

“The Dying of the Light”

Revelation 2:1-7

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This morning we begin our examination of the two-chapter section of Revelation known to all its readers as “The Letters to the Seven Churches.” That is an accurate description of this material only if it is remembered that the entire book is a letter to the seven churches and that the letter to each particular church is also a part of the letter to all the churches and, indeed, as the number *seven* indicates, to the universal church of Jesus Christ. In my remarks on text I will introduce this letter to the church in Ephesus but also say some things about the seven letters together as a group.

Text Commentary

- v.1 We noted last week that determining who or what the “angels of the churches” were is a notorious difficulty in the history of the interpretation of Revelation. Most likely they are either heavenly guardians of the church (a wonderful thought, wouldn’t you agree?) or a personification of the church as a heavenly not simply earthly reality. In any case, as is obvious in each letter, it is the church, the congregation that is addressed.

It was natural to begin with the church in Ephesus because Ephesus was the chief city and its Christian church the chief church of the province. Ephesus was the first seaport of Asia Minor and home to the Temple to Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Forty years before, as you remember, the Apostle Paul had spent three years there building that church. [Acts 20:31] Later Timothy had an extensive ministry there. Then late in the first century the Apostle John lived in Ephesus and made it the center of his ministry. No doubt there were many in the congregation that received this letter who knew John personally, some of them probably knew him very well, and perhaps a number who could remember the ministry of Paul among them. Twenty years after the writing of Revelation, Ignatius, the chief minister of the church in Antioch, wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus that is full of praise for what he calls that “deservedly happy church” which is known everywhere, he said, for its good deeds, its brotherly love and unity, under that “man of inexpressible love” their bishop Onesimus. That Onesimus, according to an ancient tradition, was none other than the runaway slave and then Christian convert whom Paul sent back to his Christian master, Philemon, as we read in the New Testament letter that bears his name. Ignatius also praises the Ephesian Christians because, he says, “no false teaching could gain a hearing among them.” [Ign. *Ephesians*, 19]

- v.2 Each of the seven letters follows a pattern; there is an obvious symmetry to them. In each case the letter begins with an address to the angel of the particular church that is then followed by some identification of the Lord Jesus drawn from the vision of the exalted Christ in chapter one. Here he is described as the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands, as we already read in 1:13 and 15. In the next letter, in v. 8, he will be described as “the first and the last,” the

description Christ gave himself to John in his vision as we read in 1:17. And so on in each case.

In each letter in the next place comes a statement of what the Lord knows about that church's spiritual condition. Christ who is the first and the chief pastor of the church has an intimate knowledge of his churches, he knows their strengths and he knows their weaknesses.

The church in Ephesus was not the only one that we know of from the NT that had been troubled by imposters: men who laid claim to some position of eminence in the church in order to gain a following and influence. These men were not claiming to belong to the Twelve, of course, but to that wider group of great men and leaders who were called apostles in a more general sense and of whom we read several times elsewhere in the NT. The Ephesians had put the teaching of these strangers to the test and perhaps also their way of life; they compared both to that of the true apostles and when these men failed the test closed their ears to them. [Caird, 30-31]

- v.5 Next in each letter comes a command that addresses in some way the church's condition as the Lord has described it.

The threat the Lord delivers here is that he will judge the church, even destroy it as an effective center of the Holy Spirit's work. Some have taken "I will come" as a reference to the Second Coming but that seems contrary to the context in which the threat is conditional: if the church repents the Lord will not come; only if she continues in her lack of love will he come in judgment.

- v.6 The Nicolaitans are also mentioned in the letter to Pergamum. Taking all the evidence together, and there is not very much evidence, it appears most likely that their teaching amounted to an encouragement to compromise with the surrounding culture. Their interest was making it easier to be a Christian in a pagan world. In all likelihood they taught that Christians could, in good conscience, participate in the imperial worship or the worship of Ephesus' grand temples. It was their separation from such worship that marked the Christians out as an alien element in the society and created the greatest offense among the unbelievers.

- v.7 Finally, each letter ends with a promise. To some of the churches a specific promise is given, but to all of them a general promise of reward to those who overcome or conquer. John does not here define what he means by overcoming. But as we proceed it will become clear that overcoming means remaining faithful to Christ and his cause in defiance of the opposition and the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the Devil. And the reward to be given mentioned at the end of each of the seven letters is eternal life, in each case described in some familiar image. We will hear of the tree of life in Paradise again at the end of the book in the description of heaven given in chapter 22.

