

I. Set Up

A. Today we begin our new series called *Letters from God*, which is based on the first three chapters of the book of Revelation. It's a bit of a cliché to talk about the Bible as a love letter written by God to you, but not only is there some truth in that, there are seven letters within the Bible that are written for us. They are found in Revelation 2 and 3 and we pick up the first one today.

II. Intro

A. We have a complicated relationship with feedback.

1. As students we generally do not like it. Test scores and report cards are things to dread.

2. And as adults, we are not much different. Giving or receive a performance Review is almost always among the worst parts of the job.

B. And yet, we need feedback, and in some cases, we crave it.

1. I remember being a year out of grad school and looking around for someone to tell me how I was doing.

2. Along these same lines, who would watch sports if no one ever kept score?

C. And it's not just feedback, we actually want to get better. Think about this – there are areas where we pay people to tell us what we are doing wrong. We take guitar lessons or golf lessons where people say, “No, not like that, like this.”

1. We do this because we understand that in order to do better we need input. Assessment. Some sort of feedback loop. We do this because we realize that Feedback is the breakfast of champions – especially if it comes from someone who knows us and knows what is going on and who we trust to help us.

D. Well, we get that kind of feedback in a series of letters found in the Book of Revelation – and they serve as the backdrop for the series we begin today.

III. Not quite two thousand years ago, the Apostle John – now serving as the Bishop of Ephesus – was the last man standing.

A. He is generally believed to have been the youngest apostle. The others are now all dead – all but Judas having been martyred for their faith in some way. (Judas, as you may remember, ended his own life).

B. It's now fifty years after the resurrection and John is living on an island in the Aegean Sea - an Alcatraz of sorts. Tradition says that Roman authorities tried to kill him twice. But he survived, so they banished him to this island.

C. And while he is there, he has a vision in which he is whisked into Heaven and meets with the risen Christ and is told to take notes.

D. What he sees and writes down, becomes the Book of Revelation – a circular letter for the churches he is overseeing. They are being persecuted and are about to be persecuted more harshly.¹

E. As you may know, what he writes is ultimately encouraging, because the big message in the book is that Jesus wins.

1. There is a lot of talk about a lot of evil – multi-headed dragons and worse; There is a lot of talk about suffering; There are warnings and calls to do more.

2. It's hard to read – both because much of it is dark and most of it is hard to understand. But when you work through it, you find a focus on Jesus that is big and glorious, and you also find a promise that He wins, and the corresponding promise that if we preserve we win as well.

F. Chapter one – which I encouraged you to read in the video I sent out – is a description of Jesus. There we find the risen, glorified Jesus appearing to John. Jesus is described as the protector, authority, and judge of His church, and He tells John to write some things down:

1. First, the things which he had seen, this is the contents of chapter 1;

2. Second, seven letters – which is what makes up chapters two and three and which is what we are going to be focusing on;

3. And third, all the things that will take place – which makes up the contents of chapters 4-22, which is where things get really hard to grasp.

G. There is a lot in the Book of Revelation. This series focuses on chapters 2 and 3, the seven letters to seven churches in Asia Minor – now Turkey.

1. There were ten churches in the area. The ones Jesus writes to are not the biggest seven, but are considered models for other churches out there. And his comments to them – His letters to them – are full of insight about what they are doing right and what they are doing wrong and what the church should be like.

H. Today we get Christ's comments to the church in Ephesus, which today looks like this – **PICTURES OF RUINS** - and it is so spectacular that if you are visiting the seven churches, you visit Ephesus last. Otherwise, all the other sites are big let downs.

1. Let me note, when you go on a Seven Churches tour, you are not actually looking at church buildings. You do do that, because over the last two thousand years, lots of churches were built in and around these sites. But they were not there at the time John was writing the Book of Revelation. What you are visiting is the ruins of the cities.

IV. Ephesus was the major city in the area, and it was quite a place.

A. It wasn't the capital of Asia Minor, that was Pergamus, which we'll look at it in a couple weeks.

B. But Ephesus had all the people – some say as many as half a million

C. It had the best harbor in the area, which meant lots of trade and money.

D. It was a free city, which meant Rome had given it the right for self-governing – which meant, no Roman troops in town.

E. It was a sports town. The Ephesian Games rivaled the Olympic Games.

F. It was an arts town – it had a massive theater.

G. And it was the center of the worship of Artemis, or the God Diana² - and her temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

1. It was 425 feet long, 260' wide and 60' high, all made of glittering Persian marble embellished with gold and jewels. It was supposedly beautiful beyond words.

2. It was: 1) a museum for treasure from around the world; 2) it was a bank; 3) it was a sanctuary from the law - so it was filled with criminals; 4) it was a pagan fertility temple, so it was filled with prostitutes; and 5) it was a place where you could buy idols. Write ups suggest that the morals of the temple were worse than the morals of animals.

