

A veterinarian shares this story. I had been called to examine a ten-year-old Irish Wolfhound named Belker. The dog's owners, Ron, his wife, Lisa, and their little boy, Shane, were all very attached to Belker and they were hoping for a miracle.

I examined Belker and found he was dying of cancer. I told the family there were no miracles left for Belker, and offered to perform the euthanasia procedure for the old dog in their home.

As we made arrangements, Ron and Lisa told me they thought it would be good for their four-year-old, Shane to observe the procedure. They felt Shane might learn something from the experience.

The next day, I felt the familiar catch in my throat as Belker's family surrounded him. Shane seemed so calm, petting the old dog for the last time, and I wondered if Shane understood what was going on. Within a few minutes, Belker slipped peacefully away. The little boy seemed to accept Belker's death without any difficulty or confusion.

We sat together for a while after Belker's death, wondering aloud about the sad fact that animal lives are shorter than human lives. Shane, who had been quietly listening, piped up and said, "I know why."

Startled, we all turned to him and he explained, "People are born so that they can learn how to love everybody, but dogs already know how to do that, so they don't have to stay as long."

I'm not sure if that was a true story or not, but if the truth be told, we could probably learn a few things about love from our pets who naturally seem to love us no matter what.

We are continuing in our study of the book of Revelation and last week we finished with the greeting and the introduction found in Chapter 1, where we learned that the Apostle John – the last surviving apostle, was the human author. He's the one who put pen to paper, and if you recall, John, who was likely in his 90's, found himself on Patmos, which was a Roman penal colony situated on a barren volcanic island surrounded by shark infested waters. John was exiled there by the Roman authorities – subjected to forced labor in the marble mines for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. John was doing what God wanted him to do. John was in the center of God's will, and John was suffering for it. The Roman authorities wanted to shut John up and stop his ministry, so they put him on that rock surrounded by water, but we know that didn't work out too well, for God had

a different purpose and this morning you and I are reading the product of that purpose from Patmos.

In the first Chapter, we learned the book of Revelation is actually a letter, a very long letter, a letter written to seven real churches in Asia Minor. These churches faced intense persecution by the Roman authorities, pressured to compromise their faith, and these churches needed encouragement to endure and persevere. They needed to be challenged to live godly lives in an ungodly world, and these churches needed hope for the future. They needed to know that in spite of their present reality – God was still on the throne, Jesus will return just as He promised, He will be victorious, good will triumph over evil, and in the end, it will all be worth it for those who overcome by putting their faith in Christ.

Last week, we also got our first taste of apocalyptic writing – a style that uses signs, and numbers, colors, and vivid images to represent deeper truths and meanings. We saw that Jesus revealed Himself to John in a vision using Old Testament imagery similar to the imagery given by God to the prophet Daniel. This is how Jesus chose to reveal Himself to John at that moment, using a lot of symbolism, driving home the truth that Jesus is in the midst of the church, He is the wise and mighty high priest of the church, and ultimately, He has the last word – even the last word over death.

Now, if you also recall from last week, John gave us an outline for the entire book. In Chapter 1 **verse 19**, John was given instruction by Jesus, and He said to John,

“Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.”

That is the outline of the book. Chapter 1 pertained to the things which John had just seen – the things John had already experienced. That was the first section. The second section of the outline pertains to ***the things which are***. In other words, these are the things that are present at the time of John’s writing – the current events that include messages from Jesus to these seven churches which were active in John’s day, and these messages are found in Chapters 2 and 3.

As I said earlier, these seven churches were real churches in Asia Minor, and I also believe these seven churches represent all churches, throughout all times, worldwide. What is said of them can be said of any church, anywhere, and if you think about it, this really isn’t anything new. The Apostle Paul’s letters were sent to seven churches; however, they are applicable to all churches.

So, for the next seven weeks, we are going to be looking at the letters to these seven churches – letters given by the Lord and given from His perspective, meaning this is an inside look at how Jesus sees these churches – how Jesus sees His people.

If you have your Bible, turn to **Revelation 2** and we will begin with **verse 1**.

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:”

This letter is to the **angel of the church**, and as I mentioned last week, the Greek word here for **angel** means *messenger*, and I believe this letter is written to the pastor of the church in Ephesus.

Now, before we look at the church, let’s first consider the city, a real city, and if you didn’t know, Ephesus was the city where John lived before he was exiled to Patmos.

Ephesus was a major city in the ancient world – a great port city along the Cayster River that dumped into the Aegean Sea. It would be similar to Portland, with harbors along the Columbia River that dumps into the Pacific Ocean. Ephesus was the primary shipping harbor for Asia Minor, but not only that, four major trade routes went through this city making it the commercial hub, the marketplace for Asia Minor. Ephesus was a place of commerce and wealth, where goods and products were brought in and sent out, and it was the gateway to the Roman providences to the east.