Indeed, this promise to the conqueror reappears just once more in Revelation after its seven-fold repetition in the letters of chapter 2 and 3 and that reoccurrence of the promise

is found that the very end of the book in the description of heaven. There we read, in 21:7, “He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.” That indicates that the letters are calling upon Christians to engage in the eschatological battle being waged in this world that is described in the central chapters of the book with the promise that if they do they will reach the glorious eschatological destiny described at the end of the book for those whom God rewards. [Bauckham, 14]

John is seeking to prepare the churches for difficult times ahead – the idea of overcoming or conquering suggests warfare [Ladd, 40] – and he is nerving his readers to endure and prove themselves faithful with the promise that they will not fail, if faithful, to participate in Christ’s ultimate victory.

You will notice the formula in each letter: “let him hear what the Spirit says *to the churches*.” The message of each letter is obviously intended for a much wider audience. Each church, every Christian indeed, is to heed the warnings and promises contained in each letter and apply them to himself or herself.

The letters to the seven churches are, without question, the part of the book of Revelation most familiar to readers of the Bible and most often preached. I preached a series of sermons on these seven letters in 1982 and several times through the following years I preached on the letter to the church in Laodicea and once, a few years ago, on the letter to the church in Philadelphia even though through those same years I never preached on the rest of the book. I have on my shelves books containing series of sermons on these seven letters by Robert Murray McCheyne, by Archbishop Trench, and by Alexander Whyte and sermons on these seven letters have been published by many more preachers than those three. The letters seem to us to be clearer, their message more obvious and accessible, and their value more practical than the rest of the book. They have seemed to speak *to us* and to *our situation* in a way the rest of the book does not seem so obviously to do. But, in fact, even these letters pose certain challenges to the interpreter.

For example, some have found here also a secret code needing to be deciphered. Dispensational interpreters have argued that the seven letters represent seven periods of church history. They begin with Ephesus because the church of Ephesus represents the apostolic church. It is followed by Smyrna because the letter to that church concerns the persecution suffered by the early church. Pergamum represents the time of Constantine, Thyatira the Middle Ages, Sardis the Reformation, and so on, culminating in the lukewarmness of the Laodicean church, the church that represents our modern age. All dispensationalists are sure that the Second Coming is going to occur near to their own lifetime, if not in their own lifetime, so the seventh period of church history has already arrived. There is precious little evidence for this interpretation of the seven letters, it is in the case of many details in the letters rather obviously contrived, and there is much to be said against it, not least the fact that the letters explicitly purport to be messages to real churches that then existed in the Roman province of Asia. If the letter to Philadelphia actually is about the missionary movement of the 18th and 19th centuries, nobody in that church in Philadelphia would have known that. They would have completely misunderstood John’s message to them. Indeed, in a most important sense, it wouldn’t have even been a message to them. Interpretations of this type that violate the clear sense of a passage and its original context

should get short shrift from us. John obviously expects his readers to understand what he is talking about!

What *is* clear is that the letters concern the same realities that are described in the central visions of the book. We may think they are a message directly to us in a way the central part of the book is not, but, in fact, the letters and the central visions of Revelation are about the same thing. There are a host of connections between the themes of these seven letters and the themes of the great visions that follow. It is the tumult and battle, the struggle on earth for the kingdom of God, the opposition of the enemies of God and man, that make necessary the faithfulness, the endurance, and the willingness to suffer to which the church is summoned in the seven letters. In this way the seven letters continue and finish the introduction to the entire book and lead into the central part of the book.

But if there is no secret code to decipher, what of the letters together as a whole? How do they function as a whole? For example, some have taken the letters to set before us the seven marks or characteristics that the Lord Christ wants the church to display. John Stott works this interpretation out in a very attractive way in his study of the book of Revelation. [*The Incomparable Christ*, 187-193] The seven letters, he thinks, set before us the seven marks of a faithful and godly church: love in letter one, suffering in letter two, truth in letter three, holiness in letter four, integrity or sincerity in letter five, mission in letter six, and zeal in letter seven. But in the finest recent commentary on Revelation, the monumental study by Gregory Beale, the author concludes that all seven letters are really about the same thing and set before us but one mark of an ideal church, viz. that of bearing witness to Christ in the pagan world around us.

