

“What’s Missing?”

Revelation 2:1–7

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Many of you are familiar with this letter of Revelation and at the beginning of this letter there are actually seven shorter letters to specific churches. We will be looking at the letter written to the church at Ephesus in this study. Before we get into the text, I want to give a brief bit of context, a history lesson on the church at Ephesus. This church had been planted by the Apostle Paul and we see this in Acts 18 to Acts 20. Paul stayed there for three years and he rarely did that anywhere.

At one point he rented out a hall so that he could teach every day to the believers. Sinclair Ferguson noted that this would have been equivalent to every one having a seminary education because for years they were able to attend for maybe a couple of hours every day and just listen to the Apostle Paul teach. When Paul left, he appointed one of his favorite disciples, Timothy to take it over. Famous preachers came to visit there – men like Apollos – some of the most gifted men of ancient times.

Probably after Timothy was gone, in the late 60 A.D. church history tells us the Apostle John went there and he probably still had Jesus’ mom, Mary, with him. He kind of made it his base camp for the next 30 years or so until he died. He had a brief exile on the island of Patmos when he wrote this letter but I want you to think of the significance of this church. For over 40 years there are head pastors like Paul and John – the two greatest theologians of all time. Both did much right for they persevered through persecution and now this church is going to get this letter.

One Bible commentator said the church of Ephesus was kind of like the mother church of Asia. There was so much happening there and probably leaders were being raised there as they were sent out to other churches. Does this make you think of any modern day churches that sound similar to that? Before I read this text I want to pray and pray in your heart as I do.

Prayer:

Father God would hear our prayers? Would You bless the reading, teaching, preaching, the understanding, the acceptance and application of Your Word? We pray all this in the name of Christ, Amen.

Revelation 2:1-7 says [1] *“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of Him who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.*

[2] ‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. [3] I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. [4] But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. [5] Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. [6] Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. [7] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’

In Revelation 2:1 the word angel can mean messenger so in some sense this letter is probably being written to the head pastor at the church at Ephesus or maybe all the pastors thinking they could have had multiple pastors, but it's applicable to the whole church. Also in verse 1 Jesus is the One who is being referred to in this verse.

I'm going to make three points from this text of Scripture. One is what's right? They are getting a lot right. Two what's wrong? There is a rebuke and thirdly, what's missing? So, let's get into this study.

The first point is what were they doing right? For at least 40 years, this church has been persevering so they have been getting a lot of things right. The first thing to notice is they had right living, good works, good deeds. He was telling them they were persevering and they were in the midst of persecution. The Apostle John had been exiled when he was writing this letter. He was telling them they were so committed to Christ and serious about their faith that even under persecution they stand true. They don't give in. They did hard work, toil, patient endurance and perseverance.

What did their good works flow from? It flowed from good thinking, good theology and right doctrine. He praised their doctrine. In Acts 20 Paul had predicted that false prophets and teacher would come but they smoked them out. They didn't listen to them and probably church discipline was practiced to get rid of these men that were not teaching the right thing. We don't exactly what they were thinking but it was probably some kind of compromise. For instance, they may have said something like this; 'It's okay for you to say Jesus is Lord as long as you say Caesar is lord as well.' These false teachers wanted them to do both things but they stood against it. Near the end it mentions this specific cult - *works of the Nicolaitans*, but it was probably some kind of licentiousness or libertine attitude around sexuality, like you can sleep with whoever you want, just don't make that big of a deal about it. The church at Ephesus fought against this because they were serious about pure doctrine and pure lives. They were doing so much right.

Think about this. What if you as an individual or we as a church we're to get a letter from Jesus and it starts out saying something like, 'these are all the good things you are doing...' We would feel pretty good about ourselves. This is sincere praise so there is a lot here that would warm your heart and get you excited from the One person who never does flattery. It's genuine and always accurate, but it doesn't stop there. Before I go to the next point, I want to ask this question. All Scripture is God-breathed and applicable but some portions of Scripture are sometimes seen a little more applicable to us in certain situations, does it not? I wonder in 21st century American who might this Revelation 2:1-7 apply to?

It's not the mainline liberals down the road, because they don't have right doctrine. It can't be the modern day libertines – the licentious ones who have right doctrine (they get the Gospel right) but say 'I'm forgiven by Jesus so I'll go out and do what I want. I'll party my brains out for the glory of God.' This is what I think when I read this passage. This sounds a lot like people like me and you. The people who go to evening worship or were raised in ministries like Campus Outreach or go to good reformed churches, who are serious about doctrine. So, let's take this seriously as we continue to study this text.

The second point is, what was wrong? He said they left their first love. This is what John MacArthur says 'The Ephesians' passion and fervor for Christ had become cold, mechanical orthodoxy. Their doctrinal and moral purity, their undiminished zeal for the truth, and their disciplined service were no substitute for the love for Christ they had forsaken.' Their enthusiasm was gone, their thrill was low and zeal had flattened out into orthodox habit and

tradition. Orthodox fundamental believers are inclined to believe they love God because they have such high regard for and such obedience to His Word.

