – "I fell. I was way up there; now I'm way down here – I might as well have just taken a free fall."

It's always good to do this – think back to times when you were especially obedient – weren't those the best times of your life? And aren't the times of disobedience the most miserable? Why do we fall for the lie over and over and over that disobedience will make us happy? It's because we forget.

Repent

Restoration requires a decisive break. It's one thing to repent of an affair, or to repent of a grudge, or some sin that is real overt and at some moment in time you simply stop doing it and cut your ties to it. But how do you make a sudden, decisive break with apathy? How do you turn 180 degrees from coolness in your love?

The only way to do that is to suddenly become zealous in your love. Jesus doesn't tell them to start inching their way back toward Christian love. He wants a decisive, pervasive, whole –life turnaround in the area of love.

and do the things you did at first.

Moffatt: "The way to regain this warmth of affection is neither by working up spasmodic emotion nor by theorizing about it...but by doing its duties." (Mounce)

To stay on track: maintain your spiritual health on three fronts:

1. Tenaciously hold on to your love for God expressed through love for others. **GUARD YOUR HEART!**
2. Fight the gravitational pull of sin. Don't just become acted upon. Actively, aggressively pursue God.

A genuine relationship with God doesn't happen by default just because you go to church and play the Christian game. God said "you will find Me when you seek after Me with all your heart."

GUARD YOUR WILL!

3. Do the kinds of works that accompany love for God and others. Resist laziness, and guard not only your heart but your deeds.

GUARD YOUR LIFE!

If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

I will come

Lit: "I am coming." (I'm on my way)

If this does not refer to the Second Coming, it's hard to see how this relates to the rest of the Book. 2:26 and 3:11 refer to the Second Coming.

As we found last week, the Menorah represented the people of God. If you are no longer a Menorah, you are no longer the people of God. If you're not a lampstand, you're not a church, and so you're not the people of God.

Ephesus was on the road to apostasy!

To avoid this fate all He requires is repentance. They don't have to repair all the damage they have done. Just repent.

What can we do?

This has been an unnerving and frightening letter to study. If you take the commendation seriously, it's hard to fathom how this rebuke could be a problem.

It's frightening, because it shows that even the best church can decline. And it's frightening because Jesus looked at that decline and didn't do what we often do when someone is drifting from the Lord: just shrug it off and say, "He'll snap out of it."

I was lying in bed Thursday morning just contemplating this – what can we do as a church to avoid this horrible fate?

What can a church do to keep itself from ever drifting as a church?

My first thought was that drifting away from the Lord happens to a church only if it happens to a lot of individuals within that church. So how do we avoid that?

Maybe we should begin to take spiritual lapses a little more seriously. I don't mean becoming judgmental and condemning or legalistic with each other. We need to always be ready to instantly forgive sin when someone repents – just like God.

But maybe we would do well to simply take spiritual struggles more seriously.

If we are at Bible study or Sunday night prayer and someone says, "Lately my prayer life hasn't been too great" or "I can't seem to spend any time in the Word lately" our reaction is usually very mild – we hardly notice.

"Dear Lord, please help George to have a better prayer life" and that's the end of it.

Meanwhile, someone develops a life-threatening disease and everyone in the meeting fervently prays, and we pray about all through the week, and people are visiting the person in the hospital and recruiting everyone they know to pray...

And if the person couldn't afford medical treatment someone would pay for it...

And the next person says, "My spiritual life is going down the tubes" and it's a big "ho-hum."

Maybe the way to avoid the fate of the Ephesian church is for us to be a little more animated in helping each other not to cool off spiritually.

If someone has been spiritually strong in the past but begins to decline we always just assume, "She'll snap out of it sooner or later." Or maybe some people think, "I guess he wasn't so spiritual after all."

But neither one of those reactions help anything. We need to mobilize ourselves into action. If someone was strong and is on the decline that's alarming! It's an emergency! It's a prayer alert! They need our help!

Gal.6:1-2

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.

Be gentle. Be loving about it. But don't be so gentle that you don't even do anything to restore him!

But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. 2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

If it's something you tend to struggle with, be careful that you don't fall into the same sin. If it's something you don't struggle with, be careful that you don't fall into the sin of pride.

Jude 22-23

Be merciful to those who doubt; 23 snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear-hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

I don't know how you have applied that verse in the past. Maybe you picture a scenario where someone is in some bizarre cult, and we have to go in and try to rescue him out of that fire.

But maybe we should adjust our thinking on that a little. Maybe the fire that threatens to consume the person is just a lack of spiritual progress over the last year, or a cooling off of zeal for the Lord, or a drifting away from fellowship.

