

Sunday, October 25th, 2020

Revelation 2: 1 – 7 (ESV)

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.”

To Ephesus

Revelation 2: 1 – 7

Of the city of Ephesus, pastor and author, David Chilton once wrote,

The city of Ephesus was the most important city in Asia Minor, both in politics and trade. It was an important cultural center as well, boasting such attractions as art, science, witchcraft, idolatry, gladiators, and persecution. Main Street ran from the harbor to the theater, and on the way the visitor would pass the gymnasium and public baths, the public library, and the public brothel. Its temple to Artemis (or Diana-the goddess of fertility and "nature in the wild") was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. St. Luke tells us another interesting fact about the city, one that has important bearing on the Seven Messages as a whole: Ephesus was a hotbed of Jewish occultism and magical arts. Throughout the world of the first century, apostate Judaism was accommodating itself to numerous pagan ideologies and heathen practices, developing early strains of what later came to be known as Gnosticism – various hybrids of occult wisdom, rabbinical lore, mystery religion, and either asceticism or licentiousness (or both), all stirred up together with a few bits and pieces of Christian doctrine. This mongrelized religious quackery was undoubtedly a primary spawning ground for the heresies that afflicted the churches of Asia Minor. ⁱ

In Scripture, we first hear about Ephesus in Acts chapter 18, when Paul, passing through the region, decides to leave Priscilla and Aquilla in the city. Eventually, they are joined by Apollos, whom they train more adequately in the way of the Lord, and in Acts chapter 19 we are told that Paul himself returned, “reasoning and persuading...about the kingdom of God”, first in the synagogue, and later, in the hall of Tyrannus. Luke wrote,

¹⁰ This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. ¹¹ And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul... Acts 19:10–11 (ESV)

In truth, the situation was so extraordinary that,

¹³ ...some...itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.” ¹⁴ Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. ¹⁵ But the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” ¹⁶ And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

Acts 19:13–16 (ESV)

It would almost feel like comic relief if the thing weren't so serious. But as the event became known,

¹⁷ ...fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. ¹⁸ Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. ¹⁹ And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. ²⁰ So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. Acts 19:17–20 (ESV)

And one thing that shines through in these stories from the book of Acts, is that there can be no compromise between the gospel of the kingdom, and any other so-called “gospel”. Jewish exorcists who invoke the name of Jesus but do not truly believe in him

¹⁰ ...blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively. Jude 10 (ESV)

as Jude, the brother of Jesus would put it; and when it comes to what we might today call the new age practices of the those engaged in so-called magic arts, there is nothing to be done but destroy their books and talismans, even though this involved significant financial loss, and led eventually to a riot.

I want us to make note of this, because I think this kind of holy intolerance becomes very important in understanding the letter that Jesus sent to the church at Ephesus by way of the apostle John in Revelation chapter 2.

We see the same sort of thing in Paul's letter to Timothy, his son in the faith, in which he wrote,

³ As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus **so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine,** ⁴ **nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies,** which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. 1 Timothy 1:3–4 (ESV)

So, Paul appointed Timothy to serve as a pastor at Ephesus—at least for a time—and instructed him to carry on his ministry there with that same kind of intolerance toward anything that undermined the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, some would argue the timetable, based on the traditional date for the book of Revelation, and that's OK; but if we accept an earlier date for the Revelation (as favored by some scholars based on evidence internal to the book), then it's very possible that this epistle from Jesus—the letter found in Revelation 2, verses 1 – 7—was also addressed to the church by way of Timothy. Given both the contents and the context this would make a great deal of sense.

That letter begins,

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. Revelation 2:1 (ESV)

So, just a couple of things before we dive deeper. First, it's worth a mention that the words that follow are in fact “the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands”, that is, the words of Jesus Christ himself. Of course,

¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching... 2 Timothy 3:16 (ESV)

and so on, but this letter is word for word from Christ himself, regardless of what theory of inspiration we might hold to. This is either a letter from Jesus, or it's a lie. There's no middle ground here.

Also, note the way that Jesus refers to himself in terms from the vision related in Revelation chapter one. He will do this in each of the letters to the churches and it's important, because he will do so in a way that highlights some particular aspect of the message that follows. In this case, he is the one

...who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. Revelation 2:1 (ESV)

bearing in mind, of course, that, according to Revelation chapter 1, verse 20, the seven lampstands are the seven churches, and the stars are the angels—the ministers or messengers—of those churches. Speaking to this, the old puritan, Matthew Henry wrote,

...it is the honour of the Lord Jesus Christ that the ministers of the gospel...are in his hand. He directs all their motions; he disposes of them into their several orbs; he fills them with light and influence; he supports them, or else they would soon be falling stars; they are instruments in his hand, and all the good they do is done by his hand with them. ⁱⁱ

And in this letter, Jesus highlights the prophetic aspect of his anointing because he is addressing the Ephesian church's participation in that calling. Verse 2.

