

ECF 15th January 2012 Ephesus: Where's the Love? Revelation 2:1-7

Ephesus was an impressive city. It was the 4th largest in the world at the time with a population of about 250,000. It was prosperous, had a thriving economy, and it was culturally rich. There were gymnasiums, libraries, a 25,000 seat theatre and a temple dedicated to the Emperor Domitian with a statue of the emperor four times life size.

But dominating the city was the Temple of the goddess Artemis. This marble temple with its 127 pillars was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and the largest building in the Greek world.

Devotion to Artemis was passionate – both for religious and commercial reasons as the selling of religious objects in Ephesus was big business. When some of the Ephesian craftsmen felt threatened by Paul's ministry there, the whole city was thrown into an uproar. "They all shouted in unison for about two hours, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.'" Acts 19:34

But even in this pagan-dominated city, an active church had grown up. They had experienced some great Christian ministry from Paul who had ministered there for about two years, but also from Timothy, Priscilla and Aquilla, Apollos and according to tradition, John himself, who had served there in his old age. For over 4 decades this fellowship had been dedicated to faith in Christ and defending the truth. It had been it had been a beacon of light in that dark city.

But when Christ wrote to them, he something challenging to say – a message they must not ignore; and a message that we need to hear today! Revelation 2:1-7: "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: ² I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. 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. ³ You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

⁴ Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. ⁵ Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. ⁶ But you have this in your favour: You hate the practices 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 the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."

1. Author

As we'll see, each of the seven letters start by referring back to John's vision of Christ that we saw last week.

a) Seven Stars:

Here we're reminded that Jesus is the one who "holds the seven stars in his right hand." v1

In the Greek and Roman world, it was widely believed that the movement of the seven planets controlled people's lives and destinies. Roman emperors took the symbol of the seven stars, depicting them on their coins, as if to say, "We rule the world!" And when the Emperor Domitian's young son died in AD83 he proclaimed him to be a god. Coins were minted to celebrate this, depicting this son sitting on a globe, playing with the seven stars!

i) Jesus is in Charge of Us

But the one holding the seven stars is in reality Christ. He is the true sovereign. He is in charge.

And as we saw last week, he is specifically in control of the churches as "the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches." Revelation 1:20 Jesus is speaking to the church as the one who holds them in his hand! He is in control. They are in his care.

Jesus said: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand." John 10:28 We are held securely and safely in the hand of Christ!

b) Seven Lampstands:

And Jesus is also the one "who walks among the seven golden lampstands." v1. They are a symbol of these churches and this teaches us that Jesus is close to them.

i) Jesus is Close to us

Our Lord is not distant and remote. He is near us. He is involved in our lives.

And so each of these letters begins with these words: "I know..." v2 Jesus knows all about them.

There is a challenge here. There is nothing hidden from our Lord. He knows us exactly, intimately, totally. We cannot deceive him. He sees everything.

But there's also a wonderful encouragement. Sometimes we can feel as if nobody sees the good we do. Nobody recognises it, values it and appreciates it. But this is not true. Jesus is walking among us. He sees what we do. He appreciates it. And he will reward it: "If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward." Matthew 10:42 We can give ourselves to serving him wholeheartedly because nothing that we do for Christ is ever wasted, overlooked or insignificant!

2. Praise

a) Activity

And Jesus saw the good in this church in Ephesus. He said, **“I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.”** v2

This church had been very active. ! Paul had written to them: **“We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”** Ephesians 2:10 And they hadn’t avoided the challenge to work hard for the Lord. Their’s was an energetic Christianity.

b) Faithfulness

And they had been faithfully been trying to live out this calling. **“I know... your perseverance.”** v2 There’s was not a short-term commitment. Even in this powerful and prosperous city, where it was tough to be a follower of Christ, their church history contained 40 years of activities and outreaches and ministries – and they had not grown weary!

c) Committed to Truth

And they’d been committed to God’s truth. Just before his journey to Jerusalem where he was arrested and subsequently transferred to Rome, Paul had met with the leaders of the church in Ephesus one last time. In that emotional farewell, Paul warned them that **“Savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!”** Acts 20:29–31

And they had been on their guard. Jesus said, **“I know... that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.”** v2 They hadn’t just lazily accepted everything that people said. They had questioned it, tested it, compared it with Scripture – and rejected those who had been teaching lies.

