

West Valley Church
9/4/11

Church.rethink
Part 12
Revelation 2:1-7

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We've spent the summer rethinking what church is by going through the letter of Ephesians out of the New Testament. Last week Pastor James summarized it for us and did a great job. But I thought you might wonder, "Whatever happened to the church in Ephesus?" That's what we're going to find out today, because there are some powerful applications with a serious call for us regarding how to think and act as the church, and what our priorities should be.

The purpose of this series has been to help us as a church get a correct view of who we are and what we do. Why do we do what we do the way we do it? We need to "rethink." I say that because God has put this church on this corner in this community for a reason, and it's time we accelerated our pursuit of that purpose. God is accelerating what he's doing in us and through us, and that is only going to increase. So we want to "rethink" what West Valley Church is and what West Valley Church is here for. We are a growing church—we are growing spiritually and numerically. And God intends for that growth to continue so that we can successfully carry out the mission he has given us—to introduce people to Jesus Christ, to equip people with a faith that works, and to live as people with purpose. In other words, to Love, Learn, and Live. Ephesians has been instrumental in helping us focus on the most important things. Now, we're going to learn what happened to the church at Ephesus. We'll see it from Revelation 2, the first seven verses. This is what it says: *Write this letter to the angel of the church in Ephesus. This is the message from the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven gold lampstands: I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don't tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. You have patiently suffered for Me without quitting. But I have this complaint against you. You don't love Me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to Me and do the works you did at first. If you don't repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches. But this is in your favor: You hate the evil deeds of the Nicolaitans, just as I do. Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what He is saying to the churches. To everyone who is victorious I will give fruit from the tree of life in the paradise of God. (Rev 2:1-7, nlt)*

What we just read is the first of seven letters to seven major churches in existence around 95 AD. In a vision, Jesus dictates these letters to the Apostle John, and that was Jesus' letter to the church in Ephesus. In order to understand this passage we are looking at today, I need to also give you some understanding of the book of Revelation. Take out your notes and write fast and keep up. First, let's see

1. The ***Direction*** of the Letter.

There's been a lot of popular literature about the contents of Revelation in the last few years, from the fiction novel series called "Left Behind" to most recently Joel Rosenberg's books. Many of you have read them, I'm sure. Much of that comes from the book of Revelation. A lot of that is *speculation* about end times events. We typically think Revelation is written in a future direction, but whenever you read prophecy in Scripture, there are three different applications that you have to keep in mind. The first is that it must be understood in its ***primary association***. In other words, these are real letters written to seven actual churches in Asia minor at the end of the first century AD. Each message was tailored to the needs of the church it addressed. So each letter must be read in its own context.

Secondly, it must be understood by its ***personal application***. This is what we will focus on today. The great value of these letters beyond the first century is in identifying the kinds of Christians who show up in churches in *any* age or time. Most problems that churches face today could be solved by taking the Lord's advice to these seven churches. Lastly, these letters must be understood in ***prophetic anticipation***. Many Bible students believe that the seven churches, in the order that they are addressed by Jesus, are a prophetic picture of the chronological development of the universal Christian Church spiritually at seven different stages through the ages. We're not going to talk about that today, but many suggest we are living in the age of the church of Laodicea—the church of the end times and the seventh church and last church in the letters. But regardless of which way you look at it, there is important and practical application for us, the church here in West Valley, today. So let's move on to

2. The ***Destination*** of the letter.

This letter—the passage we read—is to the church in Ephesus. So let me briefly give you some of the history of the church at Ephesus, and some of the timing of significant events.

The city of Ephesus was established as a Greek Colony around 1400 BC. It was situated on a harbor on the Cayster river, which emptied into the Aegean Sea. It was at the intersection of several major trade routes. It was the gateway to Asia in the East and the highway to Rome in the west. When Paul wrote his letter in 62 AD, Ephesus was at the height of its prominence and prosperity. It boasted about a

quarter of a million people, the largest city in the known world at that time. It was also a hotbed of cults and superstitions, a meeting place of East and West religions, Roman and Greek and Asiatics all mixed together with all their pagan religions. They worshipped more than 50 different gods and goddesses and it was the center of the *occult* of the ancient world. The greatest false goddess was Diana. The temple to her was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was a spiritually dark city.