Peter was shocked and offended when Jesus questioned him three times of whether he really loved Him (John 21:15-17). Peter's theology and morality were sound but his heart was not yet fully devoted to Christ. As important as right living and right doctrine are they are no substitute for love and in fact become cold and sterile apart from love. Lovelessness not only grieves the Lord but it gives Satan a foothold in a believer's life when a believer or body of believers loses its deep sense of love for the Lord. That believer or that church is on the brink of spiritual disaster.

Another quote comes from a long time New Testament professor who teaches at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida, Simon Kistemaker, "The church that Jesus addressed no longer consisted of first generation believers but of second and third generation Christians. These people lacked the enthusiasm their parents and grandparents had demonstrated. They functioned not as propagators of the faith but as caretakers and custodians. There was an obvious deficiency in evangelistic outreach as a result of a status quo mode of thought. They loved the Lord, but no longer with heart, mind, and soul." They fell short of genuine enthusiasm for the Lord.

Here is a real life example of what I've been talking about that might help us even better get our mind around this. My wife and I before we got married loved each, got married and then fought like cats and dogs. We are both pretty much Type A personalities and it was an explosive combination the first couple of years and not in the way we wanted it to be explosive. This happened more than once, but I can remember this one night very clearly somewhere in the first or second year of our marriage, it was not in the heat of passion, anger or rage where you say things to try and hurt each other, for this was after the fight was over and we both had cooled down. We were both being very rational and logical and we both said something to each other that was virtually the same thing. I said 'Hey you don't seem like the same person I married for you seem crazy to me, but I believe Jesus and His Word so I'm against divorce. I'm not leaving, I'm staying. I have to be honest, I don't like you very much, but I'm sticking around.'

You don't have to be a Christian psychologist or a marriage counselor to realize that's not the marriage we all grew up dreaming about. Think about this. We had right doctrine – marriage is important, divorce is bad, don't do it. We had right deeds and commitment – we're sticking in this thing even when we don't enjoy it, but the love and passion we're gone. We are 23 plus year down the road in our marriage and God has revived our marriage, but just like that can happen in those intimate of human relationships, it can also happen with a genuine believer that is loved by the Lord, loves the Lord to some degree with their mind and actions but not with the heart.

The third point is, what is missing? I have read this passage many times, meditated on it and at first it's like one of those passages that is pretty convicting – you left your first love! But when you think, practically what does it really mean for my life? It's not as clear. Does it mean I don't cry enough when I come to church? You don't get goose bumps any more when you hear your favorite praise and worship song? No, that's not it.

As I've been studying this lately it has made me think of my teaching from Jonah for one of the things you see in Jonah is that you can have a genuine believer that is getting so much stuff right. Jonah had the right theology about God and you really see it from a prayer he prays to God in Jonah 4. He had right practice. At first, he didn't want to preach to those wicked

pagans but he finally did it, but he certainly didn't have the warm, passionate love for Christ and the way it showed up was that he didn't have warm, passionate love for other people.

Here is another worthwhile quote from Sinclair Ferguson; "The pharisees were originally a kind of holiness movement for they were conservative, moral, consistent and pure but they started focusing on externals only and behavior patterns and not the deep work of God in the heart. If there is a special danger for professing Christians today it must certainly be indifference to and ignorance of the true nature of the human heart. We should never be deceived in to thinking outward conformity to group norm, professions of conversions or intellectual ascent to orthodox doctrines or the same thing is true heart knowledge of God. No amount of love of truth patterns is exactly the same thing as love for Christ. Jesus Christ's words in Revelation should serve as a lasting warning to Christians whose hearts are set on pure doctrine and upright moral behavior. These things are entirely Biblical and laudable in and of themselves but that is not the only issue. There is another issue. Do these things spring from and lead to a present experience of fellowship with and knowledge of God? Jonah was only now discovering how much it is possible to experience and accomplish and yet for areas of his life to be untouched by God's grace."

Last quote by John MacArthur is 'without love the best doctrine is like a noisy gong or clanging symbol for true spiritual love is defined as an attitude of selfless sacrifice that results in generous acts of kindness done to others, countless others throughout history of the church having endeavored to keep their faith pure but had not reached out to others in love as the Lord commands every believer to do. They often become heresy hunters, eager to tear down what is wrong but doing little to build up what is good and full of criticism but deficient in love.'

I think most people have heard of Sinclair Ferguson and or John MacArthur. I have heard people criticize those two men. I have never heard anyone call them a theological liberal. You might not agree with their doctrine but I have never heard people say they take doctrine lightly. I have never heard anyone say they don't practice the faith or are not serious about good deeds. I have heard people accuse John MacArthur of being a heresy hunter himself yet he is saying there is a real danger for us if we emphasize all head and all hands but the heart gets left out.

