

Our Lord's Lenten Words to Ephesus & to Us
Sermon based on Revelation 2:1-7
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
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Introduction: This Year's Lenten Series

The Apostle John once wrote—at the beginning of Revelation: *Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven-fold Spirit before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.* Amen.

Dear fellow followers of our Lenten Lord:

Normally, when you come to a Lenten midweek worship service, you expect to hear about the suffering and death of our Savior Jesus Christ. And today, you did so—in the reading of the Passion History. But the sermons this Lenten Season will be different. Here at Saint Mark's, every three years, we preach on the Passion History during weekend worship—for the sake of our people who are unavailable during the middle of the week. And then, during the midweek services, we cover a little different territory.

This Lenten Season the territory we are covering is our Savior's set of seven letters to churches in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, in the nineties AD—sixty some years after his death and resurrection. These letters, written though the Apostle John in the Book of Revelation, have Lenten overtones. They reveal the sins of their listeners, they apply Christ's kind forgiveness to those sins, and they direct their listeners more closely to follow Jesus. These letters are the Spirit's instruments to call us to repent.

Theme: Our Lord's Lenten Words to Ephesus & to Us

And so it is that tonight we consider: OUR LORD'S LENTEN WORDS TO EPHESUS & TO US. Briefly, these words will remind us that: SOMETIMES WE'VE FORSAKEN OUR FIRST LOVE, but: OUR FIRST LOVE NEVER FORSOOK US.

Exposition: Our Lord's Lenten Words to Ephesus

I invite you to pick up a pew Bible and turn to page nineteen hundred fourteen. On page nineteen hundred fourteen you'll find Revelation, chapter two, verses one through seven—God's special Scripture for us this evening. I'll read it. I'll explain it as I go along. And in the end, we'll apply these words to us.

Our Savior Jesus says to his Apostle John: *To the angel of the church in Ephesus write* the following....

So, was John writing to an *angel*? Unlikely. Instead, the word “angel” in the original Greek literally means “messenger”. (After all, an angel is God's messenger.) Jesus was speaking to the “messenger” at the church at Ephesus—probably the “pastor”, who would in turn relay this message to God's people.

Jesus, then, was addressing the church at *Ephesus*—on the west coast of Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. It was a congregation Paul had visited on his second and third missionary journeys, a congregation to which Paul addressed his letter to the Ephesians, a congregation to which Paul had later sent his young fellow pastor Timothy.

John himself was only seventy-five miles away, as he wrote. But he was on the little island of Patmos, a mountainous island about six miles by ten miles in size, out in the Aegean Sea. The aged Apostle John was exiled there for proclaiming Jesus. That's why he needed to write letters, rather than being able to make visits.

Well, what did John write? **These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand** – the *seven stars* were the seven “angels” or “pastors” of the seven churches – and he **walks among the seven golden lampstands** –the *seven golden lampstands* were the seven churches themselves.

Now, first our Savior is going to approve what these Ephesians were doing right. Next our Savior is going to reveal the sinfulness of these Ephesians. Then he will encourage them again.

So first, Jesus affirms what the Ephesian Christians are doing right. He says: **I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.** For forty years now, the Ephesians had continued in the truth. More specifically: **I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.** There was no tolerance for false teaching and false teachers among the Ephesians—and Christ approved! So, he says: **You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.**

But secondly, Jesus reveals what the Ephesian Christians were doing wrong. **Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.** And what is this *first love* that the Ephesians had forsaken? Well, this is the only place in the Bible those words “first love” come up. But they have to refer to none other than the joy of salvation found in the Savior Jesus. It was love for Jesus that caused the Ephesians to burn those five million dollars worth of scrolls, remember? It was love for Jesus that caused the Ephesians to persevere, even when Paul’s preaching precipitated a riot, right? It was love for Jesus that led elders from Ephesus to take a two-day trip, just to visit a little bit with Paul, remember?

And so, Jesus says and John writes: **Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent** – admit your sins, and lay them at the foot of Christ’s cross – **repent and do the things you did at first** – and all remains forgiven. But: **If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.** Failure to confess sin and find its forgiveness at the foot of Christ’s cross is nothing less than the forfeiture of heaven itself.

