

Seven - *You've got mail from Jesus* - looking at 7 letters to 7 churches in 7 cities in Revelation.

This week we jump into the letters starting with the first- the letter to the Church in Ephesus.

We see an outline for each letter. Seven elements are nearly universal throughout the seven.

- **To the “angel” of _____** (identifying the church he’s writing to)
- **Jesus** (a one phrase, a unique depiction of Jesus – the center of the Church)
- **I know...** (commendation; God sees everything and he knows everything... and he cares)
- **But I have this against you...** (correction; God sees and knows... and he cares)
- **Counsel** – action steps.
- **Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches**
- A promise concerning their destiny and eternity. **Eschatological Promise.**

Anyone with ears to hear... should hear what he’s saying to the churches...

These churches were reading each other’s mail. This had to be slightly unnerving for the ones that were mailing it in or on the verge of judgment. And yet clearly they were supposed to hear and understand. They were to take heed, even if the message wasn’t directly to them.

So to answer the Q of how to apply this now, in our church: *if the shoe fits, wear it.*

We can catastrophize as our culture loves to do and proclaim “*it’s worse than it’s ever been,*” when we simply need to brush up on history. We think our culture is sex crazed... the church in Ephesus we’ll look at tonight existed in the shadows of one of the seven wonders of the world, the temple of Artemis, where thousands of male and female prostitutes were an active part of the worship. News flash – we’ve been jacked up since Genesis 3. But as we look to harvest meaning and application, it IS still helpful to dig into context of these passages.

READ REVELATION 2:1-7

“anyone with ears to HEAR” - This was a favorite phrase of Jesus that he used in ministry and took with him after his resurrection. (“*He who has ears to hear, let him hear...*”)

Jesus uses the word “**akouó**” – it’s the word we get the word “acoustics” from.

It implies to focus on and to pay attention... and goes even deeper: **responding** to what you hear.

There’s an implied response and obedience. Of letting what you hear bear fruit.

May we who have ears to hear “akouó”

May these passages serve as a mirror for us. So we can look more like Christ.

This letter has a unique description of **Christ...**

...who holds the 7 stars in his right hand and walks among the seven gold lamp stands...

This is clear shade thrown at the Roman emperor Domitian. Roman emperors would be declared gods upon death according to tradition. But Domitian kicked tradition and declared himself a god at the beginning of his reign. He had coins minted with his own face on it. One of these coins unearthed by archeologists has Domitian sitting on the globe with seven stars. Jesus is saying this emperor, who calls himself a god and threatens your lives for worshipping me alone --- he’s a paper tiger.

Portrait of Ephesus

Over a quarter million residents. The commercial center of Asia Minor, just miles from harbor. It was one of the three biggest cities in the region, and considered the gateway to Asia.

Paul strategically ministered in Ephesus and had some of his most fruitful ministry there. God moved in such a way through miracles and more that the economy was hurt because the idol makers couldn't sell idols, so they rioted. So many people began following Christ there that it became known as the mother church in Asia Minor after the fall of Jerusalem. This is the hub for the church, and place of influence.

But the key verse in the entire passage shows where they had drifted to:

“you have left your first love [you have lost the depth of love that you first had for Me].”

This Church – this local body of the Bride of Christ – had fallen out of love with Jesus.

Raphael Saadiq lyric: *“Falling in love can be easy. Staying in love is too tricky.”*

Why is staying in love so tricky?

Why do so many fall out of love?

In **Revelation 2:5** Jesus says: “Consider,” “Remember,” “keep in mind,” and “look how far you’ve fallen.” I’ve sat down with people to consider the state of their marriage and they sit disillusioned and saddened and say: *“how did we get here?”*

Jesus asks the Church in Ephesus to look back and see how they got here...

Why is falling in love so easy, and staying in love so tricky?

One of the first things I tell couples when I do premarital counseling is marriage is like so many other things in life – **you get out what you put in.**

Think about it- in the dating season you’re putting so much into the relationship. Dates, gifts, flowers, notes, calls, holding hands, physical affection. Right feelings follow right actions. It’s why you feel butterflies and goosebumps and feel stirred to love. Because you’re actively investing you’re getting so much out of it.