In John’s day, Ephesus was the largest city in this western region of Asia Minor, having a population of about 300,000 residents. It was a beautiful city with its main street lined with marble columns and statues stretching from the harbor to the city amphitheater, which reportedly seated some 25,000 people.

Ephesus was world famous as the religious and cultural center of that entire region, and it was the home to the Temple of Artemis (also known as the Temple of Diana), which was called one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was 425 feet long by 220 feet wide, and it was supported by 127 columns that stood some 60 feet tall. At that time, it was one of the largest marble buildings in the world, much larger than a football field.

Now within the center of this temple, was the statute of the goddess Diana. With a beautiful temple and a beautiful name like Diana, surely, she will be a beauty as well. Okay, not so much. As you can see, she it is a multi-breasted looking thing who was supposed to suckle people and give them life. She was believed to be the goddess of “childbearing” and the worship of Diana was the main religion in Ephesus.

So, that’s a snapshot of the city – now, let’s consider the background of the church. The church in Ephesus was founded by the Apostle Paul around 53 A.D., after Priscilla and Aquilla's initial efforts which began in about 50 A.D. Paul spent a couple of years there to establish a thriving church, and after Paul, then came Apollos who was from Alexandria. Later, Paul trained up Timothy to become the pastor at Ephesus, and after Timothy, Tychicus, and after Tychicus the Apostle John. John moved to Ephesus after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. This was John’s home church before he was exiled to Patmos.

That’s a brief background of church at Ephesus and we are told that Jesus **walks among** it. Jesus is with the church, He loves the church, He is the Head of the church, and Jesus sees the deeds and the real motives of the church. Jesus knows the true condition of the church, He knows what is really going on, and because Jesus knows what is really going on, He can complement, criticize, and challenge the church as He sees fit. So, let’s start with the good stuff first.

²I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; ³and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary.

This sounds like a great church. It’s a happening church. They are a busy church, they are a determined church, they are a hardworking church. They seem to be church that faithfully serves. They are a sacrificing church that endures and perseveres through hardship, and they are a church that possesses sound doctrine – strongly opposed to any false teaching.

In the days of the early church there were false teachers and those who tried to mislead the church and exploit the church for their own purposes, and the church had been warned many times, by Paul and others, to be careful and to be sure they were not being misled. As a matter of fact, it was John who said **1 John 4:1**,

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

We have to be careful as well. We are never to assume that every spiritual word or every spiritual experience or demonstration of spiritual power is from God. We must test these things to see if they are in fact from God. We trust in the principle that God will never contradict Himself – God will not contradict His Own Word, and that’s why it’s vital that we know it.

This church took these warnings to heart and chased off the evil doers and the false teachers who failed the test of sound doctrine.

Some years after the book of Revelation was written, Ignatius who was the leader of the church in Antioch wrote the church at Ephesus and said to them, *“You all live according to truth, and no heresy has a home among you; indeed, you do not so much as listen to anyone if they speak of anything except concerning Jesus Christ in truth.”* That’s an example of just how passionate and zealous they were for doctrinal purity.

In **verse 3**, Jesus highlights the perseverance of the Ephesians – they have endured hardships for His name, and they have not grown weary. From their earliest days as a church, these Christians had put up with hostility from the authorities and from those who worshipped other gods – and if you remember, some of this persecution was mentioned in **Acts 19** when the silversmith Demetrius worked up the people of Ephesus into a frenzy against the Apostle Paul and his companions. If you recall, Paul’s message was hurting the business of Demetrius who made silver shrines for the temple of Diana. He wanted Paul and his companions gone to protect his profits.

So, the church at Ephesus was a serving church, a hardworking church, a persevering church, a church that knew their Bible, and if we drop down to **verse 6**, Jesus continues with His complements and points out they are a church who hates sin. He says,

“Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”

The church at Ephesus hated the sin of the Nicolaitans and so did Jesus. The Nicolaitans are also mentioned later in the letter to the church of Pergamum, but there isn’t a lot which is known about them. Some Bible scholars have speculated this was a strange sect in the early church who claimed to have the inside track with God and possibly taught that freedom in Christ meant you had a green light to do whatever you wanted to do without any reservation, similar to – *if it feels good – do it, God won’t mind*. Well, God did mind and so did this church.

So, the church in Ephesus sounds like a great church, a church any of us would like to join, but let's go back up to **verse 4** because Jesus has something else to say to them.

“But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.”

We are told they had left their first love, **but what does that mean? Did they forsake their love for God? Did they leave their love for one another?** I suspect that both are in mind, because the two loves go together. You can't say you love God and not love His people, and you can't really love His people without loving Him first. John tells us in **1 John 4:20-21**,

If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

And here's the crazy part, this church was once commended for their love. Paul said to them in **Ephesians 1:15**.

