

# Revelation

*Part Nine  
Ephesus  
(Revelation 2:1-7)*

*With Study Questions*

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*Part Nine*

*Ephesus*

*(Revelation 2:1-7)*

To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, ‘These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: <sup>2</sup>“I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; <sup>3</sup>and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary. <sup>4</sup>Nevertheless I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love. <sup>5</sup>Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent. <sup>6</sup>But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. <sup>7</sup>“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Revelation 2:1-7).

## **Introduction**

There are popular posters people have deemed fit to display on their front lawns which begin with the phrase, “Hate has no home here.” It is the first phrase on a list which is followed by, what might be considered, left-leaning cultural propositions. I publicly suggested that to accuse people who disagree with you on moral, cultural or political issues, to be governed by hate, may not be the beginning of a profitable discussion. I took a bit of heat for deigning to offer such an opinion.

Accusing people who disagree with you of being hateful or bigoted has become quite normal. There is a bit of irony in how the person accusing others of hatred can be so vicious. Whether witting or not, there is a festering anger that rapidly appears. I was having coffee with a female pastor who displayed some bold honesty when she told me that she was raised in a house where she was taught that conservative people were evil. It took an act of the will on her part to have a civil conversation with me.

It is not uncommon when I share my more Christian views of culture for people to accuse me of not loving or caring about others. They truly believe that if you're on the right side of the political aisle that you must be an uncaring person. Occasionally I'll point out that a month hasn't passed in the last forty years when I haven't volunteered to aid orphans, homeless and the elderly. I am then reminded that Jesus told good Christians not to do their deeds to be seen by men. Of course, in the same sermon Jesus told Christians that others should see their good works in order glorify their Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). It's tricky business seeking to honor God rather than people or self.

I open with this little conundrum because in Jesus' first letter here to the Ephesian church, we're going to have to unpack two statements that, at first blush, seem to be in conflict with each other. This is a church which is chastised because they left their **"first love"** (**Revelation 2:4**). But they are, at the same time, praised for engaging in a righteous hatred (Revelation 2:6). This is one of those enigmas that pastors are, at their own peril, tempted to ignore. But we must work this out. Perhaps there should be some type of hatred in your home. Maybe the houses with these signs have more hatred than they realize. But is it the right kind of hatred? We'll get to that. Now to the text.

**To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands (Revelation 2:1).**

As discussed, the angel is likely the pastor of the church. Particular churches have particular issues. Jesus is calling the pastor to be a source of encouragement but also address the vulnerabilities and failures of their particular church. Though there is a Christ-ward direction every church is called to pursue, the ministry is not precisely a one-size-fits-all pursuit.

At the same time, every church can learn from every other church. After all, the vision has all seven stars in one hand, making this a corporate affair. Churches should not view themselves as disconnected from other churches. At the end of this particular letter, Jesus will fan this particular message out beyond Ephesus.

**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Revelation 2:7).**

Of all the seven churches (perhaps of all the churches in the New Testament), we know the most about Ephesus. And Ephesus was probably more like current day Los Angeles than any other (except maybe Corinth). It was a big city, the “supreme metropolis of Asia Minor.” It played a significant role in Roman government. It was a great commercial center. It was a very religious (not necessarily in a good way) city. The cults of Artemis, the worship of Diana, etc. (see Acts 19). It was a hub of mysticism, magic, idolatry and was an asylum for, and catered to, Roman criminals. It is not difficult to make comparisons to our current cultural environment.

Perhaps this is why the title of the risen Savior from chapter one refers to the pastors being held in His right hand. The word for “**hold**” in this verse, *kraton*, is different than in chapter one, *echon*. Chapter two indicates a firm grip. And in chapter one, Jesus is in the midst of the churches. Here He is walking, indicating activity and intimacy. It is a covenantal promise.

**I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people (Leviticus 26:12).**

Jesus became flesh and “**tabernacled**” among us (John 1:14).

**I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; <sup>3</sup> and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary (Revelation 2:2, 3).**

We then read of the commendation from Jesus. I often consider how Jesus might view our church. It is His opinion that matters. We are all tugged in so many directions, there is a continual temptation to allow the opinions of men undue sway. John, in his gospel, introduces us to the unnerving little phrase.

**...for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God (John 12:43).**

One can easily imagine the pressure in a highly religious and intellectually self-confident city like Ephesus. But this church wasn't all bad. They were hard at work. They did not give up easily. They had no tolerance for evil. They were willing to put teachers to the test and ferreted out the liars.

Perhaps their penchant for sound doctrine came from Timothy being their pastor, the eloquence of Apollos (Acts 18:24), the willingness of Aquila and Priscilla to instruct Apollos or Paul's warning to the elders that savage wolves and perverse teachings would be in their midst (Acts 20:26-31).

They were fighting the good fight and had not grown weary in doing so. There is great pressure to tamper with the message and there is great heartbreak when you see those under your care being won over by the winds of pagan thinking. Their doctrine was their strength. But they had a weakness.

**Nevertheless I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love.  
5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent (Revelation 2:4, 5).**

At the risk of sounding self-deprecating, this criticism hits home within the Reformed community. At least it does for me. Sound doctrine has always been a priority and a pursuit for me. I often found myself in discussions that became heated. I wanted to win the argument rather than win the soul-to beat rather than to bless.

