

Revelation 2:1-7

2 *“To the angel of the church of Ephesus write,*

‘These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: ² “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; ³ and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary. ⁴ Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. ⁶ But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

⁷ “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.” ’

Today brings us to the instruction that are given to each of the seven churches. There is a general format to each of the letters that we need to familiarize ourselves with and I have included an insert in the bulletin today to help us see each of these churches and what it is they are praised for and where it is they need to improve. In each case, whether or not the Church was ultimately praised, or ultimately condemned, there is a promise made and that promise is to those who overcome. In every church, and in every situation there are always trials to overcome. As believers we are not always in charge of our situations, however, we are always called to overcome.

As we begin to look at the Churches I want us to recognize that each of the churches is addressed according to a similar pattern. As each church is addressed we see a greeting or salutation and in each case there is given a description of the one who is greeting them, Christ. After the greeting the church is praised or commended for the things that they are doing right. After their commendation they are then condemned and warned about their practices that are contrary to the Word of God, and then there is given a statement of blessing or reward to the overcomers.

The first thing we see in the address to Ephesus, just like every other church in this account is how the Lord is described:

‘These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:

The object here seems to be to turn the attention of the church in Ephesus to some attribute of the Saviour which deserved their special regard, or which constituted a special reason for attending to what he said. To do this, the attention is directed, in this case, to the fact that he held the seven stars which are emblematic of the ministers of the churches in his hand. I know we have talked about the idea that the churches are on His hand verses being in His hand. The difference in meaning comes down to the authority that has been given to the pastors or leaders in these churches. The idea that they are on specifically His right hand, which is emblematic of the power and authority of God. In Matthew 18 the disciples were arguing amongst themselves who the greatest among them was and rather than settle their dispute, Jesus instead gave that very famous declaration of authority to the church by saying: ¹⁸ *“Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*

This authority is not given to them based on who they were, but it was given to them by Jesus Christ because of who He was. This gives a deeper meaning to the stars being on His right hand.

The angel of the Church is a messenger carrying forth the Word of the Lord.

Jesus is presented as walking amongst the lampstands, which represent the churches themselves. Jesus, as the light of the world is the source of light intimating that they were dependent on him, that he had power to continue or remove the ministry, and that it was by his presence only that those lamp-bearers would continue to give light. There is the additional idea of his “walking” in the midst of them, implying perhaps constant and vigilant supervision. He went from one to another, as one who inspects and surveys what is under his care; perhaps also with the idea that he went among them as a friend to bless them. This also implies that the absolute control over the churches and the ministry belongs to Jesus. It is the fact that he walked amidst the churches, and that his presence was necessary to their perpetuity and their welfare, where we also see Him involved in who are His representatives in the Church.

The significance of the warning in the following verses is underscored by the idea that the punishment threatened against Ephesus, and we see this in other churches as well, that if they disobey, “that Jesus would remove the candlestick representing their church out of its place.” I see this as very interesting, the churches which do not overcome have their lampstand removed. Obviously, this is a bad thing to have their lampstand removed, but one of the questions we need to ask is what does it mean? To be removed does not necessarily mean that they cease to exist. Perhaps the lampstand would remain and yet being removed they would cease to produce light. There are many “churches” who have long been removed from the source of light and yet they still exist.

Of the seven churches in the Book of Revelation, Ephesus is the only one where we also have an epistle written to that church. Because of that, we have inspired details about the Church at Ephesus. The Epistle to the Ephesians was probably written in 58 AD. At the time of that letter the Ephesus Church was very young, having only been established a few years earlier by the Apostle Paul. As I have said in the past, I believe the Book of Revelation to have been written sometime before A.D. 70, most likely between the years 64 and 66. That being the case, that means the Ephesian Church is still fairly young at the time of the writing of the Book of Revelation.

The church in the early verses of our text is praised because of their stand for orthodoxy, Specifically they are praised for , and I quote, *“your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; ³ and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary.*

They were a church that without any doubt was active. They had many works, there was a lot of labor going on and they were standing against evil. One author put it this way, “They understood the antithesis.” They knew they were in a war and they knew there were enemies to fight. This church was. it seems, properly orthodox. They did not tolerate evil. We would think such a thing would be obvious in a church, and yet as we continue through these letters we are going to see churches condemned because of their toleration. Ephesus had this right. They were even known for testing those who claimed to be apostles and were not.

