

Revelation 2:4-7

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Jesus warns the Ephesians that they are not acting out of love. Their priority is no longer to love God first, and to act accordingly. They act rightly, and stand up for truth, but they do not do it from love. If they do not repent, Christ will take away their effectiveness as witnesses to the world. However, He commends them for opposing a heretical group, the Nicolaitans. He urges the Ephesians to follow the Spirit and to overcome the world, so that they will be rewarded greatly in His kingdom.

In Revelation 2:1-3, the Ephesian church is commended for standing for the truth and expelling false leaders. Next is the exhortation where the *church* in Ephesus is instructed how to fix what they are doing wrong. Jesus desires that His church be all they can be. He commends them for good work, but then exhorts them for what is missing. Jesus says *but I have this against you, that you have left your first love*. The word love here is the Greek word “agape.” The other word used for love in the Bible is “phileo,” which indicates an affection for someone or something.

“Agape” love is a love of choice. It refers to making a choice to do something that is in someone else’s best interest. An example is in 1 Corinthians 13, which says that “love (agape) is patient.” To be “patient” is to make a choice to persist in an undesirable circumstance while having to endure an irritation of some kind. No one is called “patient” when they persist in spending time doing something pleasurable.

Why would someone choose to endure an irritation that can be avoided? In the case of “agape” love, it is because they see a greater purpose. An example might be persisting in spending time with an annoying person because you see that you might be able to serve that person by providing them a benefit. (Perhaps that person is your own child.) This is agape love. It is setting aside what is circumstantially comfortable to serve something greater than the irritation, bother, discomfort, pain, or cost.

In this case, the something greater that should be served is God. Jesus made clear that the first and greatest commandment is “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). The Ephesian believers are exhorted to set aside other priorities and make love of God their primary focus.

Apparently the Ephesian church had lost the proper motivation for standing for what is true. Jesus does not tell us what they had put in its place. Perhaps the Ephesians had decided “being right” was their top priority. If that was the case, they had stopped serving God as their primary priority, and started serving self. In such an instance, standing for truth would not be out of “agape” love for God. Rather it would be out of a desire to ascend over others.

It seems clear that the church is being exhorted to make their *first love* a love of God, as per the first and greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37-38).

Something else had taken *first* place in the lives of the Ephesian believers. After correcting them, and exhorting them to again elevate love of God first in their lives, Jesus reminds the *church* in Ephesus that *I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent*. This is a stern warning. Jesus is glad the Ephesians stand for what is true. He is glad they confront and refuse to tolerate false leaders. But without having love of God as their primary motive, their witness is not the witness God desires.

Therefore, Jesus makes clear that if the Ephesian church does not return to their *first love*, and do all they do for the right reason, Jesus says He *will remove* their *lampstand out of its place*. To *remove* the *lampstand* likely refers to removing their witness. Their light will no longer shine. Jesus will remove their example, because it does not stem from love. Even though they are doing good standing for what is true, they are a bad example if they do not do it from a place of love for God (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

There could be a number of ways a church's witness could be removed. Jesus does not state the how, only that this is a certain outcome if they do not mend their ways.

In spite of the Ephesians standing for what is true, Jesus does not want a witness to the world for truth unless it is done out of a motive of love for God. It needs to be done in order to serve God, who desires us to benefit others. As Paul states in the 'love chapter' of 1 Corinthians 13:

“And if I give all my possessions to feed *the poor*, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.”
(1 Corinthians 13:3)

The greatest possible devotion is to lay down one's life for a cause. But Paul says here that even if he gives his life as a martyr, if he does not do it in love, “it profits me nothing.” This would indicate that even good things lose their benefit if they do not stem from the proper motive. And the primary motive we all need to choose is to love God with all our being (Matthew 22:37-38).

It is important to note that Jesus emphasizes the *first love*, which is love of God. All other love is proper when it flows from that *first love*.

After exhorting the Ephesian church to return to their *first love*, Jesus adds *yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate*. Adding this compliment might be Jesus's way of emphasizing that He really does commend, and desire that believers, His servants, stand in the truth. Jesus did not want the Ephesians to “be nice” to the *Nicolaitans*. Jesus wanted them to hate their deeds, even as Jesus hated their deeds. But He desired them to do all they did out of their *first love*.

