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REVELATION 2: 1 – 7

EPHESUS – PURE IN DOCTRINE, BUT LACKING IN LOVE

In the previous passage we looked at (Rev. 1:9-20) we noticed that, two times, the exalted Christ instructed John to write what he was about to see (v.11 and 19), and then send it to the seven churches in the province of Asia. But before we get to what John has seen in his visions, we find Rev. 2 and 3.

Here we have seven separate messages, dictated by Jesus Christ himself. They form a set of ‘cover letters’, so to speak, in which Christ addresses each church separately, although they are all part of the total package to be sent to each of those churches. And therefore, each one of these letters is relevant for all the churches, including us, today.

A close look at these letters shows again that Revelation really is a work of literary art. There are many connections and allusions to other parts in this book. For instance, you cannot understand the opening-sentences without the vision in Rev. 1. And the promises at the end reflect passages and pictures in later chapters.

The main content of these letters gives us insight in a variety of specific problems in the various churches. It is like a mini catalogue of the sort of issues you can expect to find in all the churches throughout history. There

are lots of good things to be thankful for, but also many dangers, challenges, and temptations to be aware of.

At the same time, when you pull it all together, the pattern shows one collective problem for the whole church. That is the temptation to compromise with the world, to settle down in the great city of Babylon. We will hear more about this city later. Here it refers to the temptation to assimilate with the contemporary culture, instead of persevering in the journey toward the new Promised Land, the new heaven and new earth.

This takes different shapes and forms in different times. But not conforming to the values and beliefs of the world in which the church lives between Jesus first and second coming will be a constant challenge.

When you go through these letters it is clear that – from Christ’s point of view, with the perspective from above, so to speak – not all the churches are equally healthy. And so, he is going to address each one of them according to his concerns for that particular church. At the same time, he addresses all the churches, the entire church.

This is how it comes to us. Confronted with these examples, we all must develop Christian discernment to look into this mirror, evaluate our own church-life, and respond with faithful obedience. In this light we will look at the letter to Ephesus as the first one.

The modern visitor to Ephesus, on the west-coast of Turkey, finds only ruins that have been unearthed in many decades of archeological research. But the remnants of its ancient history are still impressive. My wife and I have had the privilege of walking down the marble streets where once the apostle Paul and his companions were walking. We stood in the theatre we read about in Acts 19. It seats about 25,000 people.

Despite its ruined state you can still picture Ephesus as a once wealthy, prosperous, and magnificent city. It was famous for its enormous temple of Artemis, one of the wonders of the ancient world. The angry chorus of the confused crowd that kept shouting for about two hours “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians” (Acts 19) didn’t achieve much, contrary to the results of Paul’s activities. In 262 AD the temple burned down and was never rebuilt.

Today all that is left is one pillar, whereas the gospel they were opposing is still bearing fruit!

At the time the exalted Christ dictated this letter, the city of Ephesus was booming. It had a busy harbour for large ships coming from the west, and from there well-travelled trading routes went eastward, deep into Asia.

For a long-time it was a major trade-centre in that part of the world that saw many merchants and other travellers come and go. As a result of all those contacts it also became a cultural and religious melting-pot in Asia Minor.

This was the city where the apostle Paul worked for three years during his third missionary journey. We read about his time in Ephesus in Acts 19. And the preaching of the gospel was greatly blessed. From Ephesus the good news of Jesus spread to the country-side where, in a large area around the city, more churches were established.

Well, some 40 years after all this was happening, John sits down to write what Christ tells him to write, beginning with the letter we are looking at.

John is instructed to *write to the angels of the churches*. I mentioned before that there are many different ideas as to what these “angels” are. Traditionally they were often seen as the ‘bishops’ or ‘ministers’ of these churches.

But nowhere does the Bible use the name ‘angel’ for such a function. Others think that these are literal angels, so that every church had its own ‘guardian angel’, so to speak. But it is hard to write a book and send it to an angel.