V. So, Ephesus is quite a place. And, it was also home to a church – one Paul had planted on his third missionary journey.³ We read about that in Acts 19. And it was quite a church:

A. For starters, it was busy planting other churches. The Ephesian church is likely mentioned first by Jesus not only because it was the most prominent of the seven churches and it was in the most important town, but also because it had planted the other six.

1. Let me pause here to note that today is the first weekend that the Vernon Hills campus is officially meeting. So, a shout out to Christ Church Vernon Hills

2. I would never recommend starting a church in midst of a global pandemic, but this was all set up to launch last Easter – and we rented the space and got it set to go and have about 75 people on the launch team. And then COVID hit. So, we will see what the Lord is going to do. Anyway, a shout out to the group in Vernon Hills today. May we marvel at God’s timing as you grow and thrive.

B. So, let me note that the Ephesus church was in a prominent town, it was busy planting other churches and **also that it was being persecuted**. You can read about that in Acts 19. As the church grew, the sale of idols at the temple went down. This made the merchants mad. They came after Paul. A riot broke out.

VI. So, what we are about to read now is the letter Jesus sends to them.

A. As a quick aside, the format he uses here will be the same for all seven churches. There are seven parts: 1) the letters start by identifying who it is addressed to; 2) there is some description of Christ – which in each case ties back to Revelation chapter 1; 3) there is some statement of commendation; 4) there are some words of criticism; 5) there is a reminder that Jesus is coming again; 6) a warning to heed what is being shared and finally, 7) a promise for those who overcome.

VII. Revelation 2:1: **To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:** The Greek word *angel* means messenger. Some say it refers to real angels. Maybe, although we have no other suggestion that each church has an angel. The term means messenger, so it could be a note to John to tell the person taking mail to Ephesus to be sure to tell them this.

VIII. **These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.** The person being referenced here is Jesus. John is just the scribe. In Rev. 1:20, we are told that the seven golden lampstands are the churches, and the seven stars are the messengers of those churches. So, who controls the churches? Jesus.

IX. V2: **I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.** They are commended for three things.

A. First, their consistent hard work. They weren't auditing the faith. They were not Christian consumers. They were not expecting to be entertained. They were serving, sharing Christ, planting new churches, helping people in need. \

B. Second, they were doctrinally purity. V 2 reads: **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.** They cared about truth. They had not moved on from the truth they had been taught.⁴

C. Third: There were persistent. Tenacious. V3: **You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.**

X. These are all good things. The church in Ephesus had a lot going for it.

XI. V4: **Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.** They were doing things right, but, they had a big miss.

A. We need to be OK with people not liking us or not liking the church. Except, it's not OK when the person who has a problem with the church is Jesus. It's not that all they are doing is bad. Quite the contrary – what they are doing appears to be very good. But, their heart for God was cold. Jesus suggests that they were doing the right things, but not for the right reasons. They were motivated out of duty or guilt or tradition, but not love for God.

B. Loving God – loving Christ – must be at the core of our relationship with Him. We have lots of verses that make this point:

1. When Jesus was asked to summarize the Law, he said: You shall love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself.

2. In Mt. 10:37 he says: “He who loves father or mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me, and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.”

3. In John chapter 8 :42 Jesus told the Pharisees, “If God were your Father, you would love Me.” No more definitive statement is made in the New Testament than that. “If God is your Father, you would love Me.

C. I can go on. When Jesus wants to identify the spiritual condition of Peter in John 21, he asks him the same question three times: “Peter, do you” – what? – “love Me?”

D. Those who are Christians love the Lord Jesus Christ. The Christian life can be summed up: God loves us, we love God, and therefore we keep His commandments.

E. *In Ephesus this isn't happening. The Christians are still doing the right thing, but the honeymoon is over. Their love for God had cooled. They are doctrinally solid. They are morally pure.* They are disciplined and hard-working. But their love for God has faded.

F. Has yours? Was there a time when your love for God was hotter than it is now? If so, when? And if so, why? What was going on then? What is not going on now?

G. The call to love God – indeed, to love him more than anything else – is worth reflecting on.

1. The first thing we can note is that it's audacious. Reading Christ's words saying, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me," are shocking. A bit scandalous. This kind of demand could only be made by a delusional megalomaniac or by God.
2. Second, they line up with the first of the ten commandments. God needs to be first. Something will be first – most important, most defining, most irrepressible. We all worship something. We cannot help it. What do you worship? What is your life oriented around.
3. The third thing to note is that it is hard. As commandments go, it's much easier to work on not having idols, or not stealing or not lying or sleeping around. These are behaviors you can refrain via sheer force of will if necessary. But valuing God above all else is a posture of the heart. And as you have likely come to understand, the heart is hard to control. We cannot will our hearts down the right path.

