

## THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST: THE KING

Seven Letters: Ephesus

Revelation 1:1-8

Mark Vroegop

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*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. 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. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 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. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 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' (Rev. 2:1–8).*

How many of you remember the WWJD bracelets? The letters represented an important question: "What would Jesus do?" In the 1990's this question and the bracelets became a bit of global sensation.

You may not know that the movement began with a youth group leader at Calvary Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan.<sup>1</sup> It began as an attempt to get teenagers to think about how their Christian beliefs should translate into their daily lives. WWJD became a memorable way to help teens think about how they were really living.

Having pastored in Holland, Michigan, that question was uniquely important because if you ever visit the small city you'll be stunned by the number of tulips and the number of churches. While the population is about 35,000 people, there are 170 churches in the greater Holland area. In fact, the city was founded by Reverend Albertus Christian Van Raalte as a training ground for Christ.

But Holland was also known as the location of the great division between the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church. They divided over whether to sing the new hymns or stick with the Psalms, over services in English vs Dutch, how Calvinist one needed to be, and the use of the Heidelberg Catechism.<sup>2</sup> When I served in the city, it was known as "the pastors' graveyard" because so many pastors were run out of their churches.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What\\_would\\_Jesus\\_do%3F](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_would_Jesus_do%3F)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hollandsentinel.com/story/business/names-faces/2021/09/19/initial-rivalry-behind-hope-college-and-calvin-university/8352011002/>

The community didn't lack for churches. But it did have a dangerous form of cultural Christianity – even dead orthodoxy. And that's why WWJD starting in Holland is so interesting to me.

Every church and every community have a story. And it's important in every generation to not only ask "What would Jesus do?" but also to ask, "What would Jesus say?" Jesus knows our story better than we do. He knows what is spiritually helpful. He knows who is real. He knows who is faking it.

So, what would Jesus say about our church? What would he commend? What would he critique? I think that in order to know what Jesus would do, we'd have to also know what he would say.

That question – what would Jesus say? – is front and center in Revelation 2-3 and instruction to the seven churches.

Today we are going to look at the first two churches to whom John wrote, and I want to focus our attention on three key phrases and then make some applications.

"He who has an ear, let him hear"

"Do the works you did at first"

"Be faithful"

Our goal is to look at the text in order to consider what Jesus said to them and what we he is saying to us today.

### **1. "He who has an ear, let him hear"**

Before we get into the specifics of the words to Ephesus and Smyrna, I want to start with a brief overview of all the letters to the churches. We're going to dive deep into all of them. But it's important to remember a few things about these churches and to consider two common themes related to listening and endurance.

Before we look at those two themes, let me remind you about three things that I've mentioned before.

First, these letters are written to real churches but they're representative of all churches. These specific churches were in modern-day Turkey, and there were more than seven churches in this area. We're not entirely sure why John wrote to these particular churches. He may have had some prior relationship with them. Maybe he was familiar enough with them that he could write with some degree of accuracy. The fact that he chooses seven is probably because John intends for these churches to be seen as representative of the whole. Each city probably had multiple house churches. So, John has more than one church in mind. In other words, there's something for every church to learn from every church. Every letter contains the words "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Second, the letters appear to be written in a chiasmic form. That means that they arrive at a point (like a mountain) and return back to similar themes. There are parallel themes in letters 1 and 7, 2 and 6, and 3

and 5. This form, also used in other places in the Bible – like Lamentations – is intended to unite the whole piece together.

Third, each letter is connected to some characteristic of Jesus that John saw before:

*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' (Rev. 2:1).*

*And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life' (Rev. 2:8).*

*And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword' (Rev. 2:12).*

Who Jesus is serves as the basis of his relationship with the churches. His evaluation and their actions flow from the essence of who he is. Pay attention to the man behind the curtain.

Now to the common theme of listening and endurance.

All of the letters contain two important phrases:

**“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”** – This might sound familiar if you walked through our series in Isaiah. One of the major warnings to the people of God was the possibility of “keep on hearing but do not understand” (Is. 6:9). Jesus used the same language to apply to the message of the parables (see Mk. 4:9, 23). It’s warning language. It’s not a flippant statement. If you don’t hear, it’s incredibly problematic. Not listening is not only a sign of spiritual immaturity, but also part of God’s judgment. Jesus uses prophetic and parabolic language on purpose:

...the church has become compromising and spiritually lethargic and has entertained idolatrous allegiances, so that the parabolic method of revelation is instituted. The parables throughout the book not only have a judicial effect on the unbelieving but are meant also to shock believers caught up in the church’s compromising complacency by revealing to them the horrific, beastly nature of the idolatrous institutions with which they are beginning to associate.<sup>3</sup>

We can’t remain academically distant from these letters. Like all the book, they need to be brought close. Each of them needs to be applied.

But there’s another phrase that is equally important for all the letters.

**“To the one who conquers...”** – This reflects the goal of the entire book of Revelation: faithful endurance.

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<sup>3</sup> G. K. Beale, [\*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text\*](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 238.

*'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' (Rev. 2:7).*

*'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death' (Rev. 2:11).*

*'To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it' (Rev. 2:17).*

Remember that the goal of this book is to inspire and encourage perseverance. That's why the concept of being a conqueror is linked to promises. This is meant not to be viewed as a reward or as transactional obedience. John is linking together listening, victory, and reward.

The one's who listen are those who are victorious. The victorious ones are blessed. So, keep listening. Keep obeying. Keep enduring.

We endure by listening: He who has an ear, let him hear.

## **2. "Do the works you did at first"**

The first letter is addressed to the church at Ephesus. This was a solid church in an important city, but they were showing signs of spiritual complacency. Their orthodoxy had outpaced their passion.

