

In this next part of the book of Revelation, we have seven letters which are written to each of the seven churches. And in these letters, Jesus is speaking to them, talking about what is happening to them and what is happening in each one. So we get a picture of what these churches were going through. But these letters were not just written for them. They were also written for the whole church, including us. This is why Jesus says in verse 7 of our reading: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Not just "the church." So it is good for us to pay attention to what Jesus says in this letter, because he is also speaking to us today.

And the first letter that is written in the book of Revelation is written to the church in Ephesus. Partly because it was the closest to the island of Patmos, but mostly because Ephesus was the largest and the most important city in Asia Minor in that time. About a quarter of a million people lived in that city. That's roughly the size of the whole area of Fargo-Moorhead today. And Ephesus sat on the coast of Asia Minor. It was a very important trade city because of it. It was the crossroads of some major trade routes, and there were always ships and traders going in and out of the city. People were constantly coming and going out of Ephesus, so it was important for that reason. But the city was also important religiously. The great temple of Artemis was built at Ephesus, and that was one of the ancient seven wonders of the world. Some people even considered it to be the greatest of the seven wonders of the world. And for that reason, Ephesus attracted a lot of tourists, visitors who came to the city in order to see the great temple or to worship in it or whatever it may be. So there were always people coming and going in and out of the city.

For that reason, Ephesus was important for the early church. It only made sense to have a church here. Paul spent three years preaching and teaching in Ephesus. That was longer than anywhere else on all of his journeys. And the letter of Ephesians was written to this congregation. It was a very important one indeed. Which made sense, because if you had a church in a city like Ephesus, the Gospel would go everywhere very quickly, not just to Asia Minor and to the region around it, but to the entire world. So this was a very important church indeed.

But that had a downside. Ephesus also attracted a lot of conmen, a lot of charlatans. Men who would do anything to make a name for themselves, anything to make a buck. Some of them even pretended to be Christians, even saying that they were apostles on the same level as Peter and Paul and all of the rest, claiming to have a special revelation from God, a special message that had come just through them. Unfortunately, these false teachers went everywhere in those days. They went from city to city trying to peddle their message. And just as unfortunately, in some places they were successful. Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 11: "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." So the Church needed to be on guard against these false apostles, against these false teachers, just like today.

But in this situation, Jesus says in our letter, verse 1: "To the angel of the church in Ephesus, write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.'" Now, why does Jesus describe himself in this way, talking about the stars and the lampstands? Because both of these symbols point to his relationship to his Church. Because you'll remember back in Revelation chapter 1, the seven stars represent the seven angels of the churches. And these seven angels are so closely connected to those churches that whenever God speaks to them he's speaking to that whole church. So in chapter 1, they are described as

being in Jesus's right hand, but now he describes it as holding them in his right hand. And that's an important difference, because just being in the hand might say that that's just where they are. But holding them in his hand shows that he is the one in control, that they belong to him, that he is the one who directs them. It's like how you hold the reins of a horse in order to direct it where you want it to go. Jesus is the master over these churches. They would not exist apart from him. And the same is true for the seven lampstands. We heard, again in chapter 1, the seven lampstands represent the seven churches. But Jesus is not just standing among them. He's walking. He knows what's going on. He's paying attention to everything that's happening. He knows what they're doing. He knows what is happening to them. So through these two symbols, then, Jesus shows himself as the Lord of his Church, as the one who is in control. There is no Church apart from him, and he knows perfectly well what is going on among them.

So this is why Jesus goes on to say, starting in verse 2: "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary." Jesus knows what they're doing. He knows their works. And he praises them for their zeal for the truth. Because Ephesus attracting so many false teachers of course presented a problem. But even though all of these false apostles were among them, the Ephesians were not afraid to speak the truth. They were not afraid to put these false teachers to the test, to ask, "Is what they are saying true?" They were not afraid to compare their teachings with the Word of God. And above all, they were not afraid to say when something was wrong, when something was false, and to condemn it as being against God's Word.

And for that reason, at least in this, Christians, the Ephesians are a good example for us today, especially when there are so many false teachers around us. We need to be willing to put everything that we hear to the test. To ask when someone speaks about God or about his Word: "Is this true or is this false?" And it's equally important for us to condemn what is false, to say explicitly, "This is wrong. This goes against God's Word." Because our temptation, Christians, is always to be a little soft with false doctrine, to think that it's not that dangerous or that we don't need to worry about it. But false doctrine always leads people away from God. False doctrine kills souls. That's why John says in 1 John chapter 4: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world." We need to be ready and willing to stand up for the truth of God's Word, and in that the Ephesians give us a good example.