There is no easy answer, but a possible solution could be that both, the stars (or angels) AND lampstands, are images of the churches. Angels would then refer to the churches as the exalted Christ sees them. That is the perspective from above. Lampstands would then be the churches as we see them. That is the perspective from below.

In other words, we may have our assessment of a church based on what we see, from below. But the glorified Christ opens our eyes for realities in the church that we do not see, from above. One example to illustrate this: to the church in Laodicea Christ says: *You say [from your earthly perspective], ‘I am rich, I have prospered and I need nothing, not realizing that you are [from my heavenly perspective] wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked*

(Rev. 3:17). We will find something similar in this letter to the Ephesus congregation.

Jesus Christ always begins by presenting himself – in this case as the one *who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands*. This self-designation is full of encouragement for the church. There will be severe criticism and there will be a lot to deal with, but the church is church of Jesus Christ. Frightening events may confuse or scare us, but the church of Jesus Christ is never on its own in this hostile world.

The church can be suffering or persecuted. The church can be filled with arrogant self-confidence or deeply divided by internal conflict, and yet, the exalted Christ is in her midst. He “walks”, so at all times he is actively present among us. And with the power of his right hand he protects, preserves, and governs the church, because he loves her as his bride, chosen to everlasting life.

And now you can also understand that he says *I know your works*. He knows everything about his churches, about the one in Ephesus, but also about the ones you and I belong to today. “I know what’s going on among you, in your church-life,” he says. “I know what you are busy with as congregation, what your priorities are. And I know about the daily walk and talk, the regular lifestyle of everyone in the church.”

Then he goes into the local specifics of the church in Ephesus. And it must be said, there are lots of good things to mention. There are many things the exalted Christ can praise them for. And that is what he does. He praises them. “You’re doing really great,” he says. “You are working very hard for the church. And your perseverance in doing what is right is exemplary.”

Yes, the church in Ephesus was making good progress on its journey toward the new Promised Land. And they could do so because they were not willing to trust just anybody. No, the congregation was following only reliable guides for leading them in the right direction.

The brothers and sisters in Ephesus were working hard for the church. There is always lots to do in the church. But in Ephesus many people pitched in to keep everything going. On top of that, exposing false doctrine and resisting

false teachers (as they did, according to v.2) is also hard work. And it is not the kind of work that everyone always appreciates either.

But they did not slack off and give up. *I know your toil and your patient endurance*, says Christ. Endurance is important in the spiritual battle you are involved in as believers. That is why you will find it mentioned throughout Revelation. It is your active resistance against what is wrong, and your persistent refusal to accept it, even if you have to go against what everyone else thinks, believes, or says.

Christ is fully aware that they are pretty strong at this in Ephesus. *I know you cannot bear with those who are evil*, he continues. They stuck to a zero-tolerance rule in the church for people who resist God's truth. If you promote evil, wrong ideas and wicked things among the believers, you are out! And Jesus Christ commends them for that. "That's good," he says. "Keep that up."

They also had to deal with people who showed up and *who called themselves apostles*. You had men who came to the church and who claimed to be authorized by God or by Christ to bring God's messages. That sounds pretty intimidating. How can you argue with that? If you are not too sure of the gospel as God's message, it is easy to fall for such impostors.

But the Ephesians were not so gullible. They were not impressed, and they did not just believe what some eloquent speakers were saying. Always remember: you can be good in using all the pious words and all the right Christian expressions, but that doesn't mean you are right and tell the truth.

And so the Christian believers in Ephesus tested those preachers. And when they did that, they found out what kind of people these so-called "apostles" really were.

How did they do that? Well, there is in the church only one way to find these things out. You listen carefully to the claims and the messages of those men, and then you check it carefully and prayerfully with what you have heard in God's Word, the Bible. In Ephesus it meant that they had to check it with what they had heard in the past from men like Paul and Timothy and John.