Since one of the marks of a true church has always been the presence of church discipline, I should mention that the church of Ephesus was straight on church discipline as well. Paul had

warned the church in Acts 20 that savage wolves and false teachers would come into the church, and that they needed to watch out. And the Ephesians took that warning to heart.

The word "tested" as used in the text here is speaking as though it is a court trial. They were examined, investigated, tried, and treated as false apostles. Their credentials were yanked. And the whole church was warned not to take in these false apostles. So you can see that on many levels the church of Ephesus was an outstanding church.

But there was also a big problem in Ephesus, the way it is worded in the text is in the form of a nevertheless. In spite of all that was going on, in spite of their willingness to stand against evil and against ungodliness we read, *“nevertheless I have this against you, you have left your first love.”*

There are numerous discussions about what this means, but in general I see this as pretty clear. I speak of this as a case of “spiritual drift.” By drift I mean that this church knew the truth, they knew what was required of them, and yet over time, and I want us to see that it was not a whole lot of time their original affections began to waver. Whether than focusing on God and loving God they began to be focused on *their* mission. Notice, the Mission of God is never separate from the person of God, but the focus of this church started to be about *their* mission.

Phillip Kayser describes it this way: Doing the right things, with the right ministry, methods, and mechanics without love is like having a furnace whose fan is still blowing, but the flame has gone out. Does this letter to Ephesus describe you? Were you once passionate about the Lord, but are now simply slogging on? Did you once have devotions that set your heart on fire, but now find it difficult to do much more than read a Scripture and say a two minute prayer? When was the last time that you were so struck with the awesomeness of God that you wanted to fall on your knees

and worship? When was the last time that you were so excited about the Lord that you wanted to share your faith with others?

And don't despair if this has happened to you. I'm not trying to beat up on you. It's easy for any of us to lose our first love. Like the drifting lady in her inflatable mattress, we think everything is fine with us. We don't notice that we are drifting. The Puritans list all kinds of things that can make us drift. It may start with skipping devotions because of busyness, and over time we get used to giving short shrift to our time alone with Lord. It may be a sin that we have neglected to confess, and over time that sin doesn't seem like that big a deal any more. Maybe in years past you would have shrunk in horror from an image on the computer screen, but over time you became conditioned to not think those images are such a big deal - after all, you rationalize, everybody else sees the same things and our God is a God of grace. For some, the drift may start with hardships that make you discouraged, and you have prayed, yet God doesn't seem to be answering your prayers, and discouragement turns to cynicism, and before you know it you are doubting that God acts at all in your life. Your faith has waned almost to the point of non-existence. Or your scenario may be different from what I have described, but you still know deep down that you have drifted from where you want to be in your relationship with God. Just recognizing that you have drifted is a good first step.

The warning given by Jesus in verse 5 is severe and abrupt ⁵ *Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.* One of the things that many of us miss is that part of repenting is remembering. Remember from where you have fallen. When our love has grown cold, let us use a physical example, we know it. When you get cold it is obvious, and we want to

go back to when it was warm. We are told to remember from where we have fallen. We are then told to repent and do the first works.

I remember teaching my children what the word repent meant when they were very young. I taught them that to repent means to turn around and to go the other way. It speaks of a situation where things are not good and you are called to change directions. Many have classified repentance as saying you are sorry. But true repentance is confession of sin to all who have been wronged, and a turning around in both your thinking and your actions. Repentance involves your emotions as well. There must be a very conscious about-face in mind, will, and emotions. Here we see the Ephesians who have so many things right, and yet their love has grown cold. They are told that they can have this back, but it requires them to repent and begin to do the first works.

What are the first works? Well generally the first works are the elementary works or some would call them the rudiments. Often there are people who have been in the faith for years, and they have been there for so long that they do not even realize that their love has grown cold. They see a new Christian or a young Christian who is excited about Jesus and what Jesus is doing or what Jesus has done and rather than be excited about it their reaction is along the line of, "well of course we all know those things", or a mockery of their excitement.

Think of it in terms of our marriages. When we first began to love our spouse we were excited to talk to them on the phone, we were excited to hear their voice. We worked to woo them. But perhaps now that love has grown cold. When it speaks of doing the first works it is speaking of these very basic things that used to bring us joy. It involves seeking God's will, it involves prayer and Bible reading and it involves for lack of a better phrase, "truly loving Jesus."