But Jesus still offers a little bit of encouragement. **You have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.** Strictly speaking, we don’t know exactly what the Nicolaitans taught. However, what we read in the rest of the Bible, and what we read from Christian leaders who lived shortly after this time, leads us to believe that these people said something like the following: “The soul counts for everything. The body counts for nothing.” (And of course, that amounts to a denial of the resurrection of our bodies.) “Since the soul counts for everything and the body counts for nothing, we can do whatever we’d like with our bodies—eating foods sacrificed to idols, participating in sexual immorality, et cetera.” And Christ condemns that!

To conclude: Jesus says and John writes: **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life** – the very one forfeited by Adam and Eve – **which is in the paradise of God** – yep, the very paradise forfeited by Adam and Eve.

Appropriation: Our Lord’s Lenten Words to Us

And that’s it. That’s God’s Word to us today.... So, what does Jesus want to say to us by it? Well, some of the condemnation for our sinfulness should hit home for us. But so should the benefits of our Savior Jesus Christ.

First of all, the condemnations for our sinfulness.... I count three actually.

One: Jesus commends the Ephesian Christians for persevering against false teaching and false teachers. Can he commend us for the same?

Well, as a church body, I think it's true that the WELS, to which we belong, has fought admirably against false teaching and false teachers.

But how about us ourselves? ...Our whole culture contends that there are many ways to heavenly glory and that everybody really worships the same God anyway, albeit by different names. Do you fight that? Do you speak up against that when you hear it? Do you contend for the Scriptures' truth? ...Our whole culture contends that Christians, especially, are more or less the same – that some may demand good works and others focus on God's grace in Christ, that some may demand a human decision and others focus on God's grace in Christ – but these things should not be divisive. Do you fight that? Do you speak up against that when you hear it? Do you contend for the Scriptures' truth?

My brother, my sister, let's lay our sins at the foot of the cross of Christ!

Another condemnation for sinfulness.... Jesus condemns the Ephesian Christians for forsaking their first love. Would he condemn us for the same?

Well, as a church, there are an awful lot of people at Saint Mark's who treasure Christ our Savior.

But how about us ourselves? ...Is Christ the center of our lives to such an extent that we listen to him every day? That would happen by way of his Word. Is Christ the center of our lives to such an extent that we visit with him every day? That would happen by way of our prayers. Is Christ the center of our lives to such an extent that the people who really know us actually have in us a window through which to view our Savior?

My brother, my sister, let's lay those shortfalls at the foot of the cross of Christ!

And a final condemnation for sinfulness.... Jesus commends the Ephesian Christians for persevering against immorality. Can he commend us for the same?

Again, as a church body, I think it's true that the WELS, to which we belong, has publicly proclaimed the truths of the Scriptures regarding a righteous life.

But how about us ourselves? When we've seen a marriage breaking up, when we've witnessed drunkenness, when we're aware of an unmarried couple living together: has our love for Christ and our love for others led us to say...? "Oh, trust Christ! Trust Christ for the forgiveness of these sins of yours! And trust Christ when he says: 'I can shepherd you through the difficulties of your marriage. I can make your life so much better without drunkenness. I can bless you so much more by reserving a sexual relationship for marriage.'" Have you always said that?

My brother, my sister: Isn't our guilt as high as the heavens? Aren't our sins as numerous as the minutes we have lived? Doesn't hell itself hang over us?

But my brother, my sister: It is precisely for that reason that our Heavenly Father led his One and Only Son into that wayside park, into the Garden of Gethsemane—late in the evening, early in April, two thousand years ago. God's love for us laid the crushing load of our transgressions on Jesus' shoulders, so that he sweat like great drops of blood.

And Christ's love for us led him to accept our sins, even though he dreaded their punishment. Christ's love for us led him to undergo arrest, even though seventy-two thousand angels were on standby, so as to rescue him. Christ's love for us led him to have his hands tied with our transgressions, his innocence fouled by our wickedness, his life snuffed out because of our sinfulness.

And you are set free! So, no matter how often you have forsaken your first love, Christ Jesus your Lord, he will never forsake you. That, in turn, strengthens you to love him forever and ever—until you dwell with him in the paradise of God. Amen.

The Apostle John once wrote—to continue his Revelation: *To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.*