

Session 1

June 6, 2021

CHARACTERIZED BY LOVE

Revelation 2:1-7

There are many ways to interpret the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation. Some see them as indicating various time periods in the development and history of the early-centuries church. Others see the importance in the variety of congregations and the unique challenges each one faced. Hence virtually every “type” of church issue is represented in one way or other. But since these churches were actual, existing congregations in Asia Minor, examining the cities they represented and the distinctive challenges each faced seems like a good place to start. Once that is done, we can apply the principles taught to similar situations we face today.

The city of Ephesus was originally a port city; a place of travel, commerce, and culture. Unfortunately, the city was better known for her temples to the pagan deities and her rampant immorality. The goddess Artemis was popularly known as the “Lady of Ephesus,” whose worship included temple prostitutes!

Yet in the midst of this spiritual darkness, a church grew. The gospel had been brought by Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18); Paul served there for over a year, and the apostle John reportedly retired there.

The commendation (vv. 1-3). Like most of the seven letters, the letter to the church at Ephesus begins with some words of encouragement from the Lord Himself, the One who holds the messengers in His right hand and moves in the midst of His churches (v. 1; see Rev.1:20). Four areas are highlighted. First, He commended them for their *deeds*. The word “works” is generic, referring to the acts they accomplished. The word “labor,” however, indicates heavy toil and struggle. Next, He mentioned their *endurance*. In the midst of difficulties, they never gave up. Third, He commended them for their *discernment*, as they tested the false teachers and rejected them. Finally, He commended them for their *testimony*. In the face of persecution for their faith, they stood strong. For reflection: *What kind of reputation does your church have in your community? Is it well known as a church who serves the whole community with humility and integrity?*

The condemnation (v. 4). The many words of commendation were followed by a rather terse statement of condemnation. “But I have this against you: You have abandoned the love you had at first.” I believe it was Charles Stanley who said, “It is easier to work than to worship.” That’s certainly true. Ask a men’s group to build a wheelchair ramp, and a dozen volunteers show up on Saturday morning. Ask the same group to come for a two-hour praise and prayer session and see who shows! Good works make us feel good. But if we are not careful, we will make our works a substitute for our worship. Somewhere along the way, the hot flame of love for God and for one another had cooled down in the church at Ephesus. Maybe their works had become more important to them than their love. And the Lord Jesus called them out on it. For reflection: *Why do you think it is easier to work than to love? What is so hard about loving God and loving others?*

The recommendation (vv. 5-7). Fortunately, the merciful Lord explains the remedy needed to restore the church's fellowship with Him. The response Christ was looking for included three simple steps. First, they were told to *remember*. Remember where they had come from (see Eph. 2:1-3); remember the magnitude of their salvation (see Eph. 2:4-6); remember the love they shared as a result (see Eph. 4). Second, they were told to *repent*. Good works are great, but failure to love is a sin! Third, they were told to *re-do*. The works were to continue but were to be selfless expressions of genuine love, like they were when the church began. For reflection: *How do we know if our good works are becoming a substitute for our devotion to God and one another? What warning signs might help us to recognize this sin?*