Practically what does that actually look like? Maybe this doesn't happen to you but it happens to me. It's easy to read this and think how it applies to other people and miss how it might apply to my own heart. As I have studied, prayed and meditated over this, I think here is the insight that comes. Do you remember when Jesus was asked 'what is the greatest commandment?' And they only asked for one. He never just gave one. He would say 'First, is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and the second is like it – love your neighbor as yourself.' Why did He always give the second command with it? For real genuine believers, He knows it's too easy to say 'of course I love God' but the test if you love God, is do you love other people well?

Think again about the three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him. Each time Peter said he did Jesus responded each time with telling Peter he basically then needed to live out, to prove it, to show it in the way he loves, ministers and cares for God's people. Also let's look at what John says in another one of his letters. These verses have been convicting to me at times. I John 4:20-21 says [20] *If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. [21] And this commandment we have from Him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.*

Now let's think about application of what we have been talking about. Practically speaking, how does this play out? Perhaps you have heard of this phrase – love the sinner, hate the sin. I know I have used this phrase before. It's a great phrase and a true phrase. It is so helpful but it's much easier said than done. Is it not? It seems that it is a lot easier to fall into one ditch on one side of the road. Again, the more liberal leaning ditch might be the ditch we tend to call the love ditch where you say 'I'm just going to love sinners so much I'm just going to give them a pass on their sins for who wants to make a big deal about all that stuff? Let's don't beat them up with the Law, let's give them grace.' This is loving the sinner and loving the sin even though no one really says it that way, but that's the way it plays out. I don't think that's the ditch that most of us are in danger of. I know I'm certainly not, most of the time.

So, what does that necessarily imply of what the ditch on the other side of the road is? That would be going all out on hate – hate the sin and hate the sinner as well. Most of us, would probably never say with our lips 'I hate that person' but have you ever felt it? I'll give a personal example here.

I won't say which election I'm talking about in this example but I would catch myself watching the news on TV and as the people in the other party that I was going to vote against were talking about their position, I would find myself talking back to the TV. Have you ever done that? I wasn't saying sweet, loving, nice things to them either. I wasn't praying prayers of mercy. I was much closer to praying the imprecatory psalms if I was praying at all. I just had this sense of disgust and contempt, thinking 'you morons, you idiots! What's wrong with these people, they are ruining our country!' Those might be the facts and in fact, I still think pretty much they are the facts.

Hear me, nothing that I am saying and much more importantly, nothing that the Bible is saying says that we should back off of truth for even one second or even right action, not even one millimeter but we have to have truth and love. Again, it's much easier said than done. It's a Biblical slogan because it takes a lifetime to really practice it. We're supposed to have sharp minds that think well about doctrine and action, yet in my life I often notice my sharp mind for doctrine to whatever degree I have that, can really quickly translate into a sharp tongue to attack and accuse.

In Revelation 2:6 we're to hate the deeds of those not practicing the truth and those at the church of Ephesus we're praised for doing this but they were not praised for loving people. Perhaps they had become pharisaical or heresy hunters.

In conclusion, I want to give one more personal example. Perhaps this study is just for me and not for anyone else reading this. I really started walking with Christ when I was about 15 years old and I was in high school. I was very serious about it because I had had a powerful experience with the Lord. I had been deeply emersed in the Animal House type fraternity lifestyle as much as one could as a 15 year old and I came out of that by God's grace. I became serious about the Bible, about truth and was at church every time I could be. I was reading and studying the Bible and I was passionate about it. I even liked getting into debates with people at my high school that disagreed with me. There were liberals and Muslims and I was passionate about debating them.

There was the problem for it was almost like I gloated and boasted at being about to tell them 'Hey you're going to go to hell' and I would say it with a smile on my face. "I'm right and you're wrong, have a nice day!" There were no tears or tenderness or compassion for them from me. I do think that most of us are a lot more sophisticated today than I was as a 15 year old and yet with all that is on the line in our country politically that we need to be applying truth to and

speaking up about and doing good deeds about, even in our denomination where we need have right thinking, truth, sharp thinking, speak up and good deeds, it's just very easy to let love slip out the window in the midst of doing and saying the right things.

We need to remember this; whatever you might feel against the theological liberals or the political liberals or whoever you consider your enemy that can tempt that you're at least tempted to feel at times, realize that we were once the enemies of Christ. Christ had every right to look at us with contempt, disgust and hatred, yet He looked at us with overwhelming compassion that moved Him to come to earth to hang on the tree of death that you and I justly deserve over and over again so that He could offer to us in love the tree of life for all eternity. We need to be melted and molded by that so that even more when confronting enemies with truth where we can do it with tenderness, compassion and gentleness. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we love You. Thank You for Your life. Thank You for Your death. Thank You for Your resurrection. Thank You for Your example, but much more importantly we're so grateful Lord that You're not just a moral example but You're our living Substitute, our Savior, the sacrificial Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Thank You and make us more into Your image for we pray all this in Your Name Lord Jesus, Amen.