It hit me quite hard when it donned on me that I was regularly violating the Third Commandment (Don't take the name of the Lord in vain). To speak of God or the things of God without the intention of honor Christ and blessing others is using His name in a vain and empty way.

The Ephesians had left their first love. It wasn't as if they were no longer Christians, but that was the direction. It is difficult to pinpoint just what an example of this leaving of their first love was. Was it love for one another? Was it love for Christ? Was it love for a lost world? Maybe some or all of the above. One way or another, a zeal they once had was ebbing, and that needed to change. Jesus gives the prescription.

First, "**remember.**" There was a time when your love (and this may be true for any virtue) was greater than it currently is. We are to remember (the verb tense means to keep on remembering). Simply put, get your

mind around the way it should be. Second, **“repent.”** Literally, we need to change our mind. It is not a matter of simply knowing, it involves assent. There are some of think Christians, having repented at conversion, need not continue to repent. But here, it is the Christian who has called to repent. Finally, **“do.”** We are to be doers of the word (James 1:22).

**My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth (1 John 3:18).**

We are not to wait for some special operation of the Holy Spirit or when the mood strikes us. We are to figure out what is right (according to the Scriptures), by an act of the will, change our minds and then do the right thing.

There have been many churches throughout the course of history that are no longer, in any real sense, churches. This seems to be happening with great regularity in the west over the last hundred years. This is the warning that Jesus gives. He will **“remove your lampstand.”** Few things would be more heartbreaking than to find that your church is no longer a church. Ephesus was moving in a direction void of love. The one aspect of Christ’s prescription that is repeated is **“repent.”**

The natural temptation in a church like Ephesus, who was sound in doctrine but lacking in love (and no doubt being accused of lacking love because of their commitment to doctrine) would be to soften their commitment to truth in order to appear more loving. But prior to His closing, Jesus reemphasizes one of their positive attributes.

**But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate (Revelation 2:6).**

There are all sorts of speculation regarding what the deeds of the Nicolaitans were, but there is no solid answer. It is safe to conclude that they were evil deeds of some sort. But what’s remarkable here is that the same church that is criticized for lacking love is praised for hatred. How do we work this out?

These may not be the verses posted on our refrigerators, but there is no shortage of passages in Scripture which call us to hate evil.

**O you who love the Lord, hate evil (Psalm 97:10; 101:3; 119:104, 128, etc.).**

The author of Hebrews writes of Jesus:

**But of the Son he says, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. <sup>9</sup>You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions” (Hebrews 1:10).**

Indifference, or a casual disposition, toward evil is not a godly attribute. This is not a license to be unduly harsh or unnecessarily unfriendly. But I fear that we have lost a sense of the deadly nature of wickedness. You may wish to tread lightly in the snake pit, but if you forget that the snakes are full of venom, plan on a visit to the hospital or worse.

We should seek to cultivate an uncompromising aversion to that which is false. But since this is such a delicate subject and one that I am confident will, by some, be misunderstood, allow me to qualify godly hatred.

First, this hatred is against the **“deeds of Nicolaitans”** not against every individual. Certain behaviors should be viewed as detestable. If you can't think of an example, perhaps you've already taken steps in the wrong direction. Second, hatred is against a class of people (again, not individual people). The psalmist writes that he hates those who hate God (Psalm 139:21). This deep aversion is aimed at a community that has identified itself as a God-hating community. It is possible to love individuals in that community in an effort to win them out. Finally, a righteous hatred is governed by our thinking God's thoughts after Him, not by our personal likes or dislikes. We don't choose a religion that accommodates our prejudices. True godly hatred can only happen through a mind that has been renewed and transformed. This excludes a fleshly lashing out.

**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God (Revelation 2:7).**

In a true spiritual battle, there will always be a temptation to give up. We are called to finish the race. Seventeen times we will see the word “**overcome.**” H. B. Swete notes that a tone of victory is dominant in the letter.

The “**tree of life**” in the “**midst of the Paradise of God**” symbolizes the life-giving presence of God, from which Adam and Eve are separated when they are cast out of the garden paradise.<sup>1</sup> Christ restores all that was lost. Perhaps if Adam and Eve cultivated a righteous hatred for the lies of the serpent, the subsequent pain and death of history would not have happened. Of course, that is mere speculation.

What is not speculation is that we are called to overcome, persevere and live our lives with an eye on the promise of true life in true paradise.

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<sup>1</sup> Beale, G. K. (1999). [\*The book of Revelation: a commentary on the Greek text\*](#) (pp. 234–235). Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.



## Questions for Study

1. Is there value in accusing people who disagree with you of being governed by hate? Explain (pages 2, 3)?
2. Does the one-size-fits all method work in ministry? Why or why not? In what respect are all the epistles in the Bible valuable to all churches (page 3)?
3. Describe Ephesus. In what ways is it similar to our current culture (page 4)?
4. How is Jesus in the midst of the church different from chapter one (page 4)?
5. What do you suppose would be a commendation from Christ regarding today's church? Your church? What was a strength of Ephesus (pages 4, 5)?
6. What was a weakness in Ephesus? Have you seen this in your own life? Explain (page 5).
7. What does Jesus prescribe for their weakness (pages 5, 6)?
8. Jesus warns that they may have their lampstand removed. What does this mean (page 6)?
9. Discuss the difficulties surrounding the idea of a godly hatred (pages 6, 7).
10. What is the blessing that Jesus promises and how is it obtained (pages 7, 8)?