And the result? *You have found them to be false*, says Christ. These folks turned out to be false preachers, fake apostles. God's Word, as they had heard it before, exposed these men as liars. And when that became clear, the

Ephesians did not want to have anything to do with them anymore. They refused to listen to them. They were full of zeal to preserve the true and pure doctrine. They wanted sound teaching and had no use for false doctrine and false teaching.

How is that with us, today? We all have easy access to so many different ideas, views, and opinions. And many of those ideas claim to be Christian. But how do you know? How alert are we when it comes to these things?

To begin with, if you want to do this kind of testing, you must be familiar with what sound teaching according to the Bible is all about. You have to be able to discern what you hear and then recognize false teaching. It is important enough.

The New Testament is full of this. In his first letter, chapter 4:1, the apostle John urges us: *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*

How alert are we? Are we ready to apply the zero-tolerance rule when it comes to false doctrine, wrong ideas, teaching that does not pass the test of God's Word? Or are we too easy-going sometimes? You hear somebody speak, you read a book or an article or a blog; you find something on some Christian website and you think: "Hey, that doesn't sound so bad. It should be alright."

Or we think or say to each other: 'Now this man is such a popular speaker or author. And he seems a nice man, a fine Christian person. Whatever he says or writes, it must be okay!' This can be especially the case when you have reliable people telling you: you should listen to this man or read this or that book by him or her.

Are you willing to put them all to the test? You may be capable of doing this. That is one thing. But are you willing to do that? Are you willing to discern unreliable guides when you listen to speakers or read stuff? And are you ready to say 'no'? Are you ready to go by the zero-tolerance rule of the Ephesians?

The question is important because we may think that it is offensive and negative to be so critical all the time. You listen to this speaker or you read

this book, and you think: “perhaps it’s not entirely kosher, but why make a problem of it? All this nitpicking! He is a Christian and you can always learn something”.

We do not know anything about the identity of those “false apostles” in Ephesus, but the whole scenario reflects the main conflict that continues to come up in the church – the conflict between falsehood and truth. And as God’s children, as God’s church, we should not be afraid or ashamed to make this distinction between falsehood and truth.

The point is that two opposite and mutually exclusive claims or statements cannot be true at the same time. God created the world, or he did not. Jesus arose from the dead, or he did not. Jesus is God, or he is not.

This is pretty controversial today. People get upset when you take this approach. For many people there is no such thing as ‘an absolute truth’. It is all a matter of opinion or preference. What is true for you is as good as what is true for me and it is unacceptable to be judgmental or intolerant. You are not allowed to say to people: “what you are saying there is not true. It is false. You are wrong”.

Count on it: making such a distinction between falsehood and truth will not make you popular with people. But here is your comfort: Jesus Christ will praise you when you refuse to tolerate false teaching in his church.

This refusal to tolerate false teachers and this desire to defend the true faith is not only difficult today – it was just as difficult then already. But Christ knows that they *have not grown weary* during the hardships they have endured for his name. They did not give up. These Ephesians were standing firm in their conviction. They were sticking up for the truth of God’s Word. They were pure in doctrine.

And there was more. In v.6 Christ says: *You hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate*. We do not know much about these Nicolaitans other than what we find in this chapter. You get the impression that they were promoting ideas that led to bad moral choices and practices. For them accepting the values of the pagan culture and living the lifestyle of the pagan world was not a big deal.

Why make your life so difficult? Why be such a narrow-minded, negative and critical stick-in-the-mud? You can compromise with the worldly lifestyle all around you. It should be okay to have some fun. Those “Nicolaitans” didn’t have a problem with this.

This is a big challenge in the church, also today, especially in combination with a lack of discernment when it comes to pure doctrine! If you are not sure what you believe, or you do not care, you will not be sure, or you will not care either, how you should live your life. Wrong thinking leads to wrong living.

But the Ephesians want nothing of this! And Christ is happy about that.

