

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA

The Church Where the Honeymoon Was Over

Program #1047

Eddie Parrish & Mark Teske

EDDIE: Sometimes after a couple have been married for a number of years, problems come up. At times we might say, when those kinds of problems arise, that the honeymoon's over. And what's true of individual marriages is also true at times of congregations of the church. We're going to study one of those congregations today on *The Truth In Love*.

EDDIE: Welcome to our program today. Along with Mark Teske, who is the executive director of *The Truth In Love*, I'm your host, Eddie Parrish. We're glad to have you with us today on the program. We have begun a series of lessons on the seven churches of Asia that are mentioned in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation. After a few introductory remarks in our last session, we're ready to begin our study of these individual congregations today.

MARK: As John opens up the book of Revelation, he says these things "must shortly take place" (Revelation 1:1). And at the end of the book in Revelation 2:10, he says, "The time is at hand." The context of the whole book of Revelation is the things which are about to happen in the day in which John wrote these things.

The book is specifically addressed to seven churches which are in Asia. It's kind of interesting that there were more than seven churches in the province of Asia, with Colosse being one that is not specifically mentioned in these seven churches. But the number seven is figurative

for the completeness, or the totality. As we look at the letters to these seven churches, we can see bits of truth about these churches that could be applicable to the situation we're in today. It is like the old saying goes, if the shoe fits, wear it. I think that really helps as we read through some of these letters and try to apply these things to our lives today.

EDDIE: Right. That's true. All of the congregations that are mentioned in these chapters were congregations of the Lord's church. These were not man-made religious bodies. And it's not our purpose in this series of lessons to establish the nature of the New Testament church and things of that sort. We've done that on other lessons and probably will again in future ones. But to those who do view this program who are members of the New Testament church, certainly these would have direct application to you and in general terms would have application to anyone who is viewing the program. We are beginning today to look at these particular congregations with the first one that is addressed in chapter 2, and that's the church in Ephesus. There's a lot about the church in Ephesus or at least the city of Ephesus by way of background information that I think is important for us to consider. The city of Ephesus was a wealthy city. It was a very cultured city in the Roman empire. But it was also a very corrupt place. There was a lot of immorality there. It would be a hard place for a congregation of Christians to survive and thrive. But a congregation of the Lord's church did exist there. We can read in the book of Acts (Acts 18–20) of the establishing of the church in the city of Ephesus around AD 51. The apostle Paul wrote a book to the church in Ephesus about AD 62, and then we have this letter dictated to John by Jesus around the year AD 96, some 45 years or so after the church was established. Jesus has a lot to say, both good and bad, about this congregation, and we're going to take some time to look and see exactly what the Lord does say there.

MARK: As we look at this letter written to the church at Ephesus, it's interesting to note that of all the New Testament churches that we see within scripture, the Ephesian church is probably the best documented of all of them because of the epistle written directly to them, the discussion that Paul had with the elders from that congregation, and here in the book of Revelation. We can see that church changing over time. Some of those changes are good, and some

our materials through the website also. So please access that and allow us to provide these materials for you, in whatever format you'd like to have them. We appreciate again the fact that you've joined us today in our study of the seven churches of Asia and specifically today on the study of Ephesus, and the Lord willing, next time we meet we'll continue our series of lessons.

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"Remember from whence you are fallen." In other words, they were to think back to the way things used to be. The writer of Hebrews said a similar thing in Hebrews 10:32, "Recall the former days." And the church in Ephesus needed to do that. They needed to think back to the time when they were doing the things that they were doing with proper motives, and when love did characterize the things they were doing as far as their obedience. So remember.

MARK: And as we look at the marriage relationship, that remembering also helps us there, that as we remember the way things were back in those honeymoon days, back in the first love, that helps us to understand, to remember what it was like. And change your ways now. Repent. Go back to the way things used to be. Just to remember back isn't enough, but you need to change things. You need to repent, you need to go back to the way it used to be in order to get that benefit.

EDDIE: Right. Remember, repent and return. Those were the three things that He wanted them to do. And if they would do those things, then He would recognize them as one of His faithful congregations. He told them if they didn't, then He would no longer recognize them as being faithful to Him. And so those are very important things. If they would return as they were supposed to, then they would have access again to the tree of life.