Consider this: perhaps the most intriguing question of interpretation in the first letter is that posed by the statement in v. 4 to the effect that the church in Ephesus had forsaken or abandoned its first love. What is the love that the Ephesian Christians had lost? Well there is a real argument about this in the commentaries. Some argue that what was lost in Ephesus was brotherly love. In their zeal for doctrinal purity – a very good thing in itself and a zeal they are commended for twice in this letter – they had allowed a censorious and critical spirit to grow among them. As one commentator put it, “...the eagerness to root out all mistaken men had ended in a sour and rigid orthodoxy.” [Barclay in Mounce, 88] We see that problem addressed elsewhere in the NT and have seen it often enough ourselves to know how reasonable an interpretation of v. 4 that is. Others however argue that what is meant is that the Ephesian Christians had lost their love for God and Christ. *That* was their first love. They were doing the right thing still but were no longer motivated by devotion to the Lord. They liken the statement in v. 4 to that in Jeremiah 2:2 where the Lord says to Israel:

“I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me...”

The great Archbishop Trench, after discussing various interpretations of v. 4, sternly concludes, “The suggestion that this leaving of the first love can refer to the abating of any other love but that to God and Christ, grows out of an entire ignorance of the whole spiritual life...” [85] But Gregory Beale argues that in fact the statement refers neither to brotherly love nor to the love of God and Christ but to the love of the lost world and specifically to sharing the gospel and bearing witness to others which these believers had loved to do when first they became followers of

Christ. He points out that the identification of Christ at the beginning of the letter is as the one who walks among the *lampstands* and that the threat, should they fail to repent, is that he would remove their *lampstand*. He is speaking to these Christians, in other words, as light-bearers. He points out that lampstand and witness occur together in Rev. 11:2-3, and that the entire thought harks back to the Lord's remark about a lamp being put on a stand so as to give light to the house and about Christians being the light of the world.

What is the correct interpretation? I'm not sure, nor do I think it makes a great deal of difference as all of those interpretations naturally come together in any Christian life. There is no true love of others that doesn't originate in the love of God and Christ and anyone whose heart is full of that love will care both to love his or her brothers *and* to bring Christ to the unsaved. In any case, the seven letters obviously address individual churches in their particularity and individuality and address all churches at the same time. Whatever was the specific reference, what John says had happened in Ephesus Jesus said would often happen: "the love of many will grow cold."

In any case, given the unmistakably distinct personality and spiritual character of each of these individual churches we cannot help but wonder what the Lord Christ might say to us if he wrote to the angel of the church in Tacoma or to the angel of Faith Presbyterian Church in Tacoma? What do you suppose he would say? Would he commend us for certain aspects of our life and work as a congregation? If so for what aspects? Would he find something to reproach? If so what would he reproach? After all, it is not as if every one of these churches were not imperfect in every way. The criticism that is contained in this letter obviously concerns more than simple imperfection, the frailty of every Christian life and every Christian church's life. It has to do with something in the life of the church so serious that, left unaddressed and unrepented of, would threaten to bring down upon it the Lord's judgment. How would the Lord Christ encourage *us* and in precisely what way would he call on *us* to repent? We can't help but wonder.

But you see, that is the great significance both of the fact that there are seven churches addressed and that at the end of each letter all the readers of Revelation are summoned to hear what the Holy Spirit says to the *churches*. We may not be precisely as any of these seven churches were in the day in which John wrote to them, but somewhere in the midst of all of them we will find ourselves and will find the word of the exalted Christ to us as a church and a people. The Lord Christ might just as well have written these seven letters and this first letter to Ephesus to us who form this congregation in Tacoma. *In fact, he did!* There are unmistakable lessons for us here!

I. In the first place, there is the Lord's commendation of hard work.

We are perhaps not often enough reminded that a godly, fruitful Christian life is hard work. There is perhaps a fear that any emphasis on hard work, on work at all might undermine the gospel message of salvation by grace and as a gift, not as something to be earned. Paul is always saying that it is not by works but by faith that we receive and obtain peace with God and entrance into eternal life. But here the very same word "work" is used twice. The Lord commends this people for their works and then, again in v. 5, using the word "work" once more, urges them to do again the works they did at first. The NIV does not translate the word as "work" but that is what the word is.