I was speaking to my Uncle who grew up in the church and knew His Bible and was once very excited about the Lord and yet he drifted from the Lord until he was so far away from faith in God that he was near lost, and yet in God's mercy he was restored to the point that he could not hear the song "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so," without crying.

This is one of those sentiments that many would mock, and yet returning to that first love means we are overwhelmed with the love of God. I know there is a maturing of love and yet if the love of God toward you is ever just yeah, you know, I would say your love has grown cold.

The letters to the churches in the Book of Revelation all take that familiar Commendation, followed by Condemnation and then a warning. The address to Ephesus is somewhat unique in that after they are condemned for their lack of love, there is another note of commendation.

Verse 6 reads: *6 But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*

The Nicolaitans are mentioned only twice in the Bible, here and in verse 15. It is because of this that many struggle to know who they were. According to the writings of some of the Early Church leaders, Nicolas who was one of the men ordained a deacon in Acts 6:5, taught a doctrine of compromise, implying that total separation between Christianity and the practice of occult paganism was not essential.

From Early Church records, it seems apparent that this Nicolas of Antioch who was mentioned in Acts that he was a proselyte, was so immersed in occultism, Judaism, and Christianity that he had a stomach for all of it. He had no problem intermingling these belief systems in various concoctions and saw no reason why believers couldn't continue to fellowship with those still immersed in the black magic of the Roman empire and its countless mystery cults.

Occultism was a major force that warred against the Early Church. In Ephesus, the primary pagan religion was the worship of Diana (Artemis). There were many other forms of idolatry in Ephesus, but this was the primary object of occult worship in that city. In the city of Pergamos, there were numerous dark and sinister forms of occultism, causing Pergamos to be one of the most wicked cities in the history of the ancient world. In both of these cities, believers were lambasted and persecuted fiercely by adherents of pagan religions, forced to contend with paganism on a level far beyond all other cities.

It was very hard for believers to live separately from all the activities of paganism because paganism and its religions were the center of life in these cities. Slipping in and out of paganism would have been very easy for young or weak believers to do since most of their families and friends were still pagans. A converted Gentile would have found it very difficult to stay away from all pagan influence.

It is significant that the “deeds” and “doctrines” of the Nicolaitans are *only* mentioned in connection with the churches in these two occultic and pagan cities. It seems that the “doctrine” of the Nicolaitans was that it was all right to have one foot in both worlds and that one needn’t be so strict about separation from the world in order to be a Christian. This, in fact, was the “doctrine” of the Nicolaitans that Jesus “hated.” It led to a weak version of Christianity that was without power and without conviction — a defeated, worldly type of Christianity.

Nicolas’ deep roots in paganism may have produced in him a tolerance for occultism and paganism. Growing up in this perverted spiritual environment may have caused him to view these belief systems as not so damaging or dangerous. This wrong perception would have

resulted in a very liberal viewpoint that encouraged people to stay connected to the world. This is what numerous Bible scholars believe about the Nicolaitans.

This kind of teaching would result in nothing but total defeat for its followers. When believers allow sin and compromise to be in their lives, it drains away the power in the work of the Cross and the power of the Spirit that is resident in a believer's life. This is the reason the name *Nicolas* is so vital to this discussion. The evil fruit of Nicolas' "doctrine" encouraged worldly participation, leading people to indulge in sin and a lowered godly standard. In this way he literally *conquered the people*.

God wants to make sure we understand the doctrine the Nicolaitans taught, so Balaam's actions are given as an example of their doctrine and actions. Revelation 2:14,15 says, ¹⁴ *But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.* ¹⁵ *Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, ^[a]which thing I hate.* When Balaam could not successfully curse the people of God, he used another method to destroy them. He seduced them into unbridled, sensual living by dangling the prostitutes of Moab before the men of Israel. Numbers 25:1-3 tells us, *Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, ^[a]and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab.* ² *They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.* ³ *So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel.* Just as the men of Israel compromised themselves with the world and false religions, now the "doctrine" of the Nicolaitans was encouraging *compromise*. As you are well aware, compromise with the world always results in a weakened and powerless form of

Christianity. *This was the reason Jesus “hated” the “doctrine” and the “deeds” of the Nicolaitans.*

The address to the Ephesians ends with the words: ⁷ *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.” ’*

He who has an ear let him hear is a phrase we will see at the end of each of the church messages. The Lord is distinguishing between hearing with our ears and hearing with our heart. If you have ears to hear you are being told to pay attention. To the one who overcomes is a theme in each of the letters to the churches.