And yet we often act like love is passive. It’s something that happens to us. And falling out of love is something that just happens to us.

But love isn’t passive.

Love isn’t something you get. Love is something you give.

Love is given. It’s a verb. The best way to feel love is to give it.

We all understand that relationships don’t just happen. They take investment. And yet so often the first place we stop investing is the most important relationship... with our spouse.

“I’m not in love anymore.” – this is often said with a sense of passive bewilderment as to how we got here, but the person stopped being active and trying a long time ago.

You get out what you put in.

But this wasn't the case with Ephesus...

Jesus commends them for their **LABOR** - These people **worked faithfully**.

These were people who heard and responded to Paul's letter to Ephesus, where he said:
*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— **not by works**, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus **to do good works**, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

The Church in Ephesus "**akouó'd**" these words, received God's grace, and got to WORK. These were people who volunteered their time, resources and energy. Because of their willingness to serve it became the hub for missionary activity. These are people who worked to learn doctrinal knowledge. Worked to test their leaders. They could call out false teaching. They condemned the licentious living of the Nicolaitians. It certainly wasn't the work of their hands or fruit of their labor that crippled their love.

Why else is staying in love so tricky?

Sometimes love dwindles, and it's due to pressure that doesn't come from within the marriage. It's outside circumstances that serve as stressors that fracture. Illness. Tragic loss. Trauma. If we don't lean into our spouse in those seasons, and collectively lean into Jesus, the weight of hard seasons can fracture a marriage.

But this wasn't the case with Ephesus...

Jesus commends them for **PERSEVERANCE** - These people **endured hardship**.

It was a hard place to be a Christian, to raise a Christian family. Domitian was worshipped as a god, and to not worship him was to risk death. Four great Roman roads led into Ephesus, and one became known as the "martyr's highway" because of the number of people that walked out on it to their death. This wasn't an easy place to raise your kids in the faith.

It's why the third commendation Jesus gives them is so key:

These people had **sound doctrine**.

They could discern a heretic - people intentionally leading people astray.

But here we find what had allowed the Church in Ephesus to fall out of love with Jesus.

They LOVED truth.

But they forgot love.

In simple terms their relationship with God was **all head, no heart**.

It was an intellectual exercise in the head, but not an intentional pursuit of the heart.

We need both.

As Ravi Zacharias once said of marriage:

Without the will marriage is a mockery.

Without emotion, it is a drudgery.

You need both.

If I read the books, learn the doctrine, work hard, give generously, expel the heretics, send out the missionaries, endure hardship... **but I don't have love?**

...I'm the church in Ephesus.

John commanded discernment in his epistles and commended the church in Ephesus' discernment here. They were able to point out false teaching because of their wisdom. Yet one of the most needed parts of discernment is discerning the target of our tolerance and intolerance.

Grace demands tolerance. Truth demands intolerance.

1 Timothy 1:7

God has not given us a spirit of fearfulness, but one of power, love, and sound judgment.

Power, LOVE (Charity and grace), and a SOUND MIND (Clarity and truth)

We will walk in power to the extent we walk in both grace and truth. Charity and clarity.

It's balance. The Church often isn't good with balance.

The same church that rightly discerned the untruth of the Nicolaitans and was commended for it had drifted from hating untruth to lacking love for people.

They'd drifted from compassion to condemning. From compassion to contempt.

The NLT is onto something when it says:

"You don't love me OR each other as you did at first."

Some folks make this all about our love for God.

But John himself makes it clear you can't love God and hate people.

In John's first letter to the church in what is chapter 4 in our Bibles:

...whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

...if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

...whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.

In our culture of division with all of its lines in the sand its easy to become the Church in Ephesus. We believe the Bible. We've got doctrine down. And verses becomes bullets in our chamber and we're always loaded. We're itching to decimate somebody with our doctrine.

It wasn't much different in Jesus' days. You had teachers saying *this is the point, no this is the point*, always up for a healthy debate. Until one just asks Jesus in Matthew 22: what's the point? Jesus's answer: **LOVE GOD. LOVE PEOPLE.** The point is LOVE.

He quotes Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and God's original command to HEAR.

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength".