We're thankful for the fact that you have joined us today on our program. We want to offer you a free copy of today's lesson, whether you want that in an audiocassette format or CD or even a DVD if you prefer. We offer those absolutely free of charge. All you have to do is contact us and let us know that you want those. We also have a booklet called *From My Heart To Yours* that would be good for you to have, as well as one called *Salvation Simplified*. We have a number of things for you if you'll contact us. Our mailing address is: P.O. Box 865, Hurst, Texas, 76053. You can send us a postcard or a note to request any of those materials. We'd be glad for you to have them. We also can be contacted by e-mail. Our address is: requests@thetruthinlove.com. We also have a website, www.thetruthinlove.com. On that website you can find our program catalog and information about the history of our program and some helpful information there. You can order some of

of them are not so good.

EDDIE: That's right. We'll begin by looking at Revelation 2:1 as Jesus identifies Himself. He'll do this with each of the congregations that He has John write these words to. And interestingly, as He identifies Himself, the identifications that He uses to these congregations take us back to the identification of Jesus that we looked at in chapter 1, in our last session. And we'll see how those correlate as we go through. But He describes Himself first of all in Revelation 2:1 as the One who "holds the seven stars in His right hand." And Mark, last time we talked about those seven stars and what they represent.

MARK: Those seven stars are the messengers to the seven churches which are in Asia. I think the illustration that helps us understand this best is the idea of God holding the whole world in His hand. We can see those seven stars, the messengers right there, with His servants doing His will. We also see Jesus walking amongst these seven lampstands. He's active. He's involved. He's interested. He's obviously paying specific attention to what's going on here in Ephesus.

EDDIE: That's right. And interestingly, when it says that He walks among the seven candlesticks which represent these seven congregations, the word "walks" is in the present tense. He is ever present among His congregations. And He begins, by identifying Himself as the One who is walking among the churches, the One who is present, and the One who holds these messengers of the churches in His hand. After identifying Himself, He says to this congregation, "I know your works." We pointed out in our last session that the whole concept of knowing the works of a congregation can be either a comforting thing, or it can be somewhat uncomfortable, because Jesus knows everything about the congregation. He knows the good and He knows the bad. He knows their strengths and He knows their weaknesses. He knows their faith and He knows their struggles with faith. He knows everything about them. And I think that was illustrated also in the description Jesus made of Himself in chapter 1 with the piercing, penetrating eyes like a flame of fire.

MARK: And when we put all this together, we can see that He is indeed eminently qualified to be the leader of the church. As we look at

His pattern for the church that He established, we can see that He hasn't just stepped away to let things happen without His involvement, knowledge or direction. We can see Him with a hands-on type of management style of His own church.

EDDIE: Right. The Bible says in Hebrews 4:13, "There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do," or to whom we must reckon or give account. The Lord sees everything. You read Psalm 139 and get that point, where David was asking, "Where can I go from Your Spirit, or where can I flee from Your presence?" (Psalm 139:7). And the answer was nowhere. God does see. The Lord sees and knows everything about us. He knows about you individually. He knows you better than you know yourself, and He knows me better than I know myself. He knows our congregations. Whatever church you belong to, Jesus knows everything about it. He knows whether it's faithful, and He knows whether it's legitimately one of His congregations or not. And so right off the bat, Mark, as you correctly pointed out, there is nobody better qualified to make whatever assessment He makes about these congregations. Nobody's better qualified to do that than Jesus Himself. And He begins this look at Ephesus with some things that He commends.

MARK: Yes. I'm so thankful that we see Jesus, not only as having that intimate knowledge of individuals, but of congregations as well. I think as we step back and think about it, it's a very sobering thought that our interactions, and our corporate behavior is on record as well as our individual behavior. That's something that's very important.

EDDIE: Absolutely. As Jesus begins, following His identification of Himself in the first verse of chapter 2, He says, "I know your works," and specifically He says, "I know your toil," (your labor.) He uses a word there that's translated "toil" which means strenuous labor or work to the point of exhaustion. Jesus looked at the church in Ephesus, and He told them they were a hard-working group of people. And that was commendable. Obviously, that was true and commendable for them and it's no less true today. God expects His people, if they're going to be what He wants them to be, to be people that are hard-working. "Let us not be weary in well doing, for in due season we shall reap if we faint

certain meal prepared a certain way. Why do I care about her teaching relating to that meal? Is it just so I can be technically correct in making that meal? Often, with doctrinal purity, it seems like our motives can be focused upon that. I want to be just as precise as I can. And precision absolutely is important, but what's the reason that I'm doing that? Am I so caught up in that that I lose sight of the fact that this is for my wife because of my love for her? That's what drives my desire to get it right. And the same thing should hold true for us religiously. The desire for doctrinal purity is out of our awesome love and respect for the majesty of God. That needs to be underlying. When that is the reason for our doctrinal purity, I think we can avoid some of the problems like they had here in Ephesus.