If we wait until he goes off and joins a false religion somewhere, that may be like standing there watching the stick burn in the fire, and then trying to snatch out a coal. The picture of Jude 23 is that the stick just fell in, and you have to instantly grab it back out before it begins to burn.

6 But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.
The Lord circles right back and praises them again.

Listen!

7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

churches.

Each letter applies to all churches. So this applies to anyone anywhere anytime who has an ear to hear.

The symbolic language of Rev. has the same effect as the parables – it weeds out those who do not have ears to hear.

What determines whether you have ears to hear? How can you see to it that you are one of those special people who are able to understand the Lord's words?

The answer is in Lk.8:8,9. There Jesus had just told a parable that would be absolutely impossible for anyone to figure out. Then He says, **He who has ears to hear, let him hear.**

And the ones who end up getting the explanation of what it means are the disciples. They end up being the ones who have ears that can hear.

So what set them apart?

What made them special?

What enabled them to be the kind of people who have ears to hear the message and who are giving the privilege of being able to understand the message?

The answer eluded me for the longest time until a couple weeks ago I noticed it right in front of my face there in v.9.

8 When he said this, he called out, He who has ears to hear, let him hear. 9 His disciples asked him what this parable meant.

That's pretty profound, isn't it?

The enlightened ones, the ones who have access to the transcendent knowledge and sacred wisdom from on high – who are they? They are the ones who say, “What does that mean?”

The ones with ears to hear are the ones who are interested enough to pursue the answer when it's veiled. That's why God veils so much of His truth and puts it in parables or apocalyptic form – to weed out those who don't even have enough interest to pursue the meaning.

People who don't have ears to hear are people who are not interested in God's Word, because they are not interested in God.

And they are not interested in God, because they are devoted to another god – a false god (such as self, or money, or pleasure, or science...).

Idols lack the capacity of perception (they can't hear), and those who worship them become like them.

Ps 115:3-8 3 Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. 4 But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. 5 They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; 6 they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; 7 they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. 8 Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

In every letter the Lord ends by promising salvation to the overcomers. That is intended by Christ to serve as a motivation – each time some wonderful aspect of salvation is highlighted.

But instead of serving as a motivation to persevere, these statements have gone largely ignored in many cases.

If this is to give us incentive and motivate us to be overcomers, we need to ask, “What is an overcomer?”

The reader doesn't know at this point in the book. That's a point of suspense. But as we read on, we find out.

All the reader knows at this point is that something is looming that is going to have to be overcome, and Christ is very concerned that we overcome it.

So all these promises of salvation are actually a bit ominous.

As we begin to read on through the book, we find a cosmic war. Satan and the forces of evil unleash their fury against God's people.

At a physical level, it is the beast who has the power to overcome the saints

13:7 He was given power to make war against the saints and to overcome them.

But ultimately it is the saints who overcome. In ch.12 Satan is thrown down from heaven in defeat, and in v.11 we see who defeated him:

10 "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.

11 They overcame him (the brothers overcame Satan) by the blood of the Lamb

and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

They were committed to Christ to the point of death, and were therefore able to overcome Satan.

So it's ironic – those who overcome Satan may be killed by Satan.

“In what sense is that overcoming? What kind of victory is that?”

Remember Jesus' words - Matt 24:10 **At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, 11 and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. 12 Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, 13 but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.**

An overcomer is someone who defeats Satan and gains victory by remaining faithful until death.

At the end of the book when the New breathtaking New Jerusalem is unveiled, Jesus, kind of like an old father showing his estate to his son and saying, “Someday all this will be yours,” says to us, **He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son (21:7)**

Revelation is all about overcoming – entering the New Jerusalem by being an overcomer.

And an overcomer is simply someone who is committed to the point of death.

Not everyone who considers himself a born again Christian is going to be an overcomer. Those who have taken up Christianity like a hobby – added church to their lives like taking up tennis or something...

People who are cultural Christians, who like being around the Christian culture and go along with it at a superficial level, those who will be committed to Christ within reason – up to a point...

None of them will be overcomers.

They are the soil in Luke 8:13 that hears the Gospel, receives it with joy. They believe for a while, but when testing and persecution come, they fall away.

To him who overcomes (and to him alone – Thomas), I will give the right to eat from the tree of life

Christ will restore what Adam lost.

Gn.3:22-24

He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." 23 So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. 24 After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Rev 22:1-20 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be any curse.

14 "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. 15 Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

19 And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. 20 He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Well, what happened to this church?

Twenty years after this Ignatius wrote his first and longest letter to this church, and it was full of unqualified praise for the "Deservedly happy church."

The church became known for its deeds and harmonious love, and for living in blameless unity and good discipline under their pastor Onesimus, who was known as "the man of inexpressible love." (Caird p.30)

Benediction: Heb.6:12 We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. Heb 13:7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. 8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.