Paul had served as the pastor of the church in Ephesus. According to Acts 19, Paul served there for two years, and there was a mighty movement of God in that region. When people were converted and it threatened the idol worship industry of Artemis, a riot ensued and two of Paul's companions were nearly killed. Ephesus became an apostolic basecamp from which Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy and 1 Corinthians. What's more, church tradition suggests that the apostle John may have served in the city as well.<sup>4</sup>

Chapter two begins with a description of Jesus that speaks to his control and connection to the church. Notice that he walks among the seven golden lampstands (2:1). As we'll see, Jesus knows all about these churches. He knows what is commendable. He knows what deserves critique.

The church at Ephesus was solid. But it wasn't perfect. And this is in the first century, less than a hundred years from when Jesus walked the earth. There never was or will be a "golden era" of church history. That should help us to not be overly discouraged or overly confident. Dig deep enough in every church and every era and you'll find some really big areas in need of renewal.

Jesus knows what is really going on. Verses 2-3 list nine affirmations of this church:

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<sup>4</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., [\*Preaching the Word: Revelation—The Spirit Speaks to the Churches\*](#), ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 65.

- Works – this was a church marked by obedience
- Toil – in hardship they were pushing forward, even when it was hard
- Patient endurance – remember that this is the goal of the book, so Ephesus is modelling faithfulness
- Discerning – they were careful in considering those who called themselves apostles
- Convictional – they were willing to identify those who they believed were false
- Enduring patiently – this must be something a bit different – perhaps connected to persecution
- Bearing up for my name – they were taking a bold stand with the name of Jesus
- Not grown weary – despite the pressure, they were not backing down

What's more, if you skip down to verse six, you'll see that they're commended for hating the works of the Nicolaitans. This was probably a group of people (maybe within the church) who were encouraging the mixture of Christian and emperor worship. This church is praised for her faithful resistance.

This is quite a list! It paints the picture of a really solid church whose doctrine and discernment are faithful and biblical. They've weathered some storms, experienced some opposition, and yet they are still standing faithful. There's much to thankful for here.

But they're not perfect. There's something missing. And it's serious – "I have this against you." This is a warning about judgment. Other phrases confirm this: "Remember from where you have fallen, repent...or I will remove your lampstand from its place" (2:5).

The critique is that this faithful, orthodox, and resilient church has "abandoned the love {they} had at first" (2:4). What does this mean? Most commentators agree that Jesus has in mind the kind of passionate affection for God and others that would have characterized the church in their early days or just after their conversion. That's gone.

What's more, it's not just about their feelings. The church is rebuked for not doing the works that they did at first (2:5). So, the problem is that the church was not doing the kind of things that were motivated by and expressed love to God and others. One commentator says:

The Ephesian converts had known such a love in their early years; but their struggle with false teachers and their hatred of heretical teaching had apparently engendered hard feelings and harsh attitudes toward one another to such an extent that it amounted to a forsaking of the supreme Christian virtue of love.<sup>5</sup>

Their zeal for orthodoxy led them to be unloving toward God and others. The early days of their enthusiasm for spiritual things and their care for one another diminished. The stress of hardship and opposition caused their affections for God and others to deflate.

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<sup>5</sup> Grant R. Osborne, [Revelation](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 115.

This is serious! If the church doesn't listen, Jesus warns that he will come and remove their lampstand. This means a removal of the spiritual power of the church. It's a warning. But there's also a promised blessing for the one who conquers: "eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (v. 7). This is the promise of intimacy with God. It's an Eden-like experience.

This first letter of seven letters is really important. Its message is timely, and we need to heed its warning. I'm sure the other letters will have application, but this one – at least for me – feels uniquely relevant.

## **Applications**

I think it's uniquely applicable because of the conversations I'm having with pastors all over the country and with many of you. The last few years have been incredibly challenging for every church, and it would appear that things are not going to get easier or less complicated.

While we should embrace the wisdom that comes with time-tested faithfulness, we also need to be reminded what the "love you had at first" looked like. Can you do that with me today? Think back to the moment when Jesus captured your heart with the gospel. Remember what it was like when you experienced God's grace. I know you were a bit naïve, but there was something special – even hopeful – about that time in your life, wasn't there?

Let me give you a few examples:

- You couldn't believe how wonderful the Bible was and you couldn't get enough of it
- You wanted to tell anything that moved about how to receive Jesus
- You'd come to worship, didn't know the songs, and you didn't care
- You loved meeting people who loved Jesus, and you had no idea about denominations or whose "team" somebody was on
- You loved talking to God in prayer because you couldn't believe you had his attention
- You looked to the future with such optimism because your sins were forgiven
- You saw people and believed that anyone could change
- Your heart was filled with gratitude and thankfulness because of all that God had done for you
- You were generous with your time and money because you knew how generous God was with you
- You thought your church was a little slice of heaven as you saw all these people who loved the same King

I could go on. But you get the point, don't you? And there's some of us who feel "homesick" for that kind of perspective. If we're honest (if I'm honest), the hardship, opposition, and even our own failures can create a cold-hearted cynicism. It's not only easy to be hardened, but you can also become harsh. It's possible to become a grumpy Christian with no joy, no faith, and no love.

The letter to the church at Ephesus is one that College Park Church needs. And today I'd like to ask you to consider what the Spirit is saying to us – right now. Where's your heart today? What's one thing that

you could do by faith that's similar to what you did when you first trusted Jesus? Has the last two years created more love for God and others in you or less?

We need to ask ourselves: "What does Jesus see?"

Have we left the love we had at first? "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

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