Some of those false teachers were a group called the Nicolaitans. **“You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”** v6 Very little is known today about this group – other than their connection with the heresy of Balaam as we’ll see in Christ’s letter to Pergamum. But clearly the church in Ephesus hated their ungodly lifestyles as much as Christ did!

We need that commitment to the truth just as much today. Paul teaches us: **“Do not treat prophecies with contempt.²¹ Test everything. Hold on to the good.²² Avoid every kind of evil.”** 1 Thessalonians 5:20–22 No matter who says it, we need to measure every teaching against God’s Word, and reject anything that is contrary to it.

3. Rebuke: Lack of Love

This was an active, faithful and committed church. In so many ways, they looked like a great church, especially considering the difficulty of the culture in which they were living. But there was a serious problem here – and Jesus was not content to leave them with their issue unresolved.

“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.” v4 Was it that their love for each other as brothers and sisters in Christ had grown cold? Had they lost the warmth of fellowship for each other?

Or was it that they had turned their back on the lost, and let their evangelistic zeal die out? In their commitment to doctrinal purity, they had turned their back on compassion?

Or was it that they’d lost their love for God? Their services had become routine. Their relationship with God had become religious observance. Their passionate worship had turned into ritual and ceremony. As Jesus quoted about the Pharisees: **“These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”** Matthew 15:8

Or maybe it was all of these – as is it difficult if not impossible to separate them. A lack of love for God, for God’s family, and for others are all symptoms of a heart that has become cold and hard.

a) A Slow Fade?

It probably didn’t happen dramatically. This was not a church that had rejected Christ! In fact this issue had probably gone unnoticed by many of them.

Loss of our love for God usually happens gradually. A compromised priority here. A pulling back there. Maybe like the seed sown among the weeds, their love had been choked by **“the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth.”** Matthew 13:22. Maybe they had been so busy serving God that they had forgotten to maintain their relationship with God.

It is a danger for all of us. If we don’t look after our love, it so easily weakens and dims. It doesn’t take much for the fire of our love to be snuffed out.

b) A Serious Issue

It may not have happened dramatically, but it was serious. It was not enough that this church did so many good things. It was not enough that they persevered year after year. It was not enough that they were committed to defending the truth of the gospel. Those things were good, but without love – they become empty, self-centred, dutiful and ultimately worthless.

Listen to what Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.³ If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.” 1 Corinthians 13:1–3

You cannot have true Christianity without love, because love is the heart of Christianity, because “God is love.” 1 John 4:16. This is not empty sentimentalism or romantic emotionalism. It is about an unconditional, unlimited, sacrificial, active, passionate love for others that sees the worth and value in them.

And it comes into our lives through the experience of God’s love poured into our hearts. As John wrote: “We love because he first loved us.” 1 John 4:19 We are not to love out of fear, or out of a sense of guilt or duty. Our love should be in gratitude, wonder and delight in response to God’s love for us.

Is it possible that we might be here this morning in the same situation? Is it possible that we could be doing so much that is right and commendable, we could be active in doing good, working hard, even standing up for truth against false doctrine – and yet our hearts are cold. Could it be possible that we have forsaken our first love?

4. Challenge

But Jesus did not point this out to make them feel bad. He pointed it out to restore them. Condemnation was not his goal. Restoration was!

a) Remember the past!

His first step was to challenge them to remember what their love used to be like. “Remember the height from which you have fallen!” v5

This church wasn’t always cold and hard-hearted. Years before, Paul had written to them: “Ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you.” Ephesians 1:15–16 Jesus used to be everything to them. Their worship used to be passionate and intense. Tears used to flow when they took communion together. They used to be excited to tell others about Jesus. Their church family used to mean everything to them.