The ESV renders overcomers as the word the one who conquers. The Greek word is the word νικῶ. This word is a word familiar to most of us because of Nike shoes. It is also a theme in the Book of Revelation. Jesus is of course the ultimate overcomer and conqueror. Revelation 12:11 is a verse that I consider to be a theme verse in the Book of Revelation:

¹¹ And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.

This verse is a very popular verse that is often quoted in Christian circles, that being said this is not the last time you will hear me mention this verse as we go through the Book of Revelation. And yet I think it is often misunderstood. We read, “we overcome the devil by the blood of the lamb” and we apply it to every situation. This is true that the precious shed blood of Christ gives

us victory over Satan in every area of our lives; however, when we look at this verse it gives us a context for a victory over Satan which we usually overlook.

To understand the victory that verse 11 is talking about, we must look at the previous verse... verse 10.

Revelation 12:10 ¹⁰ *Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, "Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.*

Here we see a proclamation of victory. The only way we can be the overcomers that this passage speaks about is because Christ has prevailed and brought forth salvation, strength, power and the kingdom. Also, we are told that Satan has been conquered (castdown). However, when the text refers to Satan, it does not call him Satan, the devil or the wicked one. No, it calls him by a specific name. It calls him the "Accuser of the Brethern" who accuses the saints before God day and night. Taking note of this simple fact, gives us the context to better understand the statement in verse 11 where it says "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb". Let's take a look.

Revelation 12:11 *And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.*

They overcame him.... Who? Now we know it specifically is talking about the accuser of the brethren. It is telling us that Satan was stripped of his power to accuse and condemn the saints of the Most High God. So how did they overcome Satan's power to accuse and condemn? It goes on to say that they overcome him by the blood of the lamb and the word of their testimony.

They overcame Satan's power to accuse and condemn the saints by the blood of the lamb and the word of their testimony. What is it about the blood and the testimony that overcomes Satan's power to accuse and condemn?

Let's address the blood first, and then we will answer the testimony next. Through the cross of Christ, Satan has been completely defeated. There are so many people who struggle with the idea that Satan has already been defeated. His power today is the power of deception. If he can deceive you into believing that God is not pleased with you, he can start some serious trouble in your life. However, when you understand what the blood of Christ accomplished for you and in you, it changes Satan's ability to deceive you in this area. In Revelation 1:5 we read exactly what the blood of Jesus has already accomplished for you.

Revelation 1:5 ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth.

To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood,

Christ took His precious blood and thoroughly and completely washed you from your sin. Because of the blood of Christ, God is well pleased with you. The scripture reveals that you were made righteous, 2 Corinthians 5:21 ²¹ *For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.* This means that if you are in Christ you have right standing with God. It also says in Ephesians 1:5-6 that if you are in Christ, you are accepted, which means that God has embraced you and you are wanted and longed for. ⁵ *having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will,* ⁶ *to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.*

In Romans 8 we are told that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus and that God is actually on our side. Listen to verse 31 of Romans 8: ³¹ *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?*

So we overcome by the blood of the lamb and the WORD of our testimony. The question that I think is important to ask here is how much WORD, and whose WORD is in your testimony?

When you know the truth about what the blood of Christ accomplished for you, you cannot be pushed around by the enemy. When the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness, all Christ did was put the word in His mouth and spoke the truth.

When the devil lies to you and he will your response should be to put the “Word” in your testimony. “Revelation 1:5 says that my sins have been washed by the blood of Christ, so I now stand before God cleansed and justified, therefore God is well pleased with me.” Many of us struggle with these verses that proclaim Who we really are in Christ Jesus. We have no problem believing the bad things about ourselves, but when the Word tells us we are forgiven, or the word tells us we are Kings and Priests in Christ Jesus we struggle.

Remember, we overcome Satan by the blood of the lamb because the blood cleanses us from all our sin and therefore it takes away Satan’s power to accuse and condemn us before God. When we make this truth our testimony, when we recognize that because Christ has conquered we too are overcomers. All of the promises to the churches in the early part of Revelation are to the overcomers and in Christ Jesus we are able to share in His victory.

Communion Meditation:

Revelation 2:7 ⁷ *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”* ’