I remember when my pastor in Aberdeen first described the church's prayer meeting on Saturday night as hard work. I couldn't remember anyone in my hearing having ever talked about a prayer meeting or anything like a prayer meeting as hard work before, but when Mr. Still said that it was I found it immediately clarifying and helpful. Of course it was hard work. I certainly had found it so. It was hard to concentrate (three hours on Saturday night), hard to retain a spiritual mind, hard to care enough about the people being prayed for, hard to practice faith from beginning to end of every prayer. To pray well for others is very hard work, some of the hardest work anyone ever does. Let us face the fact and remind one another of the obvious. People don't come to prayer meeting in as large numbers as they come to Sunday worship perhaps in largest part because prayer meeting is harder work.

But, in fact, almost everything in the Christian life is hard work if we intend to do it well. "I know your works and your toil..." is what Jesus literally said to the Ephesian church. What works, what toil? Well works toward God such as worship, prayer, stewardship, mortifying sin, purifying the heart. Works toward your fellow Christians such as forgiveness, acts of kindness and generosity, practical assistance and care, sympathy, the bearing of burdens, admonishment when necessary and so on. And works toward the world, such as the love of enemies, making Christ known by word and deed, acts of charity, the telling of the truth, and so on. Everything we are commanded to do in the law of God, every way we are to live so as to make the teaching about God our Savior attractive requires hard work. There is not an easy thing in all that list. We are, Paul said, to be *eager* to do what is good. *And the Ephesian Christians were and continued to be.* As John says, they persevered in this hard-working way of life. It is toil. But that didn't stop the Ephesians and it isn't to stop us either. There will be rest enough in heaven. That is the message. Now is the time to work and to work hard. Surely we ought all to aspire to be described as Christians and together as a congregation to be described as a church as a people that work very hard in the work of the Lord.

It is a good way to examine oneself. We live in such a comfortable world with so many entertaining diversions. And we think that our jobs require of us enough work as it is. We want our Christian life, at least, to come naturally to us. But it does not and never has. It is the hardest, most demanding work of all. So put the question to yourself. Am I working hard at my calling as a Christian? Am I putting such constant effort into getting done what ought to be done – whether in my heart or with my life – that anyone can see that toil is a characteristic feature of my Christian life? I know your toil. It was for these Christians a characteristic and the Lord commended them for it. He admired and loved that about them.

II. Second, there is the importance of fidelity to the truth.

This is what the Ephesian church is commended for not once, but twice: first in regard to the so-called apostles who had come among them and second in regard to the Nicolaitans. Paul had told the Ephesians elders years before that "savage wolves" would come among them and "not spare the flock" (Acts 20:29) and they had taken that warning to heart. These believers and their elders and ministers were no easy pickings for spiritual charlatans! Men would come among them with claims of spiritual authority and insight and the Ephesian believers would apply the tests of orthodox teaching and faithful living and send packing anyone who didn't measure up. They got

a reputation for being discerning Christians who could spot a fake or a false teaching a mile away.

And our world is no different from the world faced by the Ephesian church. There are always folk urging us to be less rigid, to make less of our doctrine, to be more tolerant of other views and other ways of life. There are evangelicals nowadays who are urging such compromises. *They* would never say in public that they *hate* the views of the Nicolaitans, such as Jesus here says he did and the Ephesians did as well. The purveyors of these ideas in those days supposed that a Christian could embrace those very aspects of the pagan culture that otherwise would most alienate a Christian from that culture. And so it is today as we are told on all sides to embrace feminism or the sexual revolution or some form of religious inclusivism. But the Ephesians knew better and the Lord commended them for their loyalty to the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. The vague, cloudy form of Christianity that others recommended they rejected out of hand. They knew what the gospel was, they knew what the Christian life was and they were determined to be loyal to both. They were well aware that the devil often disguised himself as an angel of light, they knew that the truth had to be fought for, and they were great fighters for it.