“For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints.”

Paul described this church as a loving church when he wrote his letter to the Ephesians around 63 A.D., about 10 years after he had founded the church.

So, what happened? At the time of the book of Revelation was written, most of the Ephesian Christians were now second-generation believers and though they retained their purity of doctrine and had a high level of service, they were lacking in their devotion to Christ and their love for people had faded as a result.

In all of their hard work and diligence and doctrine, their love faded away. They were mechanical, serving out of duty but not out of devotion – not out of love. They were an unloving church.

A preacher once said, *“Their theology was as clear as ice and just as cold.”* That was the description of the Ephesians. Charles Spurgeon said, *“Sometimes a focus on doctrinal purity will make a congregation cold, suspicious, and intolerant of diversity.”*

In their pursuit of truth, in their efforts to root out error, in their desire to be right, in their drive to reject anyone who did not walk in lock step with them, these Ephesian Christians had allowed a tragic flaw to infect their church. They did not love one another which Jesus said would be a hallmark for His followers. Jesus said in **John 13:34-35**,

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Of course, as a church, we need to follow sound doctrine, and yes, we need to be service-oriented, and without a doubt we need to endure and persevere through hardships, but that is no substitute for loving one another. What we do is vitally important, but why we do what we do is just as important.

Now, Jesus isn't one of those who complains but has no solution, and in **verse 5**, He provides it. Listen to what He says.

“Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.”

According to Jesus, their first love can be restored. Jesus says to remember, to repent, and to do the actions you did at first or we could say to repeat – three R's – remember, repent, and repeat.

Remember – this is a call to reflect, to go back and recall the past, to remember the way it used to be in your relationship with the Lord. Jesus is saying, *“Remember, look back to that point when your relationship with Me was thriving and exciting.”* **What was going on back then? Why were you doing what you were doing?** *“Remember when you loved Me, what were you doing back then?”*

This is something we have to do as married couples when our relationships become dull and boring. **Do you remember the “honeymoon love” you once had? Do you remember the excitement and the wonder and the joy you had at the beginning of your marriage?** Sometimes as couples, we have to remember what drew us together and filled us with love in the first place.

Jesus then says to **repent**. To repent is more than a feeling – its more than feeling sorry for your sin. It means to recognize your condition as being wrong, to accept it as being wrong, to change your mind, and to change your direction, change your

to behavior. The church in Ephesus was told to recognize their loveless attitude, acknowledge it as wrong, and go in a different way – the right way – God’s way.

Lastly, Jesus said to **repeat** which seems to be a call to repeat those loving actions which were once a priority in a believer’s life. To correct a lack of love for God and for others, sometimes have to go back to the beginning – back to the basics – back to the gospel.

I should be loving to others because Christ loves me. I should be forgiving of others because Christ has forgiven me. I should be gracious to others because Christ is gracious to me. I should be merciful to others because Christ is merciful to me. I should be patient with others because Christ is patient with me. We could go on and on with this, but I want to make this point: Often times, the loving actions come before the loving feelings, and I think that is why Jesus said to **“do the deeds you did at first.”**

Back to the couples, sometimes when we are having problems in our marriages – we’ve lost that “loving feeling,” we need to go back and do those things we used to do when our marriages were thriving and loving. It’s the same idea Jesus is giving to the church.

So, Jesus gave the church His solution, but He also gave them a warning. If you remain an unloving church, He would **remove their lampstand** – meaning they will no longer be a functioning church. A loveless church is no longer a useful church and Christ as the right to extinguish it. A church that loses its love is in danger of losing its place, no matter how busy and doctrinally sound they are, and that’s what eventually happened to this church sometime in the second century. It ended.

Then we come to the last verse to this church. Jesus tells this church in **verse 7**,

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

He who has an ear – **that includes anyone with an ear doesn’t it?** This message is for you and me as well – it’s to all **churches**. Those who **overcome**, which is a description of true believers who follow Christ, they will enjoy the fruits and the blessings and the fellowship with God throughout eternity. Originally, the word **Paradise** meant *“a garden of delight,”* but eventually, it came to mean *“the*

place where God lives.” Where God is, that is **Paradise**, and for those who love God and love others, that’s where we will be.

Source Material:

Holman New Testament Commentary, Revelation – Kendell H. Easley, Max Anders

The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament – Walvoord & Zuck

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). The Bible Exposition Commentary. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Pugh, G. (2010). Commentary on the Book of Revelation. In R. E. Picirilli (Ed.), *1, 2, 3 John & Revelation* (First Edition). Nashville, TN: Randall House.

Ephesus – When Love Grows Cold – John MacArthur

Dummelow, J. R. (Ed.). (1936). A Commentary on the Holy Bible. New York: The Macmillan Company.

Enduring Word – David Guzik

When Jesus Comes to Church – Ray Stedman