All of this sounds pretty good, does it not? The Ephesus congregation has much going for them. We would say that this is a strong and rock-solid church. And sure, that is all true and good. But it is not sufficient! Something is missing.

But....., says Christ in v.4. This indicates a sharp contrast.

Jesus Christ’s view from above discovers, underneath the strong and solid layer of pure doctrine, the weak, brittle, and crumbling layer of love. That is a disastrous flaw. It is so disastrous that it will hinder the church’s pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem!

But I have this against you, says the exalted Christ, *you have abandoned the love you had first*. Jesus’ words have the tone of the disappointed Bridegroom, who loves his Bride, but who has lost her love.

Like the LORD said to Israel in Jeremiah 2:2, *I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you loved me and followed me in the wilderness*. This is what Christ sees when he looks at his church in Ephesus. It hurts him.

What is this love? Is it love for God and for Jesus Christ or is it love for others? It is both. Your love for God will show itself in your love for others. And on the other hand, when your love for God diminishes, your love for others will also suffer.

At that time, the church of Ephesus was over 40 years old. Outwardly, little has changed in those years, or so it seems. Another generation has grown up. They stand for orthodoxy. They are willing to defend the truth, resist false teaching, and to work hard for those goals.

But the children did not feel the same intense excitement and deep love for Jesus as their parents did when they first came to faith. And perhaps even for some of these parents themselves the first love for Jesus Christ has diminished.

It sounds a bit weird does it not? How can you be so faithful and loyal to the truth that you have zero tolerance for false teaching in the church, and at the same time your heart is cold and not full of deep and warm love for the God of the church?

But think of a marriage. A husband and wife can be very faithful and loyal to each other; they can be busy taking care of each other, but more because they have this sense of duty, than driven by their first love, which was so strong on their wedding day. And that makes what looks like a strong relationship very vulnerable.

In the same way you can, as a church-member, faithfully attend all the worship-services, be involved in all kinds of activities, feel a strong loyalty to the truth of God's Word, do all the right Christian things, but more because you have this sense of duty than driven by a deep love for God. Such love can peter out. Then you are no longer devoted to Christ as you should be, and excited about loving him as you used to be.

This turns out to be an important question. What drives us? What drives you? What drives me in the church? Do you do what you do in the church because it is your duty? Because you have your own agenda? Because it makes you feel good? Because people admire you for it? Because you like to be in control? How do the things that I do betray my motivation?

Ask yourself. Examine yourself. Is it my love for God that drives me? And does that show in the things I do and how I do them? Is it not fair to say that sometimes we are not driven by a deep and heartfelt love for God? Perhaps that love motivated me in the past, but somehow it has died, and I have become apathetic, or even cynical.

The point is that for the exalted Christ this is the most crucial issue. If this first love is lacking, the church is in danger! For then all your efforts and hard work in the service of God are not worth much. Then all the good things Christ has seen in Ephesus are in jeopardy.

Remember Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13:1–3: *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

This is why Christ so strongly appeals to his church in Ephesus. Do not keep going this way, but take steps to revive your first love. “Remember how wonderful, how exciting it was,” he says, “when you were so filled with love for me. How deep have you fallen! Where did this deep love for God go? Repent. Change. Turn around. Make a U-turn in your thinking and in the way you live. Turn away from your complacency, or apathy, or whatever it is that drives you, and return to the deep and self-sacrificing love you started with when you first came to love me.”

“And then make it a daily priority to do the things you did at first, when you were driven by your love for me. Show you love for me in your actions and choices; in what you do in the church and how you live in the world.”

How can you do this? And why would you do this? Always remember God's deep love for you, as it came to you at first in Jesus Christ.

But if you do not “then your future as my church is at stake,” says Christ. His warning is chilling, frightening, but clear. *I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.* There is no future for the church that has no love.