When God asks his people to shema it means to listen and obey the same way the Greek does.

There's no separate word in Hebrew for obey.

Love is the expected, desired response.
Love is the command.
Love is the fruit when God's word takes root.

The Bible is in your head... but is it in your heart?
Have you let the roots reach your heart so your life can bear fruit?
If there's no fruit of love, the answer is no.
Lose love and you've lose the plot.

We aren't called to be theological watchmen and culture warriors at the cost of love.
1 Corinthians 8:1 - *knowledge puffs up while love builds up*"

Puffed up is analogous to being full of pride.
It says in scripture God is close to the humble. But He despises the proud.
It's why God's counsel to the Church in Ephesus isn't just remember... it's repent.

REPENT...[or] I'm removing your lamp stand.

You can go on as a country club, some kumbaya and ted talks... but you won't be a church.
A church with no love can no longer be considered a part of His Body. God is love.
"anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love."

The church in Ephesus had been busy and active and worked hard and labored.
They had persevered. They weren't going to quick grinding for God no matter the persecution.
But they were bound to become the people in Matthew 7 who will stand before Jesus and say
didn't we do this and that and the third... but Jesus says:
"Depart from me, I never KNEW YOU."

He doesn't want slaves who grind for him. He wants sons and daughters who KNOW him.
He wants a bride that loves Him – with an enduring first love.

HOW do we return to our first love when we've gone off track?

Sparking our first love again looks like...

Reembrace the truth of Ephesians 2:1-10

Christianity isn't about achieving or doing ... it's about grace and love. Oh we're called to good works... but it's to show the world the same kind of love God already shows us. When we forget this, it's easy to drift into a following Jesus that looks like achieving, performing, and doing rather than staying in right relationship with Jesus.

What's does right relationship look like? It's not just about right beliefs or right actions.
It's about right relationship. You can do good work and forget who you work for.

Quick test – what's your prayer life like? Is it pausing to make transactions like a business partnership? When is the last time you simply paused. Heeded the words "Be still and know that I am God. I've got this."

Sparking our first love looks like: falling in love with the Holy Spirit again...

Truth isn't enough. It is the **Holy Spirit** who guides us in all truth.

I've talked about Christians living like functional atheists before.

Cessationism is this idea that the Holy Spirit was active at the birth of the Church but has since returned to the bench. The Holy Spirit has clocked out, retired, and moved to Florida.

Many of us live like functional cessationists. Oh we believe the Holy Spirit is still needed, that the Holy Spirit lives in us to guide us in all truth... but how often to we pause for guidance?

I'm not saying you shouldn't have principled beliefs or systemic theology that gives us a set of directions, but we're called to be filled and led by and listen to the Holy Spirit. Some of us live lives guided by doctrine and theology to the point we don't pause to pray or ask the Holy Spirit.

Again- show me the receipts on your prayer life: *Is it asking God to bless stuff you're already neck deep in? Is prayer the last resort to fix what you've fumbled? Or do you truly lean not on your own understanding and trust the Holy Spirit to lead?*

We get so sucked into what we know about God that we forget he's alive and we're called to relationship with Him.

Christianity is a belief system, a theological system, and principled path. But it's not relationship. Jesus is a concept. An theological ideal. A historical figure. Not a person.

The Holy Spirit is an afterthought. The forgotten member of the Trinity.

We need the Holy Spirit daily.

REPENT...or I'm removing your lamp stand.

Thank God for his unconditional love as our Heavenly Father. I love Raj with a cheap imitation, but it's certainly my goal. But the fact I unconditionally love him doesn't mean I unconditionally approve of everything he does. I'm reminded of this daily.

Yet how often to we project unconditional approval on God's unconditional love?

But verses like this remind us that God's unconditional love doesn't mean unconditional approval of our actions.

Turn back to me and DO the works you DID at first.

The fruit of your first love is missing.

And the PROMISE?

Eating fruit from the Tree of Life in the paradise of God.

The Tree wasn't just in the Garden. It will be in Heaven when all is restored.

The fruit of God's love for us.

It was present in the Garden before we took a breath. HE loved us then. He loved us while we were still sinners. He loves you with an enduring, faithful love.