

**Revelation 2:1-7 (Pew Bible, pg.1034)**

**Title: “Radically Faithful ... No Holding Back”**

## **INTRODUCTION**

AT PRAYER TIME - Before I get started this morning I want to encourage us about the matter of prayer in these days we have set aside to seek the Lord. We will not see revival if we just show up on Sunday and see what show God is going to put on. That’s not revival. Revival happens when God’s people have a deep sense of desperation that drives them to prayer ... private prayer and corporate prayer. Join us on Tuesdays. We desperately need revival that only God can bring to us in answer to prayer.

**ILLUSTRATION** – Recently I heard about the testimony of one of our missionaries who had just arrived on the field when he was in a terrible train wreck. The resulting injuries left his body mangled and broken. He was paralyzed from the waist down; his legs would not respond to the promptings of his brain sent down through the nerves in his spine. His arms were broken and could not function properly. The trauma to his body left him incredibly weak. In this young man’s testimony he talked of wondering why this happened to him. He had only been on the field a short time when this accident occurred. The Lord revealed to him in the midst of His suffering that his broken body was a powerful picture of the condition of the Body of Christ. There are parts of the body that are no longer responsive to the Head of the Body, Jesus Christ. There are parts that are broken and in need of healing and restoration. And all this puts a strain on the parts of the Body of Christ that are healthy. What God is doing in these days is restoring His Body, the church. And He has been on this quest from the earliest days of the church.

Open your Bibles with me to the last book of the Bible, Revelation 2.

Now when we study Revelation we spend most of our time looking at the things that are to come, which are certainly included in this magnificent part of Scripture. But in Revelation 2-3 you find a stack of seven letters addressed to first century churches. In some ways they are very similar to the other letters or epistles that we find in the NT. But in another way these are incredibly unique ... they come directly from the Lord Jesus Himself.

These are letters written to ancient churches, but guess what? We’ve been copied on these letters. The relevance of these letters is amazing. You would think the Spirit of God had peeked into our church and into our lives. In fact, He has! And He’s telling us what Jesus thinks about the condition of His Church and of the Christians who make up His Church. Let’s read Revelation 2:1-7.

I’ve entitled this series of messages “Radically Faithful.” The churches of Asia were living surrounded by cultural and religious factors that threatened to dilute their faithfulness to Christ. These churches, for the most part lived under political oppression and social ridicule. The challenge in this part of God’s Word is to prod us live radically faithful lives for Jesus Christ, no matter what the

cost. We'll be called to patiently endure the persecution and struggles that come from living radically faithful lives. These words will come as an encouragement to us to be prepared to pay the high cost of following Jesus in a culture that stands against everything Christ stands for.

In each letter we're going to do three things. We're going to LOOK UPWARD to see the glorious revelation of Christ. We're going to LOOK INWARD to see what the Holy Spirit of Christ will reveal to be true about us. We're going to LOOK FORWARD to the action plan that Christ has for us in these crucial days. So first, let's...

## **1. LOOK UPWARD**

**Revelation 2:1 - "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands."**

Church growth and leadership experts talk about the importance of vision. And there is certainly something to that. But I'm afraid that much of this talk of vision is so man-centered. "I have a vision of this, and I have a vision of that." What the church needs above all else is a vision of who Christ is. That's where this all starts.

It is this vision of Christ that runs straight through the Revelation and it is this vision that is to sustain believers who are under assault from a pagan culture and false teachers. It is this vision that is to sustain believers who are threatened with death for being radically faithful to Jesus Christ.

The vision reveals two important things about the Lord Jesus:

### **CHRIST "HOLDS" THE CHURCH.**

**Revelation 2:1 - "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand..."**

According to Revelation 1:20, the seven stars represent the angels of the churches. And the angels are the messengers, presumably the pastor or some other leader who would deliver these messages from Christ to specific churches.

These angels have to do with the future ... the direction of the church. The word "hold" means "to hold with authority." The wording here is not that Jesus has a leash on the church. The picture in this word is that Christ holds the whole thing in His hand. Jesus holds the future, the direction of each church. We may think we make our plans, but He determines the direction of the church. So Jesus is supreme. He calls the shots.

**ILLUSTRATION** - Someone has observed that Jesus is more like our mascot than our Monarch (our King). On Sunday we trot Jesus out to cheer us up and get us excited. And enthusiasm for Him energizes us for a little while. But then for the rest of the week we sit him on the sideline while we play the game and run the show. But do we realize that the game is really about Him, not about us?