EDDIE: Yes. The answer is balance. Balance is the key. And you have to have that. Paul said, "The love of Christ compels us," (II Corinthians 5:14). The title of our program is *The Truth In Love*. And we try to balance that. Paul said to speak the truth, but do it in love, (Ephesians 4:15). "Let all that you do be done with love," (I Corinthians 16:14). So if we have that balance biblically, that's what the Lord wants. And Ephesus wasn't in balance. They had some things right that they were emphasizing, but they were dismissing other things. Jesus once condemned the Pharisees for that in Matthew 23:13. They were doing some things but leaving some other things undone, and He says you need to be doing both. And Ephesus certainly was in that camp. So Jesus has commended them, has spoken concerning a number of things that were good about the congregation, but, He says, I've got something against you. So He had a word of condemnation for them as well. But He ends his discourse with them with a few words of encouragement about where they're supposed to go next.

MARK: Like any good manager would do, He encourages them and gives them some reason to look forward to the future. These are the areas that you need to work on. Here's where you need the encouragement. Here's where you need to persist, and to move forward. And He lays those out very specifically for them, again, as a good manager does.

EDDIE: Right. And there are basically three things that He says they need to do. Number one is remember. Remember where you fell from.

terminology He uses. They had forgotten and left the love that had at one time characterized their service. They had messed up in their motives.

MARK: When we look at our culture today, the respect for marriage isn't what it should be and isn't what it historically has been in God's plan, that marriage is indeed very important to us. God has used that analogy before. For instance, in the Old Testament, in the book of Hosea, we have the wickedness that Israel had fallen into being compared to harlotry. And Hosea is used to illustrate that separation with his wife and that pulling apart of the first love. We see the human side of the tragedy as a way of explaining the spiritual side of that tragedy. And we really have that same thing going on here in Ephesus.

EDDIE: Yes, we really do. The church there had obviously taken care of a lot of the external things that God is, again, very much interested in. People could see that they were working hard. They were intolerant of false doctrine. People could see that. And those externals were in order. But they had some internal problems, problems within their own hearts. The love that had once characterized the things that they did was now lacking. And congregations of the church need to watch that, especially those that seem to pride themselves on doctrinal purity. God wants us to be doctrinally pure, there's no question about that, but not at the absence of compassion and not at the absence of proper motive. Paul talked, in I Corinthians 13 about the fact that I can do a lot of things, sell all my goods, and feed the poor. I can even give my body to be burned. But if I don't do that from a motivation of genuine love and compassion, Paul said that doesn't profit you a thing. Some, I'm afraid, have bought into the false notion that as long as they have some of these external things right, like doctrinal purity, persistence, and hard working, they can just excuse the rest of that. Well, Jesus wrote to this congregation, and He said not so. He said they not only needed to have the externals right, they also needed to have the internals right as well.

MARK: Clearly, doctrinal purity is something that is quite important to us and to Jesus as well, as He looks at the church. But the underlying question is: Why is doctrine so important? And continuing the analogy of the husband and wife relationship, my wife likes a

not," (Galatians 6:9). In I Corinthians 15:58, he commends those that are "steadfast and immovable," and those that are "always abounding in the work of the Lord." "Whatever you do, do it heartily," (Colossians 3:23). So right off the bat, the Lord sees something in the church at Ephesus that He thinks is very much worthy of commendation, and that is their hard work.

MARK: Yes. The passage in I Corinthians 15 says, "Knowing that your labor is not in vain." Clearly, as we see Jesus paying attention and appreciating their toil and hard work, we can see that it's not in vain. So often, as we work in His church, we can become discouraged, distraught or feel like we're not appreciated. But it's comforting to know that Jesus Himself really does care, and He notices, and that's something that could encourage anybody in any situation.

EDDIE: Absolutely. Not only was their work strenuous, but it was also work that was done persistently. He says, "I know your labor and your patience." The word literally means endurance, and the ability to stay the course, or staying power. These were brethren that had been able to incorporate into their character as a congregation, the virtue that comes through stressful circumstances. James said the "testing of your faith produces patience," (James 1:3) and produces this ability to endure. No doubt this congregation had been through some kind of stress or adversity that had enabled them to develop this trait that certainly everybody would desire to have.

