



**Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church**  
Sanford, North Carolina

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**Remember and Repent!**  
**Revelation 2:1-7**

A letter can be a wonderful thing. It can bring good news, even exciting news. Hearing from friend or family, college acceptance, a good report from medical tests . . .

A letter can be a scary thing, too. Sometimes the news isn't good. Someone is sick. There's some kind of crisis. Payment is being demanded on a bill or a loan.

Like most other things in life, letters can be good or bad.

Last Sunday we began a journey through the letters that the risen Lord Jesus sent to the seven churches in the ancient province of Asia. He gave these messages through John as the first part of his revelation about the things that were and that were to be. We find these messages to the churches in Revelation 2-3. And like a lot of letters, there was good news and bad news. The risen Lord commended some things and condemned others. He encouraged certain things and called for repentance for others.

Now we started this journey last week by looking at what John had to say about *the sender* of these letters—the risen Lord Jesus Christ as John saw him in his apocalyptic glory. John saw him walking among his churches, caring for them and tending their lamps. He is the Lord among his churches. And in each of these letters or messages to the seven churches, he calls on those who have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

That repeated statement, coupled with the significance of the number seven in ancient apocalyptic writings, reminds us that while each of these seven messages speaks a word to the particular church it was addressed to, it also speaks a word to *all* the churches—Christ's church throughout the world! So there's a word here for us today at Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church!

The first letter is addressed to the church at Ephesus. Listen to what it says . . .

"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: <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

<sup>4</sup> Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

### ***The church in Ephesus***

According to Acts 18, in the early 50s of the first century, the Apostle Paul passed through Ephesus, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Paul was on his way back to Antioch in Syria, and his ship apparently put into port at Ephesus, the major city of the province of Asia.

While they were there, Paul went to the Jewish synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. They wanted him to stay longer, but he had a ship to catch, so he promised them that he would return sometime if God so willed. He sailed on for Syria, but left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus.

Meanwhile, a well-educated and eloquent Jew from Alexandria in Egypt named Apollos came to Ephesus. He had a thorough knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures—the Old Testament—and had been instructed about the way of the Lord. He was fervently teaching and preaching about Jesus, and was accurate in what he knew. But he only knew the baptism of John the Baptist. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him speaking boldly in the synagogue, “they invited him into their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately” (Acts 18:26).<sup>1</sup> Afterwards, Apollos went to Greece and assisted the believers there by debating the Jews, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.

Later, Paul came back to Ephesus as he had promised. After finding some disciples who, like Apollos, knew only John’s baptism of repentance, Paul instructed them about Jesus and “they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus” and received the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, there were about twelve of them (Acts 19:1-6).

Paul then started teaching and preaching in the Jewish synagogue. That went on for about three months, but some of the Jews refused to believe and began publicly maligning the Way of Jesus. So Paul took the disciples and began meeting daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. He ministered that way for two years, “so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:8-10).

Luke tells us in Acts 19 that God was moving in a mighty way in Ephesus. God was doing extraordinary miracles through Paul. Some Jewish exorcists tried to cast out a demon “in the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches,” and the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and beat them all up. When that became known, it was clear to people in this city where the magical arts were prominently practiced, trying to control the supernatural for their own power and benefit, that the power of the name of Jesus was not something to be used for control, but rather was the name of the one who was to be bowed down to as Lord!

Now as I already said, Ephesus was the major city in the province of Asia. It was the seat of the Roman governor, and by the late first century—the time when Revelation was written—it was the center of emperor worship. Throughout the first century, Ephesus was important both commercially (as a seaport) and culturally, and had been since Greek times. Several Roman roads led there as their destination.

As well as becoming the seat of emperor worship, Ephesus was already the home of the temple of the mother goddess Artemis or Diana. This temple was so impressive that it was considered one of the wonders of the ancient world.

In Acts 19:23-42, Luke tells us how Demetrius the silversmith, whose specialty was making silver shrines of Artemis, stirred up a riot against the Christians because so many people were

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

turning from their pagan worship and ways to Christ and his way. It was right after that riot that Paul left Ephesus to travel to Greece.

Later on, Paul would again pass nearby Ephesus, but he didn't want to stop there, because he was afraid it would delay his trip to Jerusalem. So he sent for the elders (the ministers) of the church in Ephesus and gave them a farewell speech, knowing that this would likely be the last time he would ever see them.

Given the situation in Ephesus, with the influence of the Jews who were rejecting Christ, the pagan worship of Artemis, and the leanings toward emperor worship, is it any wonder that Paul warned the Ephesian elders to be careful to remain true to Christ and his teaching? He told them (Acts 20:28-31):

<sup>28</sup> Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. <sup>29</sup> I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. <sup>30</sup> Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. <sup>31</sup> So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

From what we read here in Revelation 2, they had heeded him well.

### ***The letter from Jesus<sup>2</sup>***

After all, in the letter to the angel of the church in Ephesus (the angels of the churches are probably the bishops or chief pastors of the churches), Jesus commended the church for its continuing orthodoxy—its right and accurate belief and teaching. That's vitally important, especially in the face of so much false teaching.