Do you remember a time when you experienced love for God like that? Maybe it was when you first trusted in Christ – when you first realised that God loved you as you are, that Christ died for you, that you were forgiven and accepted into God’s family.

Maybe it was when you took that public step of commitment when you were baptised.

Your heart was bursting and you went under those waters as an expression of your whole life given to God.

Maybe it was the time when you saw God at work in your life in an amazing way, when you experience God’s presence, when you first witnessed for him, when you first led someone to the Lord.

Do you remember a time when your heart burned with passion for the Lord with a much brighter flame than today?

b) Repent

But Jesus didn’t just want them to reminisce about the good old days. They needed to grab hold of that faint memory so they would be shocked to see how far they had fallen and be stirred to start the process of restoration. They needed to “Repent.” v5

Jesus will repeat this challenge to repentance to many of the seven churches. It means a change of life based on complete change of mind, heart and attitude. It is an internal U-turn – that then leads to change of what we do as well. He calls them to repent “...and do the things you did at first.” v5

This is a radical change. Jesus knows that a small alteration or tweek in our lives won’t work. We need to repent and give ourselves totally to God. We need to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” Matthew 22:37 Half-hearted, partial love will always lead to coldness and a messed up life. Nothing less than a complete, wholehearted commitment to Christ will do.

5. Warning: Removal of Lampstand

If we don’t there is a serious warning here. “If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.” v5 This town would lose its Christian witness. Christ would no longer shine into hearts through this community! Their heritage and history would not save them. Their activity would not keep their fire burning. If they didn’t change, the light would go out for this church. Without God’s love, this church would not survive.

I do not believe that we can lose our salvation. I am convinced by the Scriptures that once we put our faith in Christ and accept the gracious gift of our salvation, we are totally forgiven, declared righteous for all time, adopted into God’s family, created anew in Christ, sealed with the Spirit, held securely in the Father’s hand and nothing and no-one “nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:39

And yet, our choices as believers have serious consequences. “Do not be deceived:

God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.” Galatians 6:7 If we sow to please the Spirit, then we will produce the fruit of God’s love, joy and peace. But if we sow to please our sinful nature, then our heart for Christ will grow cold, our joy will fade, our peace will wither.

6. Promise: Real Paradise

But this does not need to happen to us. Today we have a choice. We can “hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” v7 We can humble ourselves before our Lord, face up to our coldness, repent and be restored.

And to encourage us, this letter to the Ephesians ends like the others with a promise to the overcomers: “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” v7

This is a picture of eternal life. It goes back to the garden of Eden in Genesis and is about paradise restored, as the tree of life feeds God’s people forever. It is also about relationship as the garden of Eden was a place of communion with God until it was broken by sin.

And this picture would have special significance for the Christians of Ephesus. The temple of the goddess Artemis was initially a shrine associated with a sacred tree. And coins of Ephesus frequently portrayed a tree as an emblem of Artemis. Her temple was surrounded by its own sacred space of ‘garden.’

But the believers could reject the seduction of this idolatry. They had a greater promise. One day they would experience the true, the real paradise of God. They would eat of the real tree of life. They would live forever in the intimacy of relationship with the true author of life. They would experience eternal life: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” John 17:3

Conclusion

Today the temple of Artemis is a ruin. But the promise of God still stands. We can turn from this world that promises so much and delivers so little, and instead bow before the true author of life, our risen and exalted Lord and give him our heart and allow him to pour into our hearts the love of God by the Holy Spirit.

Nothing else will equip us for life. Nothing else will empower us for ministry. Nothing else will satisfy our hearts. “I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,¹⁸ may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fulness of God.” Ephesians 3:17–19

[Please note that the above file is a copy of the notes used by Andrew for his preach at Enniscorthy Christian Fellowship, Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, Ireland on January 15th 2012 and have been published on www.enniscorthychristianfellowship.ie as part of our service to the community. Audio recordings of this, and other preaches, are also available at the above site and anyone wishing to ask questions concerning the above preach is invited to contact Andrew either directly or through the above site. Thank you]