Perhaps the Ephesians had begun to hate the *Nicolaitans* themselves, rather than hating their *deeds*. Hating people is not consistent with loving God as a first priority. Jesus instructs us to love our enemies, and do good to them (Matthew 5:44; Romans 8:21). Consistent with this admonition, part of the good we can do for enemies is to confront their evil deeds. But the motive would be to serve them, and turn them to the light, rather than to show superiority over them (James 5:19-20).

The text does not tell us about the *Nicolaitans*. Only that Jesus hated their *deeds*. Jesus agrees with the Ephesians on that point. But if the Ephesian church does not return to their first love, their witness as a church will be removed. Our true enemies are spiritual forces of evil, not people (Ephesians 6:12).

The second century Christian bishop Irenaeus wrote that the *Nicolaitans* were those that believed that since we are no longer under the law then it is expected and appropriate to sin without restraint. Paul agrees that we are no longer under the law, but under grace (Galatians 5:20). However, Paul is adamant in his letters that we should avoid sin and walk in the Spirit, because of the negative consequences to ourselves. Sin yields death, slavery, and destruction. The teaching of the *Nicolaitans* that sin is harmless, or perhaps even beneficial, is completely false and runs counter to scripture. Therefore, it would be commendable for the Ephesian church to oppose these evil deeds.

These seven churches to which the seven letters are addressed all existed at one point in history. This would indicate that any church/gathering of believers could fit the profile of any of these seven churches at any other point in history. However, many see each of the letters to the seven *churches* as representing the general spirit of various eras in *church* history in the west (which is the successor to the Roman age).

The *church* in Ephesus can be associated with the years 33-100 AD, which covers from Pentecost to John's death. During this time period, a number of biblical letters were written that stand for what is true and oppose what is false. All make the same point about justification, the process by which someone is made right before God, that it is by faith not by deeds.

This includes Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. The primary theme of these letters is that a) we are justified in the sight of God solely by faith, apart from deeds (Romans 3:21-11; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:1,10) and b) even though we are justified in the sight of God apart from deeds, we should walk in the Spirit, in obedience to Christ, because the consequences of sinful living are destructive to ourselves, both in this life as well as when we stand before Christ to have our deeds judged (Romans 6:23, 14:2; Galatians 6:7-8; Hebrews 4:12, 11:6).

Paul was adamant that although believers are justified in God's sight solely by faith, we still have decisions to make whether or not to follow in God's ways, and those decisions have immense consequences. Perhaps the *Nicolaitans* chose to believe the first part of Paul's message about grace, while skipping the second part that emphasizes responsibility before God (Colossians 3:23).

Perhaps we can also infer that the church's love grew cold during this first century age. It would be easy to understand how this could occur, especially given the persecution they endured. Perhaps legalism in following God came to supplant loving God. By loving God, we can humbly follow His ways because we trust that His ways are for our best. But obedience motivated by legalism only fulfills the human desire to "be right."

Decades earlier from John's penning of Revelation, Paul wrote a letter to the *church* in Ephesus that contains an exhortation to keep on *loving*. He says that he prays to God that "you, being

rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints” (Ephesians 3:17-18). Or, when speaking of unity in the spirit, he tells them that by “speaking the truth in love, we are to group up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even Christ*” (Ephesians 4:15). Finally, the letter’s conclusion begins with an instruction to “be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved” (Ephesians 5:1-2).

What Paul was praising at the time of his letter to the Ephesian church has apparently changed by the time John receives his revelation in 90-100 AD. The *church* in Ephesus is still grounded in truth, but they have forgotten their *first love*. God does not want them to forget truth and encourages them in their efforts to correct false teachers, but they should do that while keeping their focus on their first *love*, Jesus. This is the first and greatest command (Matthew 22:37-38).