So all this means that the church is to be focused on Christ, centered in Christ, directed toward Christ in all we do. Christ sovereignly holds the destiny of the church and our lives.

This vision shows us something else about Christ:

### **CHRIST “WALKS” WITHIN THE CHURCH.**

**Revelation 2:1** - “These are the words of him who ... walks among the seven golden lampstands.

Now Revelation 1 explains that these seven golden lampstands represent the church. Remember the vision of Jesus in Revelation 1? Jesus is our great High Priest. The OT priests ministered in the inner sanctuary of the temple. And one of the pieces of furniture inside the sanctuary was the golden lampstand. It represented the fact that the people of God are to shine the light of the glory of God before a watching world. That is our mission as a church and as believers. And Jesus is walking among the lampstands because He’s tending to them, making sure they light is shining brightly.

Jesus is walking among them, in the midst of them. He is not off somewhere, unconcerned and uninformed about the condition of His church. He knows exactly what’s going on. He’s the audience of One in this worship service today. He sits in on every staff meeting and ministry team meeting. He walks in and out of every SS department and class. He walks in and out of every choir rehearsal. He stands and listens in on our hallway conversations ... and not just on Sundays, but throughout the week. He follows us through the week watching our walk and our witness. Note: That’s why we hear Jesus repeatedly saying to the churches in Rev.2-3, “I know, I know, I know...”

So whether we recognize it or not, Christ is wholly *above* us and also wholly *among* us.

The church is to be “Jesus-driven.” The only thing that ultimately matters is the degree to which our church corporately and our lives individually are shaped and fashioned according to the likeness of Jesus. He’s looking for radically faithful people and churches.

I’m afraid we’re more interested in what the world thinks of us than what our Lord thinks of us.

This vision of Christ was so real and overwhelming to John that he fell flat out like a dead man. Have we been overwhelmed by Christ? This is the vision of Christ that we must have if we are to experience true revival. So we look upward; then we...

## **2. LOOK INWARD (vv.2-4,6)**

Now in all but two of the letters to the churches there are things that please the Lord and things that grieve the Lord.

Let me give you a little background to the city of Ephesus so you can know something about the church at Ephesus. Ephesus was one of the five greatest cities in all the Roman Empire. Because it sat at the cross-roads of several major transportation routes, it became a thriving center for trade and commerce. Some have likened it to the New York City of the ancient world.

Religiously it was an important city. Located in Ephesus was the great Temple of Diana or Artemis. Well this temple was roughly the size of two football fields. It was an amazing piece of architecture, but more importantly it was the center of idol worship. Deep in the bowels of this temple was a grotesque, dark statue of the pagan goddess Artemis. The worship of this idol consumed the city.

And here in the heart of this dynamic city was an important church, perhaps the most important church in the NT world. The church was started by that godly couple Aquila and Priscilla. The Apostle Paul invested a very sizeable chunk of his ministry personally at Ephesus. Timothy followed Paul. Paul wrote I & II Timothy to Timothy while he was pastor of the church at Ephesus. Early church historians tell us that the Apostle John later became pastor. There is some indication that Mary, the mother of Jesus, may have been a member of the church in Ephesus, since John had been entrusted by the Lord Jesus to look after Mary.

So here in the heart of this great city was an important church ... a church that had some things going that pleased the Lord.

### **WHAT PLEASES THE LORD?**

**Revelation 2:2 - I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.**

- **Service to the Lord**

When Jesus says, "I know your deeds," He's affirming their faithful service in the doing the work of the Lord. And this pleases Him.

- **Sacrifice for the Lord**

v.2 – “I know ... your hard work...” More than just good deeds. The word here means labor to the point of exhaustion. They were giving 110%. This sacrifice for the Lord pleases Him.

- **Standing firm in hardship**

v.2 – “I know ... your perseverance...” The word literally means “to abide under.” You haven’t squirmed out from under the heavy load. You’ve been ridiculed for your commitment to Christ, but you haven’t caved in.

**Revelation 2:3 - You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.**

The Christian life isn’t a fun run. It’s an agonizing race. And for some it is more agonizing for others. It pleases the Lord when we stand firm under hardship.