“When Erasmus censured Luther for “obstinate assertiveness,” the great reformer replied that ‘it is not the mark of a Christian mind to take no delight in assertions; on the contrary a man must delight in assertions or he will be no Christian. And by assertion...I mean a constant, adhering, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and an invincible persevering.’”
[D. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary*, ii, 397]

Such were the Ephesian believers and the Lord here salutes them for it. We should aspire to be no less than they devoted to the truth and determined to maintain it against all comers.

III. Then, thirdly, there is this lesson: there can be a serious, even a killing error mixed up together with real virtue in a Christian church and a Christian life.

These believers were to be commended for much and the Lord commended them. So important was what they did well, so crucial to a faithful Christian testimony and to the welfare of a Christian church that the Lord threatens the church in Pergamum with his wrath precisely for failing to do what the Ephesians did so faithfully and well (2:15-16). Loyalty to God and Christ or, as John here puts it, overcoming or conquering is not achieved by reaching a certain ratio of virtue to vice. It is not a numerical calculation as if hard work in the Christian life and fidelity to the truth make up for a lack of love. This is a very subtle temptation to which all of us are subject from time to time and Christian churches all of the time. We know we are failing to honor the Lord in some area of our life, but we take comfort in the fact that we do better in other areas. We would never admit this, even to ourselves, but it is as if we were actually counting up our merits and demerits and comparing the percentage of each as if we were some out and out Pharisee. There all manner of churches that did all manner of good things whose lampstand was removed because they didn't care enough about orthodoxy, about holding fast to the truth and so tolerated some teaching, some idea that contrary to the faith as taught in Holy Scripture.

But the Lord puts a shuddering stop to this comparing our strengths to our weaknesses and taking comfort from the strengths and setting them over against our weaknesses. He puts a shuddering

stop to such thinking in this first letter of the seven. He commends the Ephesians. They were doing well in this way and in that. But, nevertheless, he threatens to remove their lampstand – and remember, as we read in chapter 1, the lampstand *is* the church – and he threatens to remove it if they do not recover a life of love. This was a Christian church. It knew what it was supposed to do and it was doing it. Even the hardest work was being done. But devotion to the Lord, the love of others, a heart for the lost, these things were slipping from their grasp. They were beginning to do the very best things for the very worst reasons. The Devil will be perfectly happy for you, for us to carry on doing good things if only he can get us to do them for the wrong reasons. For example, nothing so ruins a man's service in the battle for the truth as the spirit of hatred or pride. And sooner or later, the Devil knows very well, the motive will win out and the right things done for the wrong reason will soon become the wrong things themselves.

The main point of every one of these letters, as the conclusion makes perfectly clear, is obtaining eternal life. Billy Sunday once said that if there is no hell then lots of ministers are raising money under false pretences! Revelation is all about the end of the matter and the ultimate destiny of human beings. This is always the great issue, indeed, the *only* issue. And this first letter makes the point emphatically: one does not get to eat from the tree of life who will not work hard at the calling of a Christian, who will not remain faithful to the truth as it has been revealed by Christ through his apostles, and who will not live a life of love.

Are we deficient in love? Of course we are. And the way to make up that deficiency, the way to rekindle that love, as the Lord tells us explicitly in v. 5 is not by attempting to work up some emotion or by theorizing about what love means; it is by doing the duties of love. [Moffat in Mounce, 88] “Repent and *do the things* you did at first...” There is the challenge here.

There is also encouragement here. There has never been a perfect church. Our temptations are severe and constant. From the beginning there has been this mixture of heroism and frailty. But there is also a solemnity here. Christians and churches are being told in no uncertain terms to take their calling *seriously* and to fulfill it, no matter the cost, no matter the opposition lest they fail to overcome and fail to enter the city of God. Eternal life is at stake.

I have many hopes for you all. I want you to live happy lives. I want you enjoy your marriages and your families. I want you to have good jobs and to find yourself able to pay your way through this world and adequately provide for your loved ones. But more than this, much more: I hope that you will all be faithful witnesses for the Lord Jesus Christ, that there will never be doubt in anyone's mind about where you *stand* and to whom you have committed your life. I hope that hard work for the sake of the most important and precious things of life will be a mark and characteristic of your life and also that yours will be a life of love, evidently and obviously a life of true devotion to God and man. I want you at last to eat from the tree of life and to that end I hope and pray that your life will always be lived with the deadly serious intention of overcoming every obstacle that stands between you and the paradise of God.