

# What Jesus Says to His Church

## Part 2: Ephesus—the Loveless Church

### Sermon Summary

We've just begun an eight-part series from the Book of Revelation—and we found out that there's a bit more to Jesus than meets the eye! Jesus is terrifying, yet tender (Rev. 1:5, 13-17a). His eyes are like a flame of fire and His feet are like burnished bronze! His voice is like the sound of many waters and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword. His face is as bright as the sun shining in its strength! He holds the keys of death and hell—he's the only one who's conquered death and the only one who can let us out of the eternal sentence of hell. When John encountered the awesome, glorified Christ, he fell down like a dead man. Throughout eternity, if you're a true child of God we will be falling down and worshiping this awesome Lord (4:5-11).

Jesus stands in the midst of lampstands, which symbolize churches (1:20), and he has something to say to each of those seven churches of Asia Minor (1:11). Our English word “church” translates the Greek word *ekklesia*. *Ekklesia* literally means “the assembly of called-out ones”, and it refers to people who God calls to come out from among sinful humanity, to become his forgiven children. The church is God's people, and they met in homes.. Interestingly, one letter is going to the “church”—singular—of each city. But in the Bible, the word *ekklesia* can mean the one church of a whole city—as in, “the church of Ephesus”—and the individual churches, meeting in homes, which make up the one, city-wide church. Interesting: all of the churches of Ephesus had enough characteristics which they held in common with each other, that one letter from Jesus adequately addressed them. But the churches of Ephesus were different enough from the churches in the other six cities, that one letter couldn't be sent to all of them.

It's almost as if all the churches of each city shared a “personality”. One letter was addressed to the church of the city of Ephesus, which was composed of many little house churches and yet clearly they had enough similarities to each other that one letter sufficed to address their issues. And it makes me wonder: what would Jesus' letter to “the church of Apex” say? So, what are the “common traits” of the church of Apex? Generally speaking, how do believers here differ from the believers of Boston, and from the believers of Birmingham? We may like to think that we do what we do because “that's what the Bible says”, but we are powerfully shaped by our culture. How has our culture shaped us—for good and for bad? And if Jesus wrote Apex a letter, what would it say?

Ephesus serves as a great case study to explore these questions. Paul planted the church in Ephesus during a brief stay there. It was a strategic city, and so Paul made another visit—this time staying for over two years. And the ministry was very successful. There was a lot of fruit. In fact, “all who lived in Asia—ie, modern-day Turkey—heard the word of the Lord” as a result of Paul's ministry in Ephesus. After Paul finished his pastorate there, he sent Timothy to be the pastor there. Later, the Apostle John (who wrote John's Gospel and Revelation) was the pastor! Two apostles, and one apostle's right-hand-man as your first three pastors—it doesn't get much better than that! Few churches ever had a more promising list of leaders than Ephesus did! But while celebrity preachers don't guarantee a godly church, Ephesus actually deserved it's great reputation.

And in his letter to the church of Ephesus, Jesus praises them for some very impressive qualities: deeds, toil, perseverance, and endurance without growing weary. That's some serious praise! But they weren't

just activists, they also cared deeply about correct doctrine. Do we “put to the test” what we hear? Jesus warns: “Take care what you listen to.” (Mark 4:24). I fear for “the church of Apex”. Whenever I turn on Christian radio I hear a mixture of good and bad. Many songs and sermons just use Scripture as a “jumping off point”, and the rest is sentimentalism. Do we listen too uncritically? Some people feel it is unloving to judge lyrics or sermons, but that’s exactly what Jesus commends Ephesus for. And it was one of the reasons the church of Ephesus bore so much good fruit.

But now we arrive at Jesus’ rebuke for the church of Ephesus: “you have left your first love”. Somewhere along the way, the Ephesian Christians had lost love as their motive. They had been motivated by love at the beginning, but over time they’d drifted (Luke 6:32-35). The “Golden Rule” teaches us that if you enjoy being loved, then take the initiative to love others; if you like your needs being met, then give to others; if you like being appreciated, then start appreciating others more. Biblical love doesn’t permit us to remain aloof and disengaged from the needs around us. Love entangles itself in this messy world—and it’s costly. I find this so convicting. It’s so hard to expend myself in situations that are inconvenient or unpleasant.

What should we do when we realize that we’ve failed to love as God loves? Jesus exhorts the Ephesians—and us—to remember, repent, and to resume. [1] Remember from where you have fallen. Recall how we used to respond to God’s love. Was there a period early in your Christian life when God’s love and forgiveness were more precious to you than they are now? [2] Repent—that means to change our minds, and therefore also our direction. Repentance is no mere emotional experience—feeling bad about our sin. Jesus says nothing about feelings here. We cannot wait til we feel bad: we must turn from our sin, we must give it up. Too many of us are ready to admit our failings, but then we wait for a feeling before we do something about it. Genuine repentance always impacts our will, and then our actions. Jesus calls us to the daily repentance that is part of the normal Christian life. Repentance is the proper response to sin, so until we are sinless, repentance should be as commonplace to our lives as sin is! [3]Resume—do the deeds you did at first. No debate or delay is permitted. Outwardly, many of our actions may be the same as before—but we will do them with a higher motive, more devotion and stick-to-it-iveness—and more inward joy!

And when he gives a command—he means it to be obeyed! He says: “I will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.” Christ threatened to remove the church from Ephesus—and He did it: there no longer is a church in Ephesus. No local church has a secure and permanent place in the world. Jesus continually evaluates us—our love, or lack thereof! Biblical love is a choice to do good for others. The church of Ephesus was doing lots of good deeds, was toiling and persevering, was testing and rejecting false doctrine, but they no longer were doing out of love for God and others. A sober warning to us: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

As Jesus closes this letter he addresses the individuals in each of those churches; he calls us to “overcome”. What does it mean to “overcome”? An “overcomer” is a true child of God. Every true child of God overcomes. God makes his true children overcome (1 John 5:4-5). And Jesus promises that everyone who “overcomes” will be permitted to “eat of the tree of life” in heaven. To live forever. Does this seem too good to be true? It’s not. It’s true. That’s why it’s called grace.