

**Missing What Matters Most**  
*Series: Righteousness Revealed*  
 Revelation 2:1-7; 18-29  
 Chadron Berean Church

In a little corner of Nebraska known for its trees, agriculture, and down-to-earth people, we adopted this practical and relatable vision of a healthy tree that has deep roots and bears fruit. We adopted it because we wanted to impress upon our hearts that we need to be a balanced church. We want to be rooted in the Word and the Gospel, and we also want to bear fruit by applying to our lives and doing outreach. But what if it were possible for our church to be rooted in the Word and the Gospel, to be fruitful in our service for God, and yet still miss what's most important? Still miss what matters most? That's what we want to talk about this morning as we revisit our church's vision. If you have a Bible, please turn with me to Revelation 2:1-7 as we study Jesus' letter to the church at Ephesus and wrestle with who we are as a church and who Jesus is calling us to be.

2 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:

So first, there's a lot of symbolism here that can be confusing, but it doesn't have to be *that* confusing. Chapter 1 presents a picture of Christ in glory, sitting on His throne in heaven. He is surrounded by **seven lampstands** and holds **seven stars** in His hand.

There is no question as to what the **lampstands** are. They are the seven local **churches** in receiving these letters in chapters 2 & 3. Churches are to be, as Jesus said, lights on a hill or lampstand—not under a basket—to give light to all around. These seven churches giving light to their respective territories in western Turkey are Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. These churches are *not very far apart* but are *very different* in their circumstances and the testing that they face. And Jesus is personally giving each church some **commendation** and some **correction**, possibly alluded to by the double edge sword in His mouth (1:16).

Some think that these churches represent the larger universal "Church" throughout the ages, which is a lot to get into, but I just tend to think that these churches capture well the issues and conditions that churches will face in any age at any given time. They are lessons all churches can learn from. There are some striking similarities with the order of these churches and church history, but a lot of that seems like speculation to me. The big takeaway for me is that each church is supposed to be a lamp in its respective territory.

**Jesus wants these churches to light up their communities.**

The seven **stars**, we are told in verse 20, are the seven **angels** of the seven churches. Most of the debate is as to whether the angels are literal angels (angelic guardians appointed to it) or if it is referring to the human messenger of the church such as a pastor or the person carrying the letter or whoever would read it aloud to the church. The Greek word *aggeloi* ("angels") frequently refers

to human messengers as well (e.g., Matt. 11:10; Luke 7:24; 9:52; 2 Cor. 8:23; James 2:25) so that makes it possible, if not likely. If it is, it is comforting to know that Jesus holds them in His hand. In any case, **Paul** spent three years with this church. **Timothy** shepherded this church for a time. And the Apostle **John**, who was writing this, had done the same. The church has been around for **40 years** by the time this is written. History tells us John, the author, pastored this church until he was arrested and exiled to the island of Patmos, from where he is writing this from.

*2 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance,*

Like a good father, Jesus begins with commendation. For jobs well done. Jesus acknowledges their **deeds**. This is a word denoting their practical service to Him. They have done good deeds/works in His name. They have even **toiled** in them. The word toiled carries the thought of laboring to the point of exhaustion. When tempted to quit, when faced with persecution and hardship, they **persevered**. For 40 years they have stuck with it! So we might say:

**They were a fruitful church.**

In modern terms, this was a very productive church. They were busy serving the Lord. They were edifying those within. They were reaching out. They were hard at it, making disciples. I'm sure they had all the church programs going: Sunday school, children's church, VBS, men's ministry, grief care, recovery groups, prayer meetings, Bible studies, and a coffee bar with hot lattes to welcome you every Sunday. They sound like a busy, fruitful church. He continues:

*and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; 3 and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.*

He continues now to praise them for their stance on truth. They had dealt with unrepentant, **evil men** who were probably turning God's grace into a license to sin. In verse 6 Jesus mentions the **deeds of the Nicolaitans**, deeds that Jesus hates. We don't know exactly who this is referring to. A second century writer said they advocated for indulgence in the flesh. People have a lot of "dogmatic guesses," but again, it's speculation. Lord willing, maybe archaeology will help us with that someday but for now, it's a bit of a mystery. They had also tested so-called **apostles**, men who said they had a "word from God," but didn't, and found them to be **false**. Maybe these are the individuals Paul warned the Ephesians elders about in Acts 20—false wolves who would come in and not spare the flock. The point is, the church had tested certain teachers, found them to be false teachers, and had preserved the truth. They had, in Jude's words, contended earnestly for the faith. So, we could say:

**They were a rooted church.**

In a lot of ways, they remind us of a good Bible church or good "Berean" church. Like the Bereans from Acts 17:11, they didn't just take anybody's word for it. They were orthodox. They placed the teachings of men alongside the straight edge of God's Word and found the teachings to be crooked. They stood up against apostasy and heresy.