MARK: Absolutely. That persistence, that continuing on, and that faithfulness through adversity is something that is sorely lacking many times today. And He goes on as well. There's another characteristic that He credits them with, their loyalty to the truth. That's very important and seen by Jesus in a very favorable light.

EDDIE: Yes. And it is a vitally important thing to say about any individual or congregation. He basically said to these brethren, you can't tolerate evil, and you have put to the test those that have claimed to be apostles but really were not, and you found them to be false. In some sectors of religion generally and in the church specifically, we find folks that would look at the whole process or concept of putting to the test brethren, preachers or whoever and determining which ones are

teaching truth and which ones are teaching error as something distasteful and something to be avoided. That's certainly not the view that the Lord took here. The Lord commended that action.

MARK: It's interesting to note that tolerance is viewed by many to be one of the great virtues of our day, yet when it comes to religious doctrinal matters, ones dealing with truth and error and to scripture, tolerance is not a virtue. Intolerance is being praised directly by Jesus. I think that's a lesson that we all need to take to heart, especially in the social culture in which we find ourselves today.

EDDIE: Yes. Culturally, we have removed ourselves so far from Christ and so far from the nature of Christ and the way He views things that the point that Mark makes is exactly right. Here, intolerance, as it relates to doctrinal truth, is praised by Jesus. And it is a virtue that we need to emulate. John said, "Test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world," (I John 4:1). We're to put things to the test. "Prove all things and hold fast that which is good," (I Thessalonians 5:21). So the Lord commends their desire to maintain purity of doctrine. He even mentions the Nicolaitans. We don't know a whole lot about who that particular group of people was, but from some of the things that I've read, it seems possible that this group of Nicolaitans were some who had adopted a philosophy of license. In other words, they believed that your actions don't really matter, you can do whatever it is you want to do and not have to be confined to any set law. Jesus says, concerning that doctrine, "You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate" (Revelation 2:6).

MARK: Yes. That's a foreign idea, that the deeds of the Nicolaitans are something that the church there is commended for hating. That's totally different than the tolerance that so many people see as a virtue in religious matters. We're not to tolerate that, as they didn't. And Jesus said that he hated them as well. We know, absolutely, that God is love, but there is another side of God, and He hates the deeds of the Nicolaitans. We see that intolerance on His behalf when it comes to corruptions of His church and His congregations. Jesus doesn't take very kindly to that. Again we see Him as the manager, the leader, and the head of His church. And He's making a very strong comment about

that.

EDDIE: That's right. He's the one that has every right to say what's good and what's bad about His church. And He said that he hated the deeds of these people that teach this ungodly doctrine. There are passages that call upon us to do similarly. Paul said in Romans 12:9, "Abhor that which is evil and cleave to that which is good." There's not a whole lot of people, it seems anymore today, that really have a profound hatred of that which is evil, but that's what God wants us to do. That's the way He is toward evil. And we don't want to hate individuals, and it's certainly not a call to be mean-spirited or to abuse people, but we certainly have, not only the right, but the obligation to have a profound hatred for evil deeds and evil works. Jesus commends this congregation for being that way. Now, when you take this congregation in capsule, at least from what we know so far, essentially Jesus says, you're hard workers, you're persistent, you have staying power, you have endurance, you're not tolerant of evil, and that's a good thing. And you've tried false apostles and rejected them. Some people in the church today might look at that and say, what could possibly be wrong here? What could possibly be wrong with this congregation? They're strong for truth.

MARK: Absolutely. Those three qualities are very important and very vital, and they're absolutely praised for those. But as Paul Harvey likes to say, now it's time for the rest of the story. Because even though they had these things right, there are still some things they needed to work on. And Jesus points that out for them.

EDDIE: Yes. In verse 4, He says, "Nevertheless I have this against you." He had something against them. Now, all those things that He said were all true, right, and good. This congregation had a lot of good qualities. But, He says, I have something against you. And you might imagine that as the Ephesian church first read this letter, and the words of Jesus saying, I have "this against you," no doubt their hearts sunk within them. And He says here what He had against them, "You have left your first love." Now, the terminology that He uses there is used in other contexts in husband/wife terminology, which is why in preaching and teaching on these seven churches, I've said before this is the congregation where the honeymoon was over, because that's the type of