In the midst of that, Paul's ministry was in Ephesus for three years—around 52-55 AD. He was in Ephesus longer than anywhere else, and then young Timothy took over as the pastor from there for quite a few years. The apostle John, who wrote Revelation as well as the Gospel and Epistles of John, also was a pastor of that church, and Ephesus had become the third greatest center of Christianity (after Jerusalem and Antioch). By the end of the 80's to early 90's, persecution arose against the Christians in the Roman Empire thanks to the emperors Nero and then Domitian. During that time St. John was arrested and exiled to the island of Patmos; a desolate island that was a Roman Penal Colony, about sixty miles out to sea. That takes us up to the time that Revelation was written—about 95 AD. In a minute I will tell you what eventually happened to the church.

Remember that Jesus' letter was addressed “to the angel of the church in Ephesus.” Most scholars agree that Jesus is not talking about a guardian angel for the churches. Most likely it is either the pastor of that church, or even more probably it is a personification of the general attitude or spirit, of that church.

Now, to put this in ever more context, let's look next at

3. The Description of Christ

In these letters, dictated by Jesus Christ himself to the Apostle John, Jesus gives a message to each of the seven churches and he focuses on one aspect of his own character that is described in great detail in chapter one. For each letter, you can find his description of himself in chapter one. Jesus applies that aspect of his character to the church he is addressing, and in each way he is focusing on what that church needs. For the Ephesian church, Jesus reminds them that he is the One “who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.” The seven stars are the angels of the churches—what I described earlier. The seven lampstands are the churches themselves. In chapter one Jesus said that he holds them in his right hand—the hand of power and authority. There's good news in this—that our church is held in Jesus' very powerful right hand, right now! No matter what we face, we are held in the palm of Jesus!

Then Jesus gives

4. The ***Diagnosis*** of the church.

Now . . . here is where we get into the application of the passage for us today. For every one of these seven churches there is good news and bad news. Remember, *we* are wanting to learn from this letter, so we are applying it to us. The good thing is that most of what Jesus has to say to Ephesus is good news—the good things they are doing. And I think the same would be true for us today: I think that Jesus would have mostly good things to say about us. In this letter to the church there are five positive things Jesus says about the church at Ephesus, and there is one negative characteristic that he mentions at the end. Let's take a look at these.

First, Jesus says that the church at Ephesus was a ***dynamic*** church. Jesus says "I know your deeds." "I know ..." God always notices when we do things for him. It doesn't go unnoticed. Jesus says, "I know." It's always comforting to realize that Jesus knows us completely. And that was true for the church of Ephesus. It was a busy, hardworking, dynamic congregation. Everyone knew that the Ephesus church was doing the work of the Lord. The Good News of God's Love—the Word of the Lord—was spreading all throughout Asia because of the work of the church in Ephesus. People were being introduced to Jesus Christ. Acts 19:20 describes this when it says, "the Word of the Lord spread widely and grew in great power." (Acts 19:20, niv) Wouldn't you like West Valley Church to be known for that? I think we're getting there, but that's part of what God wants to do in and through us.

Next, It was also a ***dedicated*** church. Football fans are dedicated. I heard the story of a guy who went to a game between his hometown team and their bitter rivals. He sat next to an elderly woman who was alone with an empty seat next to her. So he asked her, "Ma'am, I have rarely seen an empty seat here, especially on a game like today. Whose seat is that?" The woman said that she and her late husband had been season-ticket holders for 28 years, and the seat had belonged to him.

So he asked "Well, couldn't you find a friend or relative to come to the game with you?" She said, "Are you kidding? They're all at my husband's funeral."

Now that's dedication! Ephesus was dedicated.

The verse says "deeds" in one place and then "hard work" in another. Those are two different words. Deeds is like activity. The Greek word for "hard work" is a much stronger word. It means labor to the point of sweat and exhaustion. There's even a hint of weariness to it. The church was paying a price for serving the Lord—they worked so hard they were exhausted. Jesus said that if we are going to serve him we have to take up our own cross and follow him. (Mark 8:34) It's going to take work. The church in Ephesus was doing that, and Jesus recognized and honored them for it. Can he say that about us? About you? I want him to be

able to say that about me. And about us.