So, so far, so good. This is a church that is rooted and fruitful. They're balanced. They know the Word and they are serving hard. What more could Jesus want? What could they be missing?

*4 But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.*

Woah... they've left their first love? Just about everybody understands this to be their love for Jesus. They **left** Jesus behind. This is quite the statement, isn't it? This is a rooted church. This is a fruitful church. They are studying the Word. They are sharing Word. Externally, they look like they're doing just fine. They look healthy. But Jesus didn't let them leave the mask on. He knew there was a deeper issue going on and that what was being maintained was starting to be maintained out of *habit and tradition* rather than out of a *fervent love* for the Lord. Their love for Him had grown cold. They were missing what was most important! So we could say:

**They were a loveless church.**

The word **left**—you have left your first love—could be translated *abandoned*. So it's as if Jesus is saying, "You guys are doing a lot of great things. You've kept the bad guys out. You've stood for truth. You're hanging in there. You're working hard. The problem is you've abandoned your relationship with Me. You don't love Me like you used to. I just don't see the fire in your eyes anymore. You've let the light die out on our relationship."

**ILLUSTRATION: The Hard-Working Husband.** The text reminds us of a well-meaning, but misguided husband. He walks into the house to find his wife crying at the kitchen table. When he asks her what's wrong, she says, "You don't love me anymore." He says, "What do you mean? I get up early every day to provide for you and the kids. I bought you that fancy car. It's one of the nicest in town. I change the oil. I mow the lawn. I take out the trash. I spend time with the kids. Heck, I even change a diaper or two." Some of you are thinking this guy's a real meat head! He goes on, "I study your honey-do list faithfully. I circle things in your honey-do list. I memorize your honey-do list. I defend your honey-do list."

Everyone except him is thinking, "Dude, when's the last time you spent time with her? Scheduled time with her? Took her on a date? Held her hand? Went on a walk with her? When was the last time you just listened to her?" All that other stuff is great, but that's not what a relationship is. She didn't marry you because she wanted you to change the oil or take out the trash. She wanted *you* for you. She just wanted *to be with you. Do life with you.*

In the same way, we might be very busy serving Jesus, reading the Bible, and keeping up with our to-do lists in serving Jesus, but if we aren't actually spending time with Him and talking to Him... we've left our first love. We can be so busy serving Jesus that we don't spend time with Him or do life with Him.

This is a trap for any church or any believer, but especially us "good Bereans." There's a danger in letting our knowledge of God and His Word or our service replace/define our relationship with God. To let doctrine and duty get in the way of deep devotion. In **John 5:39**, Jesus is speaking with the Pharisees, and He makes a shocking statement. "You search the Scriptures because you

think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me!” “And you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.” For those of us who cherish the Word of God, this is a shocking statement! Jesus says life is in Him, not the Scriptures. It’s a good reminder the goal is not to simply know the truth or preach the truth. The goal is to know Jesus through the truth. Preaching is not the end goal. We preach the truth so people will come to know Jesus. Scripture points to Him. You can read the Bible, defend the Bible, and love the Bible... and still be neglecting your relationship with Him. Still have Him outside the door of your heart, knocking and wanting to come in and dine with you.

There’s a very similar account in **Luke 10:38-42** with Mary and Martha. They are in Martha’s home and Martha is expecting her sister, Mary, to help with the dinner preparations and all of that. But Mary is just sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening. So she tells Jesus to tell Mary to get with it. Expecting Jesus to whip Mary into shape for being lazy, she’s surprised to hear Jesus say that Mary has chosen the better part. The better portion. In the same way, this is a busy church. They are serving Jesus greatly, but they are neglecting love for Jesus and probably for each other.

*5 Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first;*

To correct their cold hearts, Jesus calls them to remember and repent. To rekindle the fire in their hearts for Jesus.