H. So, what do we do?

XII. Well, Jesus offers advice to the Ephesians. He doesn't give them a bad review and leave them to figure out next steps. He offers some advice. **Vs. 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.**

XIII. He gives them three things to do:

A. First, he tells them to remember:

1. The Greek literally means "to keep on remembering" from where they had fallen.
2. Keep on remembering who God is and what He has done. Keep on rehearsing these truths.
3. When we find that our devotion to God is fading, the solution is not to try harder. The answer is to see clearer; to gain a more ravishing vision of who God is⁵ and to let that carry us forward. This vision comes to us most perfectly in the person of Jesus Christ who is the image of the invisible God.
4. Spend time reading and reflecting about Jesus in the Gospels. We need to rediscover his kindness, power, grace, and beauty. As your vision of him becomes clearer, you will discover the false gods vying to replace him start to fade.
5. Remember what need or desire first led you to God. In Scripture, we find people coming to Jesus for any number of reasons, with the most frequent being a desire for physical healing.
 - a) It is worth noting that there is not a single instance recorded in the gospels of Jesus turning away anyone asking for healing. He demanded nothing from them in exchange for his mercy. There were no preconditions and no limitations on who was worthy of Jesus' attention.

b) We see the same unconditional love in the Prodigal Son story as the father embraces his lost, rebellious child. With God we find a radical hospitality.

c) What draws us to God changes over time.⁶ It grows. But think back to those early days.

B. The second thing he tells them to do is to repent of their sin of failing to love God.

1. To repent means to turn from sin and, even more than that, to change our mind, which will change our actions.

C. And thirdly, they were told to do the deeds they did at first.

1. Literally, they were to do the first deeds, those things that they did when they first came to salvation in Christ.

2. What have you stopped doing?

XIV. There is a bit more in his letter to the Ephesians.

XV. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. We do not know much about the Nicolaitans. They are not mentioned anywhere else. Apparently they embraced some kind of false teaching which destroyed people.

XVI. 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. As I mentioned, each of the letters includes a promise to those who overcome to the end.

XVII. So as we planned this series, we were all taken by the idea of a letter from God.

A. Not just the from God part – although that is the key part. But also the letter part. .

1. Not an email. Not a text. But a letter.

B. In fact, we were all taken by letters in general. Because they are so rare. A real, handwritten, delivered in the mail letter. We thought there was an opportunity to do something with the idea of writing and receiving letters.

C. So, each week we are going to ask you to write a letter. And today, it is a letter to God. More to the point, it is a love letter to God.

D. Now, maybe this isn't your issue.

1. Revelation 2 and 3 contains seven letters. People are singled out for different things. Perhaps you are not much like Ephesus. Maybe you are more like Laodicea – sort of wishy washy in your faith. Or more like Smyrna (you are doing everything right) or, well, there are seven letters. Maybe your love for God is strong.

2. If this is you, what will you do to shake up your life – to reorder it – so that your love for God grows? This AM in my devotional reading (read a Psalm, copy ten verses from John, have some time of silence, write in my journal, and then there are some books I read something from). And what I read said, “every 7 – 10 years you have to do something to shake up your inner world.”

3. OK, then this is an easy assignment. Write a love letter to God.

4. Look, there is a lot here. I generally emphasize that love is more than feelings. But it's not less.
- 5.
6. You do not feel like this one targets you as much as it may others. OK, well, that means you love God and should have no trouble writing him a letter!

¹ If you are dialed in on the Saturday history podcast I am doing – walking through the 100 most significant moments in the history of the Christian faith - you know that the persecution that started early in Acts, continued for 300 years. It was not constant. It was bad under Nero – who came to power in 64 AD and blamed the Christians for burning Rome. It's under his reign of terror we believe both Paul and Peter are killed. It dies down briefly after Nero's death, but then it ramps back up under Domitian, who was emperor during the period John writes this book.

² Artemis is a Greek name – the Roman name is Diana. There is some confusion here because Artemis is a male name and sometimes a male figure. Diana a more decidedly female, but in ancient ritualistic religions (and occult religions, Babylonian Mystery Cults, etc.) the male/female identity of gods is often switched. It appears to be part of the sexual excess / confusion of the times.

³ He stayed in Ephesus for three years, which was a long time for him. Timothy was involved there as well John himself. And lots of good and amazing things happened at this church – which we might expect. No church in history (with the exception, perhaps of Jerusalem, has this kind of spiritual pedigree of Ephesus.

⁴ Paul had warned the Ephesians elders many years earlier in Acts 20:28-31 when he said to them, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.”

⁵ From Skye Jethani devotion.

⁶ Like the destitute younger son returning to his father hoping for a warm bed and a job, most of us come to Christ seeking to use him to solve some problem. We see God as a means to an end, and thankfully he accepts us as we are. In time, however, he will challenge and transform our desires. He will insist we move away from a posture of merely using Jesus to one of passionately wanting Jesus. That shift may appear subtle, but it is the ultimate goal of discipleship.