Now Jesus knew them and their situation well. Notice that he identified himself at the beginning as the one “who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands . . .” (2:1)—the Lord among his churches. He told them that he knew their deeds, their hard work, and their patient endurance. He knew they didn't tolerate the wicked who tried to infiltrate the church as leaders, but rather by careful testing (as John calls for in 1 John 4:1-3) they spotted those who were false apostles. (The *Didache*, a little Christian document from the late first or early second century, also laid out certain tests for traveling apostles, prophets, and teachers.) Jesus reemphasized the Ephesians' perseverance and endurance of hardships on account of his name, and recognized that they had endured without growing weary.

That all sounds great, doesn't it? They were doing pretty well!

But then he said, “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love” (2:4). What in the world did he mean by that?

Was he talking about their love for Christ? Was he saying that somehow as they had progressed in their faith and grown toward maturity and defended the truth that the incredible love they had for him at the beginning had faded away?

Or was he talking about the love for one another that Christ had commanded his disciples to have (John 13:35)? Paul had emphasized the necessity of love for one another. After his death,

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<sup>2</sup> These commentaries have been helpful in my interpretation of this text: Morris Ashcraft, “Revelation” in *the Broadman Bible Commentary*; David Aune, “Revelation” in *The Word Biblical Commentary*; George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*; Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*; Charles Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John*.

John had become very influential in the church at Ephesus and in the churches in the area around Ephesus. Clearly he had taught this kind of love, as we see from his letters and in what Jesus told his disciples the night before his death in John 13, 14, and 15.

Or was he talking about *both*? Was Jesus reminding them of what he had told the scribe who asked him what was the greatest commandment of all—that it is to love the Lord our God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength, and that the second is to love our neighbor as ourselves, and that everything else in the law and the prophets hangs on these two chief commandments?

When you get right down to it, you really can't love Christ without loving one another, can you? And you can't truly love one another without truly loving Christ, can you? You really can't have one without the other!

So it appears, then, that the Ephesians' struggle for orthodoxy, as important as it was, had led to a lack of love. How could that happen? Right belief should issue in right behavior, shouldn't it? And the love Jesus was talking about here *is* a matter of behavior—it's the Greek word *agapē*, more than affection, it's the love that grows out of the will of the one who loves and always seeks the other's best interests.

And they had abandoned it.

So Jesus called on them to *remember* where they had fallen from, and to *repent*—to change their ways. They were not to abandon their orthodoxy, but neither were they to abandon love! Yet they had, so he was calling them to repent, to learn to love again.

You see, this quest for orthodoxy can be difficult. Right belief is important, indeed essential. It shapes us and how we live and respond to the circumstances of our lives. It gives us wisdom for living and hope for the future. But when we become obsessed with orthodoxy, we can also become cold and hard and proud—right belief becomes so ultimate that we neglect our relationship with God and we look down on our brothers and sisters who may not agree with us on every detail. As I heard another preacher put it once, we can be straight as a gun barrel doctrinally, and just as hollow spiritually.

And *Jesus is not pleased* when that happens. So much so that he warned the Ephesians, telling them that if they didn't repent, he would come and remove their lampstand from its place—in other words, they would cease to be a church!

You see, it's not a matter of *either* orthodoxy or love; *both* are necessary! We need to believe right, and we need to walk right. And the way we walk right is to walk in love for Christ and for one another!

Apparently they heeded his call, at least for a time. Writing to this same church about a dozen or so years later, Ignatius, the bishop of the church at Antioch—the church that had sent Paul out on his mission—wrote to the Ephesians and to several other churches as he was on his way to Rome to be martyred. In his letter to the Ephesians, he commended them for not allowing some teachers to sow evil doctrine among them. Then he rejoiced that it had been granted to him “to rejoice with you, that you love nothing, according to human life, but God alone” (Ignatius, *Ephesians* 9).<sup>3</sup>

Jesus closed his letter by again affirming their orthodoxy, especially their hatred of the practices of a group known as the Nicolaitans, by calling on the one who has an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches, and by promising in a beautiful picturesque way the gift of

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<sup>3</sup> *The Apostolic Fathers I*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, *The Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 183-185.

eternal life for those who overcome—those who are faithful to Christ no matter what the cost. They will eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God.

***The church at Jonesboro Heights***

Some letter, huh? What if Jesus had sent it to us?

*He did.*

Jesus commended the Ephesian church for its orthodoxy but called it to repent for its lack of love. And at the end he said, “Let the one who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”<sup>4</sup>

He’s saying it to us, too. *Jesus is calling us to believe right and to love right.*

To be biblical and true to the historic Christian faith. To know what we believe and why we believe it. For our lives to be shaped and formed by the gospel and guided by the ways of Christ. For our understanding of God and his ways to move us to mission and to give us the foundation to face whatever difficulties or challenges we encounter.

*And to love him with all we are and everything we have. To yield our lives and ourselves up to him completely in love. To love one another as he has loved us—always seeking each other’s best interests.*

“Let the one who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

Do you have an ear?

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<sup>4</sup> My translation.