

September 8, 2024

Revelation 2:1-7

The city of Ephesus was a major metropolis in Modern-day western Turkey. It was home to one of the seven wonders of the Ancient World: the colossal Temple of Artemis. Artemis, or the version of her that was worshiped in Ephesus at this gigantic, beautiful temple, was a fertility goddess. The citizens of Ephesus believed she could give them fertile wives that produced homes filled with children, fertile fields filled with abundant harvests, seas filled with fish, harbors filled with merchants and traders that would establish a thriving economy- but it came at a price! She demanded worship. If you gave her a generous gift or sacrifice, she would be generous to you. If you practiced fertility in her temple with her temple prostitutes, then she'd bless the land with fertility and rain- as above, so below. You could even appease her by giving up your daughter to be one of these women in the temple! Everyone in Ephesus did whatever they could do to appease Artemis and worship her so she would bless the city, *that is, everyone except the Christians*. The great Christian missionary Paul planted a church in this city, and immediately it was clear that they were different. In a place where men were not only allowed, but expected to run around on their wives, these Christians held their men accountable and told them they needed to love their wives and be faithful to them. Instead of looking down on the poor that didn't do enough to please Artemis, the Christians loved the poor and generously and sacrificially helped them. Instead of living in fear of what Artemis wouldn't give them, they lived in joy because their God didn't demand a sacrifice, but was himself the sacrifice. They were completely different from anything the Ephesians had ever seen! And they paid for it. *Dearly*.

They were seen as snobbish and close-minded. The Greeks believed in a pantheon of gods, they didn't really mind that the Christians worshiped someone called Jesus, but they couldn't tolerate the fact that Christians refused to worship their gods, that they said their God was the only god! The Christians were seen as unpatriotic. Artemis worship wasn't just about appeasing a goddess. It was about playing your part in the health and prosperity of the city and being a good citizen! The Christians refused, and were therefore hated. The Christians were shunned by their friends and neighbors- you didn't want to be associated with a Christian! The Christians were outcasts. And Jesus saw it. John, who served as a pastor in Ephesus, was on the prison island of Patmos, and Jesus comes to him and says, write this to the Ephesian church- to their angel, which means their messenger, their pastor: "I know." "I know the pain that you are suffering. I see the rejection of your friends and family and how painful that is. I see how much money and social status you've lost. I've seen how many people laugh at you and hate you and purposely make your lives as miserable as possible. I know! And I know that you've endured it patiently. I know you haven't asked me why or shaken your fists at the sky, asking why I let this happen! And I know how passionate you are not just for me, but the truth. I've seen how you don't just listen to everyone who claims to be a pastor or Christian teacher, that you hold them accountable to the

Bible, and you take my word so seriously that you don't tolerate anything less than the full truth that I've given to you, and you've kept at it, and I'm so happy. I love that. *But...*”

What do you mean, “but?” The Ephesians are passionate about the Bible, passionate about truth, about doctrine, and they are paying for it. But something's happening in their hearts. At first, when they first heard the Gospel, that God loved them so deeply that he sent his own son to be crushed in their place, and they realized how loved they really were, that produced a beautiful, passionate, sacrificial, selfless love in their hearts for God and their neighbors. They were happy to study God's Word and loved doctrine and theology, and were so in love with God's truth that they wouldn't settle for anything less. And they loved their neighbors, even the ones that spat at them. They prayed for their neighbors who didn't know Jesus. They were okay with being different, they endured persecution with joy, but that joy and love was turning into a deadly religious pride. They were passionate about doctrine, but more so they could prove people wrong, not because they loved God's truth. Yes, they were different from their heathen neighbors, but they weren't praying for them anymore, but saying, “good riddance” as if they were any more worthy of God's grace, as if years earlier they weren't living the same way! They grew cold, they abandoned their first love, and Jesus is very clear: “You must repent. You must realize how far you've fallen. If you don't, I'm going to pluck your lampstand out. Your church is going to die. You are going to be dead, even if you are walking around, praying, worshipping, you'll be dead, and when you realize it, it will be too late.” But look at what Jesus says at the end- to the one who is victorious- the Ephesians? They are victorious? How? Not because they are so loving, but because Jesus is so loving, and because he was the perfect loving person that all of us should have been, and he was punished for all of our lack of love, our coldness, our selfishness, and we are therefore victorious. To the Ephesians, they are going to be with him in the new Garden of Eden, a place of perfect truth AND perfect love, and they are going to live forever. When Jesus wants his church to love, he doesn't shame them, he doesn't say, “Be just like me, you can do it.” No, he shows them what he's earned for them, and that produces love in his people.