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. Revelation 2:2 (ESV)

See, there's that holy intolerance for all that would undermine the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Further,

³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. Revelation 2:3 (ESV)

And more still, verse 6;

⁶ ...this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Revelation 2:6 (ESV)

Today, we are not used to this kind of talk, but speaking to the Ephesian elders (“the angel(s) of the church at Ephesus”) in Acts 20, the apostle Paul said,

²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert... Acts 20:28–31 (ESV)

And we've already noted that he wrote in a similar vein to Timothy,

¹⁸ This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, ¹⁹ holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, ²⁰ among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. ¹ Timothy 1:18–20 (ESV)

In the text before us then, Jesus is commending the Ephesians for doing the very things that Paul had instructed them to do. As one author has written,

In many ways, the church at Ephesus had their act together...This was the church that had received the magnificent epistle to the Ephesians, and the apostle Paul had labored there...They had internalized the teaching, and they were faithful in their defense of it. ⁱⁱⁱ

But not all is well. Jesus continues,

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... Revelation 2:3–5 (ESV)

And it's so important that we would hear this. It's important because Jesus, the one speaking, is the Lord of the church—the church at Ephesus, the church universal, and this church (our church) too. Verse 7 opens with the sentence,

⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Revelation 2:7 (ESV)

So, even though this message was first given to the Ephesians, by way of their pastor, in the first century, Christ, speaks by his Spirit, not only to the Ephesians, but to all who have ears to hear, and he calls us, not to cease defending the faith—he commends the church for doing just that—but to make certain that we are doing it for the right reasons, and with the right motives.

Again, David Chilton wrote,

It is important to note that even the most rigorous concern for orthodoxy does not automatically mean an absence of love. It is only a perversion of orthodoxy that results in hardness toward brethren. Christ does not criticize the Ephesians for being “too orthodox,” but for leaving, forsaking the love which they had at first. The question of “doctrine *versus* love” is, Biblically speaking a non-issue. In fact, it is a specifically pagan issue, seeking to put asunder what God has joined together. Christians are required to be both orthodox and loving, and a lack of either will eventually result in the judgement of God. ^{iv}

Which calls for repentance if we have fallen prey to the temptation to be orthodox in our hating, but unorthodox in our loving. We can never tolerate—we must, in fact, hate—that which Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church hates. As in verse 6,

⁶ Yet this you have [that is, “For this I commend you”]: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Revelation 2:6 (ESV)

But we must be careful that our zeal to defend the faith is based on our desire for the honor of the Lord, and not some perceived slight against ourselves.

When David, the shepherd who would eventually be king, was fleeing King Saul, there were two occasions when he might have solved his problem by regicide, but on both of those occasions, he held back, caring more for the honor of God than he did for his own. And such must be our concern for the church. It is Christ’s church, and, as it says in Jude, verse 3, we are called to

³ ...contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. Jude 3 (ESV)

But as Jude would write a few verses later,

²⁰ ...you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ **keep yourselves in the love of God**, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. ²² And have mercy on those who doubt; ²³ **save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.** Jude 20–23 (ESV)

And, as Paul wrote to Timothy,

²⁴ ...the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. **God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.** 2 Timothy 2:24–26 (ESV)

And where we have failed, where our holy intolerance has degenerated into an unholy intolerance, where we have hated the sinner as well as the sin, where we have been quarrelsome, unloving, and more concerned for our own honor than for the honor of the Lord, we must have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches here in Revelation chapter 2, verse 5,

⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first... Revelation 2:5 (ESV)

It is never easy, but the admonition—the call to repent—comes with a promise as well.

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. ⁷ Revelation 2:7 (ESV)

Again, in the words of the old Puritan,

The Christian life is a warfare against sin, Satan, the world, and the flesh. It is not enough that we engage in this warfare, but we must pursue it to the end, we must never yield to our spiritual enemies, but fight the good fight, till we gain the victory... That which is here promised to the victors is that they shall eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God. They shall have that perfection of holiness, and that confirmation therein, which Adam would have had if he had gone well through the course of his trial...so all who persevere in their Christian trial and warfare shall derive from Christ, as the tree of life, perfection and confirmation in holiness and happiness in the paradise of God... ^v

⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches... Revelation 2:7 (ESV)

ⁱ Chilton, David; *Days of Vengeance* (Dominion Press, 1987), p. 93

ⁱⁱ Henry, Matthew; *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 2465.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilson, Douglas; *When the Man Comes Around*, (Canon Press, 2019), p. 21

^{iv} Chilton; *op. cit.*, p. 95

^v Henry; *op. cit.*, p. 2466