Jesus also commended them for being a **Determined church**. The verse says that the church had perseverance. It means a steadfast endurance regardless of how hard things are. It's not the kind of endurance that keeps taking a beating over and over and somehow survives. It is a courageous determination that takes hardship, loss, attack, persecution, and obstacles and turns them into strengths and victories. It's the kind of determination that father and son Dick and Ricky Hoyt have. They have raced together in more than a thousand races (which include miles of swimming, miles of biking, and miles of running). Ricky is now 49 years old, and his dad is 70. But the son, Ricky, was born with cerebral palsy. To race, he must be pulled, pushed, and carried by his father. You might be tempted to jump to the conclusion that Ricky doesn't race at all and think his father does all the work. But tens of thousands of TV viewers saw the son's role in 1999, when wind, cold, and an equipment failure made progress hard on Ricky, even though his father was the one pedaling the modified tandem bike. Dick knelt down to his son, contorted and trembling in the cold, as the two were still facing many more miles of race on the defective bike. He said to his son belted to the bicycle seat, "Do you want to keep going, son?"

The father would be the one enabling and providing the means to overcome, but the son still had to have the heart to finish. Rick shouted, "yeah!" And finish they did—and still do today. That's a picture of the church: the Father enables and provides the means to overcome, but we must have the determination to finish. The Bible tells us to run with perseverance the race marked out for us. (Hebrews 12:1) The church in Ephesus did that. But did they keep it up? We'll soon see.

The church was also a **Disciplined church**. By this it means that the church was willing to test those who claimed to be spiritual leaders but were not. They were willing to practice church discipline. They wouldn't tolerate wicked men who claim to be apostles or spiritual leaders. There were some who claimed to be spiritual leaders but didn't have the credentials to back it up. They would take advantage of churches for many reasons; power, money, control, and they either taught wrong doctrine or their lives didn't back up their teaching. That's why the church had to resort to giving written credentials to authenticate true leaders, which we still do today. That's also why the Bible warns us not to believe every spirit, but to test them to be sure, because there are many false teachers.

Let me say this: there are many churches, include some in this community, that abuse church discipline. The pastor or leaders decide who is holy enough to attend and who is not. We will never do that! This is where the Church of the Nazarene stands on this issue of discipline: The church does have a process of discipline that

we must abide by that is based on the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 18, carried out by a panel of leaders, but only in extreme situations. The process is to protect the flock and still be redemptive to those who are sinning or out of line. We will never tell someone they can't worship with us. If someone is caught in sin, where better to be? But we will not tolerate false teachers or false-living in leaders. The Ephesian church was patient when it came to service and suffering, but not when it came to leaders who sinned or abused their leadership. They dealt with it.

Next, it was a ***discerning* church**. Let me give an example of what discernment is like. You might know that I have a large collection of old baseball cards, especially of the old great ones. Ted Williams was one of the all-time great baseball players. He was the last baseball player to hit better than .400 for an entire season. He was so precise in his skill that he used a postal scale for his bats to make sure that humidity had not added an ounce to the weight of them. Once he was challenged to find from among six bats the one that was half an ounce heavier than the others, just by feeling them. He quickly did. One time he returned back a batch of his Louisville Slugger bats to the manufacturer because he sensed that the handles were not quite right. They checked and found the handles were off by five-thousandths of an inch. That's discerning!

Discernment is telling between truth and error. The church at Ephesus was discerning. They "hated the practices of the Nicolaitians." We don't know who this was, but there is certainty of what they taught. They claimed that, among other things, since Christians were forgiven anyway, that a person had the freedom to sin however they wanted to. The Ephesian church hated that. *We* must be discerning about false doctrine.

All those traits the church had are excellent: it was dynamic, dedicated, determined, disciplined, and discerning. Jesus recognized those, but his eyes looked below the surface and saw what the church was lacking. And it was significant; all the good they were doing couldn't overcome this one issue: They were a ***Dry* church**. They had forsaken their first love. They hadn't misplaced their intention. This wasn't a slight change of affection. This was a tragic omission of the most important motive. Notice the word "forsaken." It does not mean "lost" or "forgotten." It means to let go, to send away, to leave, to give up, to abandon. Theirs was a willful neglect. They did right stuff, but love was no longer their motive.