But they had a serious problem. Jesus says in verse 4: "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first." Unfortunately, Christians, what had happened in the Ephesian church was that their desire, their good desire for the truth had turned into a sinful desire to be right above all else. They had become more concerned about showing why someone else was wrong rather than speaking the truth to them. And that showed itself in a lack of love towards others, especially in bearing witness to the truth. They wanted to win arguments more than anything else.

Christians, do we fall into this same error? Do we want to be right above all things, to win arguments? Do we want to show why someone else is wrong so that we can be puffed up about being right? Because it is quite possible for us, Christians, to be totally correct and yet not put

that truth into practice, especially when it comes to speaking the truth to all around us. That's why Jesus warns the Ephesians and us, verse 5: "Remember, therefore, from where you have fallen. Repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you, and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent." Repent, he says. Turn back to your first love, or your lampstand will be removed. You will cease to be a church at all. Because there cannot be a church without love, Christians, a church without a love for the truth which shows itself in love towards others.

But be careful here. Don't misunderstand what I'm saying. Because for many people these days, when they hear all of this, they think that the opposite of lovelessness is tolerance. This "let's all just get along" kind of attitude. Love for many people means just ignoring differences. Love for many people means overlooking errors. It means agreeing to disagree. In other words, love for many people would mean tolerating false doctrine. It's better to be nice, we think, than to be correct. That you can't have a love for the truth and also a love for other people. That's the temptation that we so often fall into in the world today. But Jesus is not saying that here. Pay very close attention to what he says in verse 6: "Yet this you have,"--he's praising them for this!-- "yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." Jesus hates the works of the Nicolaitans. He hates, not tolerates. Let's not try to soften up this word here. God absolutely hates, detests, abhors false doctrine, because false doctrine kills. It leads people away from him. It leads people into death. So it's not good for us to just pretend it doesn't exist or to just ignore it. It is not good for us to overlook it in the name of "love." We have to speak the truth and also show love at the same time. To say that this is true and this is false, and to show that to the world around us. Paul says in Ephesians chapter 4 that we do this "so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." So in other words, Christians, that means speaking the truth not in an arrogant way, not in a way that only serves ourselves. That's the temptation we want to fall into. But rather to speak the truth in such a way that it helps someone else, that they also see the truth of God's Word. Sometimes that's going mean speaking that Word, that truth very harshly. Sometimes we just have to say what needs to be said. We should not be afraid to hurt someone else's feelings or think that we need to avoid that at all costs. Sometimes feelings need to be hurt if it means saving a soul. But we should also be willing to speak the truth patiently, to show someone else the truth of God's Word over and over again, to show what is right, to show what is wrong, even if we have to do it a hundred times. Because the goal here, Christians, is to help that other person. To speak the truth so that they would come to know that truth, and by knowing that truth, they would come to know Jesus Christ by faith and be saved. Jesus wants us to speak the truth not for ourselves but for all of those around us.

And so Jesus closes this first letter by saying in verse 7: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God." Pay attention to that "the one who conquers" in that verse. Repenting as Jesus commands us to repent is never an easy thing. Repenting means we have to overcome sin. It means we have to win the victory over the sin which is keeping us away from God. And for the Ephesians that means overcoming their lovelessness, to speak the truth not just for their own sake, but also for the sake of those around them. And that's not something that would happen instantly. It's not even something that would happen overnight. It would be a constant fight against that sin with everything that they have, because of their love for Jesus. But

Jesus shows them that this fight against sin is not pointless, that there is a point to it. Through the power that comes from God, they would be able to fight against that sin and to conquer it. They would be able to overcome.

And Jesus promises that the one who conquers in this way will eat of the tree of life. You'll remember in Genesis, Adam and Eve could not eat of that tree because of their sin. Genesis chapter 3 says: "Then the Lord God said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat and live forever--.'" Their sin kept them away from the tree, just as our sin keeps us away from the tree. But the one who overcomes will eat of that tree. And we learn at the end of the book of Revelation that the tree of life is in the heavenly city, in the New Jerusalem, and those who live in the city eat of it. They will live forever with God.

So even though the fight against sin is hard, Christians, even though it may be hard to speak the truth, to speak the truth in a way that benefits others and not just ourselves, we must still fight. Because God will give us the victory over our hesitance. God will give us the victory and show us the way to speak the truth. So fight with all that you have, and God will give you to eat of the tree of life in paradise with him forever. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches! Amen.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, who holds your Church in your right hand and who walks among your people, make us steadfast in the truth and lead us to speak that truth to all around us, so that they would come to know you by faith and be saved; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.