Finally, the letter ends with the instruction to listen, understand, and do again, a series repeated from the beginning of Chapter 1 (Revelation 1:3). Jesus says: *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*. Jesus does not add “heed” or “do” but that is implied. Jesus will also cite a part of the blessing referenced in Revelation 1:3, which will be a reward gained by those who heed and obey Jesus, and serve as faithful witnesses.

We can recall that this letter is from Jesus to the *church*. So the *church* is *hearing* the words of Jesus. But Jesus is telling them to listen also to the *Spirit*, to *hear what the Spirit says*. The external message is from Jesus, but internal understanding comes from the *Spirit*.

This phrase *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches* makes reference to the plural *churches* instead of just the singular *church* of Ephesus that is being addressed in this particular letter. It is therefore reasonable to take as an exhortation to all believers, in all eras. We should all stand for what is true, but remember to make loving God our first and foremost priority. Instead of only “being right” (as compared to other people) we should check our motives, and make our first priority to stand for what is true in a manner that pleases God, and serves as a good witness to His ways.

The letter to the *church* in Ephesus ends with: *to him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God*.

The *him who overcomes* addressed here is singular. The *church* as a whole is instructed throughout the letter to Ephesus, but it is narrowed down to an individual here at the end. It is important for the members of the *church* to understand that each person has a role to play in repenting and making a choice to follow this admonition. The *church* is the gathering of the believers, so each believer is asked to hear and heed. This will be a pattern in the rest of the letters to the seven *churches* as well: they will end with a promise to the *one who overcomes*.

Overcoming is the action part, the “heed” portion of the opening exhortation from Chapter 1 to listen, understand, and “heed” the words of this prophecy in order to gain great blessing (Revelation 1:3). Each of the seven letters will set forth a blessing that will be given to the *one who overcomes*. This provides the rationale for paying the worldly price for a spiritual blessing. In life, there are only three things we can control: who we trust, the actions we take, and the perspective we choose. In this list of instructions, God helps believers choose an eternal

perspective while giving them actions to do in the present. He also exhorts us to trust Him, and believe that His reward is and will be worth any loss we endure by following His ways (Hebrews 11:6).

The overall theme of this letter to the *church* in Ephesus is that they need to “overcome” self. Their love of self has led them astray from their first *love*.

Everyone likes winning and we all want to be victorious, to be the *one who overcomes*. It is a great blessing or benefit to win. So this blessing helps provide perspective that if we are faithful witnesses, if we listen, understand, and do, that we will be victorious (Revelation 1:3).

The promised reward to the one who overcomes is that they will *eat of the tree of life*. This is likely a reference to Genesis and the *tree of life* in the Garden of Eden whose fruit Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat. This disobedience caused them to be cast out of the Garden, where they had dwelt in God’s presence.

Being separated from the *tree of life* also meant that Adam and Eve lost immortality (Genesis 3:22). In the new earth, believers will once again dwell in God’s presence, and the leaves of the tree of life will provide healing to the nations, and reinstate immortality (Revelation 22:2).

This passage does not disclose the nature of the special benefit that eating of the fruit will provide. But it could indicate a special insight and knowledge, given that this was the subject for the tree of life in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:17). Scripture asserts that the ultimate experience in life (eternal life) is to know God (John 17:3). Perhaps what is being pictured here is that to walk by faith in this life, loving God by faith, leads to a faith-knowledge of God that yields the greatest of rewards. Words and pictures likely fall far short of describing how great the rewards will be for overcoming. As Paul stated:

“Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard,
And *which* have not entered the heart of man,
All that God has prepared for those who love Him.”
(1 Corinthians 2:9)

The greatest of rewards go to those servants who “love Him.” One of those is the knowledge of God obtained by faith. In this life we live by faith. In the next we will know by sight. This life is the only opportunity we will have to know by faith. It is an amazing and special privilege that should not be overlooked. If we have the ears to hear, and eyes to see, we can gain great blessing from these words.

Sadly, what is also apparent is that those who do not overcome will not receive the blessing of wisdom from God. God is the inheritance for all His servants (Romans 8:17a). So all of His servants will know Him by sight. But this passage exhorts believers to realize that there is much to be gained or lost based on our faithfulness in this life.

Biblical Text

But I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵ Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent. ⁶ Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.'