### **Rekindle your love for Jesus.**

I couldn’t believe it, but I had a powerful reminder of this this week. I had my message ready by Wednesday. Thursday was my day to get away and spend the whole day with the Lord. But I woke up that morning at 6 am because it was cold in my house. I knew something was wrong with the furnace. So I got out of bed and tried fixing it. It had an error code 1—the fire wouldn’t stay lit. It would come on for a few seconds and then go out. So I plugged in some space heaters while I worked on it. Thanks to prayer and YouTube, I cleaned off the burners and a sensor and it started working again. And wouldn’t you know it? In my devotional chapter that day, the author prayed God would “keep the fire burning” in his life for Jesus. I kid you not. This was exactly why I was taking the day off—trying to spend time with God and hear from God in the wilderness. It was a powerful reminder to me that you’ve got to keep your soul and your mind clean to keep burning for Jesus. Don’t let things—even noble things like serving Jesus—get in the way of your relationship with Him. And when we don’t keep the fires burning, we turn to other things to try to find warmth our soul is longing for. But listen to this: Jesus would rather have a relationship with us than allow us to continue serving Him without it:

*or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.*

This makes us say, “Woah” again because He isn’t holding back. He wants our love more than anything else. He wants a relationship with us. So much so that He’s willing to remove the church’s lampstand and shut the doors. He wants us to be rooted and He wants us to be fruitful—they are commendable—but not at the expense of our relationship with Him. For us to continue being a light, the fuel has to come from our relationship with Him. Everything we do should be an outflow

of our relationship with Him. That's why I like how we have the cross at the center of our church logo. It reminds us Jesus is at the center and without abiding in Him, we are nothing. One man said, "The church that loses its love will soon lose its light, no matter how doctrinally sound it may be." The same man said, "It is only as we love Christ fervently that we can serve Him faithfully."

*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.'*

So Jesus wraps up this message with another brief commendation and a word encouraging their spiritual sensitivity to what He says. Do you really hear what He is saying? To those who do, they apply it, and, He says, they will enjoy **the tree of life in the Paradise of God**.

This is not saying, "If you just try really hard, you'll get into heaven." When you connect it with what's already been said, it's saying the way to heaven is not through religious works and duty. They're doing that already. It's **through a relationship with Jesus**. You won't want heaven in the future if you don't want a relationship with Jesus now. This is why when we share the gospel, sometimes we throw people off when we present it as a ticket to heaven—a place to go to—and if you just do this and this, you're good to go. We're not just interested in getting people from point A to point B. We want them to get to heaven, but we also want them to have a relationship with Jesus. Heaven is just the result of that relationship now.

#### **ILLUSTRATION: Matt Rhule**

We don't want people to just *know about* Jesus. We want them to *know* Jesus. I know *about* Nebraska coach Matt Rhule, but I don't personally *know* Matt Rhule. Same thing: Jesus doesn't just want us to know *about* Him. He wants us to *know* Him.

This leaves us with some sobering questions. If Jesus wrote a letter to you or to our church, what would He write? Would He see a love for Him? Or someone too busy for Him? And what needs to change to make Him a priority again?

**Repent:** If we've been letting our relationship with Jesus go, we need change that. Instead of ignoring Him, we could actively **schedule time** to just spend with Jesus: daily, weekly, monthly.

**REMEMBER:** Jesus said, **remember**. Memory is a powerful tool in rekindling old relationships. Going back to the place where you first met or to the place of your first date, that first movie again, that restaurant can rekindle things. When love flowed naturally. You were inseparable. You made time for each other. You weren't forced to buy flowers. You just did it because you loved them.

Maybe it's time you did that with the Lord. To go back to those places literally or in memory and recall how you and Jesus first met. Reflect on the overflow of deeds you did at first. **Remember the joy** of your salvation and how you loved Him. You were satisfied with just knowing Jesus and you wanted to spend every minute with Him. There was an innocence about it.

Those are good personal applications. As far as our church-application goes, let's **keep our love for Jesus palpable** in this church. Let's share our stories more about how Jesus is working in our lives. **Refuse to let church become a cold, mechanical place.**

But also, pray for the church leadership as we **rethink our church's vision**. The vision was never meant to be permanent. None necessarily are. We're starting to sense we need a new vision and would like to tackle that this summer with your help and input. So we have two questions in your bulletin.

1. What do you like about our church?
2. What do you wish were true about our church?

This is for members and nonmembers to prayerfully fill out. Please read the questions and prayerfully fill them out over the next couple of weeks. No name needed. When finished, please fold and place in the offering boxes. The elder team thanks you for your careful consideration and values your input in this visioning process!

As we come to the communion table now, I'm not going to lead us like I normally do. Just take it individually when you're ready after meeting with Jesus in our hearts as the worship team plays these last two songs.