The church was good in all those things, but they didn't have love. And the Bible says that without love we are nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3) Yes, they were very good at what they did. But they didn't love. Have you ever been around a church that was good at work, good at doctrine, but no good at love? Those kind of

churches often get zealous for “rules” because they don’t love. Unchurched people today say the church is hypocritical and judgmental. That’s exactly what Jesus meant when he said the Ephesus church had lost their first love.

What kind of love is Jesus talking about? The original language is very clear: it can be found in the great commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-40) Jesus said that everything else in the entire Bible hangs on this commandment. Loving God and loving others is *inseparable*. It isn’t really two commandments. They had chosen to stop loving the Lord, and they stopped loving people. It didn’t matter which one, because they are both the same. We must love God and love people. To not do one is to disobey both. Do you ever choose *not* to love someone in the church? Then Jesus says this same thing against *you*. This was serious, and it took serious action to correct. Here’s how we correct this: Jesus gave

5. The ***Demands*** of the church.

It isn’t a slight thing to not love each other. It isn’t a simple sin to stop loving Jesus first and foremost with everything you have. But Jesus always gives us an opportunity to be forgiven and change course. So Jesus gives them His three-part prescription. First: ***Remember*** Restoration begins by remembering. This church had fallen—it didn’t just stumble. It needed to remember what its relationship with Jesus was like at the beginning. Christian: think about what your relationship with Christ was like when you first came to him. Or remember what it was like to lead someone to Christ, if you’ve ever even done that. Remember a time that you trusted Jesus with your greatest or simplest need, and he provided. Remember him. Next, ***Repent*** Repentance means to change your mind and change direction—to turn around. If you have left your first love, then turn around and go back to him. That requires a choice on your part and an act of the will. Then Jesus said ***Repeat*** He said, “Do the things you did at first.” That meant to take the steps you did when you first became a Christian. Pray. Read the Word. Worship wholeheartedly. Be so excited about Jesus that you tell others about him. Feelings follow action, not vice-versa. Get it? Trust that in being obedient and doing what you did at first will eventually result in a heart that is excited and loving.

So Jesus gives

6. The ***Door*** for the church.

Jesus gives them an invitation. He knocks on the door for them to respond. He says “he who has an ear to hear, let him hear.” In other words, he says, “if you want to hear this, you will. Open the door to me!”

Then see

7. The *Dividend* for the church.

If the church would seize the opportunity it was being given, maintain all their good things and remember, repent, and repeat in their love, the reward would be to eat of the tree of life in the paradise of God. This means the original relationship with God that Adam and Eve forfeited would be restored to them. They would enjoy all the life of heaven, in the presence of God. Jesus then warned the church that if they didn't do these things, he would remove their lampstand; they would forfeit their position as a church. So, the question is: did they make it? Did the Ephesians do what Jesus told them?

The city of Ephesus itself (not the church) hit hard times. It had terrible silting of its harbor, a catastrophic plague, internal unrest and external attacks, and so within a hundred years of this letter the city had lost almost all of its influence and population. But the church still hung on through those challenges. The great temple of Diana that I mentioned earlier (one of the seven great wonders of the world)—the Christian church had led in the destruction of that temple in 400 AD, and they took marble from Diana's temple and used it to build what was called the Church of Holy Wisdom—a Christian church. Earthquakes later destroyed that church. In the 5th century the Church of St. Mary was built, and in the 6th century the church of St. John was built. But the church struggled until, by the middle ages no trace of either the city nor the church existed at all. Neither has *ever* been rebuilt. I guess we could say Jesus removed the lampstand that was the Church in Ephesus. The church, for all its great start, for all its great influence, for all its great work, did not love. And do you know what's interesting to me about that? Remember the very last lines of the letter of Ephesians? "Peace to the brothers, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with *an undying love*." (Ephesians 6:23-24) Love is mentioned three times in the last two verses. The very last word they received, they quit doing.

What about us? Do we want to be known for our good programs, our right rules, our old traditions, our strict policies, or our love? Do we love Jesus first and foremost above everything else, and do we love people? Without love we will lose our lampstand. This church will no longer exist.

Pray