This warning reflects the tone of the whole book of Revelation. Jesus is on his way as the Judge. He is coming soon! The time is near. On that day, the Judge will exclude, from the circle of churches, the congregation that has abandoned its first love.

That is how serious this is, also today. Will we be there when the multitude no one can count will gather before the throne of God and of the Lamb? Will we be there on the day that Jesus will return in glory to judge the living and

the dead and to separate the goats from the sheep (Matthew 25:31-46)? The question is urgent enough.

At the same time, there is this wonderful perspective of the promise of the exalted Christ: *To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*

When, by God's grace, you fight against your sin and against your lack of love, you continue to resist evil and you fill your life with things that show how much you love your God and your Saviour Jesus – then your future is bright; then the joy and glory of God's eternal kingdom will be yours.

You may remember that God had planted this 'tree of life' in the Garden of Eden. But it is long gone. Because of our disobedience we lost the right to eat from this tree.

But God's amazing grace in Jesus Christ will bring it back. The 'tree of life' appears again in Revelation 22 as a permanent feature in the New Jerusalem. And the abundance of its fruit – twelve crops per year – will feed the citizens of the new heaven and the new earth for ever and ever.

Love him who loved you first. Then your life will be good, and your joy will be abundant in the paradise of your God.

3. Do you really believe that *the time is near*, as it says in verse 3? How does this affect your priorities in life today, but also your activities with a long-term focus, for instance your education, your career or raising your children?
4. In v.4 and 5 God greets the churches. Quite often the same words are used to greet you and welcome you in church every Sunday. It implies that God himself is greeting you and welcoming you with these words when you come to worship. Explain why this is significant and discuss how this affects you.

Chapter 2 – Revelation 1:9-20

1. In v.9 we hear the word *tribulation*. It reflects that in the last days, the days between Jesus' 1st and 2nd coming, the world is often a hostile place for those who believe in Jesus Christ. Find passages elsewhere in the New Testament that illustrate and affirm this.
2. How are you comforted and encouraged in what is going on in your life and in this world by the various details of the vision of the glorified Christ as John describes those in the verses 12 – 16?
3. John's vision of the glorified Christ causes him to *fall at his feet as though dead*. Christ then lays his hand on him and says, *fear not* (v.17). Explain what this tells you about how we should experience our relationship with Christ, and how we should worship him.
4. What makes 'golden lampstands' (v.12 and 20) a fitting image for churches? And why the plural and not just one golden lampstand as image of the one universal church?

Chapter 3 – Revelation 2:1-7

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Ephesus Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.
2. Can you, and dare you, identify what drives you, either personally or as congregation, in your Christian life and in your activities in the church, but also as church?

3. Sometimes Christians make a contrast between defending and promoting purity of doctrine, rejecting false teaching and applying discipline on the one hand, and being a church where love and social compassion are in the centre of everything we do. It is often seen as traditional, conservative versus contemporary and outreach-minded. Is it correct to contrast those things? Explain why or why not. Can you appeal to this letter to Ephesus for this?
4. Seven times we read in Revelation that John was *in the Spirit* and that he saw and heard things *in the Spirit*. What do you think it means “to be in the Spirit”? Discuss the question whether God might use the same experience today to communicate with people.

Chapter 4 – Revelation 2:8-11

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Smyrna Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.
2. In Smyrna, the Christians were facing severe persecution. This is a significant aspect of the Christian life throughout history, and is still the case in many parts of the world. What do you think is the secret of believers who remain steadfast and strong in their faith under serious threats? Think of the story of Polycarp.
3. Have you ever experienced negative reactions to your Christian faith and/or Christian life? How did you or would you handle that and deal with it? What makes it hard not to compromise your faith?
4. In the political and economic situations we find ourselves in, here in North America, we enjoy much prosperity, as well as freedom to worship and serve the Lord. Does the call of Christ: *Be faithful unto death...* mean anything for us? Can we do anything with it today?

Chapter 5 – Revelation 2:12-17

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Pergamum Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.