- **Struggle against evil**

v.2 – “I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people.” False apostles, false teachers were knocking at the door of the church and making their influence felt in a powerful way. But these faithful believers stood their ground in the struggle against evil. And this is pleasing to the Lord.

Jesus says to you, dear unnoticed servant ... “I know, I know.” Sometimes we grow weary. Sometimes we long for someone to recognize what we’re doing. Jesus says, “I know...”

So there are many things that please the Lord in this church. But we also see...

## **WHAT GRIEVES THE LORD?**

What more could Jesus want? But the all-discerning gaze of the Savior (remember He has eyes like fire) picks up a flaw that is deadly to the future and the witness of the church. He detects a heart problem.

**Revelation 2:4 - Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.**

It’s so easy to be perfectly appropriate in our theology, and practically arranged in our organization, but to be personally apathetic about our Lord.

And this grieves the Savior because He longs for a heart connection with His followers.

**ILLUSTRATION** – A marriage is in trouble when the husband and wife begin to take each other for granted. And the believer is in trouble when he or she begins to take Christ for granted.

You can't be proud of getting an A in theology, an A in service and an F in love.

**ILLUSTRATION** – Without being sacrilegious, someone has observed that for believers in this condition, Jesus Christ is like our little affair on the side. Then we go back to our regular life.

**QUOTE:** One well-known worship leader has described the situation like this: “Often it feels to me as if, for many of our people, singing praise songs and hymns on Sunday morning has turned into an affair with Christ. Too many of us are far more passionate about lesser, temporal concerns such as getting ahead at the office, finding personal happiness in a hobby, driving a new car, or rearing well-balanced children. But we rarely ever get that excited about Christ Himself, at least on any consistent basis, except when we enter a sanctuary on a Sunday. Then for a while we end up sort of ‘swooning’ over Christ with feel-good music and heart-stirring prayer – only to return to the daily grind of secular seductions to which, for all practical purposes, we are thoroughly ‘married.’ Christ is more like a ‘mistress’ to us. He’s someone with whom we can have these periodic affairs to reinvigorate our spirits so we can return...to engage all the other agendas that dominate us most of the time.” OUCH!

When Jesus says, “You have left your first love...” what does that mean? It means you’re holding something back from God and from others. What is love? This agape love, as we discovered in our study of I Corinthians 13, is giving ourselves completely to God and to others. We give everything to Him because He gave everything for us. We love Him because He first loved us. What had happened in Ephesus is that there was a vast part of their lives that they were holding back from God. Christ held nothing back when He went to the Cross. That’s love.

What are you holding back from God?

We look upward to gain the vision of Christ. We look inward to see what He sees in us. And then we...

### **3. LOOK FORWARD (vv.5,7)**

I’m so thankful that Christ doesn’t just look at the sad situation in the church and say to them, “There’s no hope.”

**ILLUSTRATION** – Imagine going to the doctor with a serious illness. After the examination the doctor says, “I’m sorry. There’s nothing I can do for you. Just go home and prepare to die.” Thank God He doesn’t give us on us.

**Revelation 2:5 - Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.**

So what are we to do with this information, this knowledge? We’re to take responsibility for the condition of our lives and our walk with God. Do you realize that you are as close to God right now as you want to be? There’s nothing but your own desire that stands between you and all that God wants to be in and to you ... nothing. Remember, repent, return.

There are two powerful motivations in this corrective action Jesus is calling for. One is present, one is future. One is negative, one is positive.

**Revelation 2:5 - I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.**

Note: This has to be a very real factor for us as a church. Where will we be 10 or 20 years from now? Our destiny is in the hands of Christ. He determines which lampstands stay, and which ones go, depending on the radical faithfulness to Him.

The other motivation is found in...

**Revelation 2:7 - Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.**

## **CONCLUSION**

**ILLUSTRATION** – I’ve spoken often since our trip to the UK about the Welsh Revival of 1904-1905 and the way God used a young man named Evan Roberts. But actually it didn’t start with him. In northern Wales there were some young people in a church where they were experiencing a powerful refreshing of their faith. One day during a church gathering a young 16-year old girl named Flory Evans stood and gave a testimony. She simply said, “I love the Lord Jesus with all my heart.” That was it. The effect on the worship service was electrifying and the spiritual fervor spread to the other youth in the area in the following days and weeks. Revival spread throughout Wales because of the simple testimony of one young lady: “I love the Lord Jesus with all my heart.”

Are you holding anything back from Jesus today?