Lovelessness kills a church. A pastor I know said something I'll never forget: “Culture trumps doctrine every time.” It's possible for a church to have all the correct theology, to know exactly what the Bible teaches and have a pastor who preaches theologically correct sermons that align perfectly with the Bible every Sunday, but if the culture, the everyday actions of the church members don't reflect what the Bible says, then it doesn't really matter. What kills a church, according to Jesus? It's not a lack of money. It's not a lack of building upkeep. It's not the lack of a school or preschool. It's not the boring preaching or lackluster music. It's lovelessness. When the Christians enter the building ask themselves, “Where do **I** want to sit? Who do **I** want to talk to? What songs do **I** want to sing? Is the church using its funds the way **I** think they should be? Is the pastor telling me what **I** want to hear? What can the pastor, the people, the church do for **me**? What's in it for **me**?” And I need you to hear this: if that is how you think, what's in it for **me**,

you are killing your church. It is absolutely possible for a church to have all the right doctrine, to have all the right preaching, to preach correct sermons, to sing theologically accurate hymns, to take communion in the right way, and still be absolutely, hopelessly dead. There must be love. Christians must understand that their church is something bigger than themselves. This isn't about me! We are here to serve each other! To show love to each other. To put each other first. To think, "what can I do for you? What can I do for God? How can I serve you?" That is what Jesus wants. That is what Jesus has given us, we aren't accepted because of the love we show, but because we have been loved by Jesus with a sacrificial love, it's our joy to love each other, to put each other before ourselves.

Love without truth is not love. It's as if Jesus knew that people would twist his words, so he says immediately after his warning that we need to love, "Yet, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate!" What's he talking about? The Nicolaitans were a group of people that claimed to be Christians, and taught that because Jesus has died in our place, and we are saved and perfect before God because of what Jesus has done, not because what we have done (all of which is true by the way), that it doesn't really matter how you live. God is love, so he'll forgive you. So go ahead and live how you want. "You want to enjoy the Artemis prostitutes with your neighbors? Go for it! Fit in with everyone else! God is love, he doesn't mind. Even if he doesn't like it, he'll forgive you. That's his job." Jesus says: "*I hate that, and you should too.*" Because Jesus loves us, he hates sin, because sin hurts people and separates them from him. He hates lies, especially ones told in his name. And if we truly love, we will too. A christian life without love is dead, but love without truth is not love- and there are churches that attempt to do this. In the name of love and tolerance and kindness they'll say, "we tolerate everything, even things the Bible clearly says are sinful because God is love. God is love, so it doesn't matter what you believe. It doesn't matter who you sleep with. It doesn't matter how you live your life." Jesus hates that. It's not loving to lie to people.

So what do we do? How do we as Christians hold to the truth that Jesus wants us to hold to, even when the culture calls it hateful and evil? How do we show love, and yet be honest with people about what God says? The first sermon I ever preached wasn't at a church. It was at the seminary- pastor school- to my classmates. I still remember it because I had never been so nervous in my life. We weren't allowed to have any notes, and it was the job of the classmates to critique everything they could. I still remember saying, "Amen," sitting down, and being torn to shreds by my classmates. One said, "Are you going to yell like that every sermon?" Another said, "I could tell you're dehydrated, your mouth noises were really distracting." Another counted how many times I said "um" and "uh." (It was 27). That would have crushed me, but it didn't. Why? Because I knew they were on my side. I knew they loved me, I knew they only wanted me to be the best preacher I could be, so even though I didn't love hearing everything I did wrong, I could swallow it because I knew I was loved.

And so Jesus comes to us, to our church, and tells us what we need to work on. points out the things in your life that are not good, and it may hurt. Don't tune it out. Hear it. But then understand who's saying it- Jesus, the one who has the seven stars, the church in his hand and he'll never let it go, the one who walks with you in your hardest times. The one who willingly was slaughtered when it should have been you, so you can look forward to the glory of the new Garden of Eden. No other God would do that for you. If he loves you that much, whatever he tells you is because he's on your side, and that is the guiding principle for how we talk about truth. Friends, students especially, the Bible says a lot that is absolutely contradictory to what our culture says about sex, money, love, life, how someone is saved, what it means to be a good person, and there may be times when you hold a fellow Christian accountable because he or she is doing something that Jesus hates, or an unbeliever who asks, "what do you think about this?" Have courage. Be honest. But remember: no one will care about how much you know until they know how much you care. Love them. Show them you love them. And tell them the good news of Jesus, all of it, even the hard things. You'd be surprised what Jesus can do, the lives he can change, the people he can save through the love and truth joined together in his church. Amen.