

Refuge Bible Fellowship
1600 Chicago Avenue, Suite R7
Riverside, CA 92507
refugefellowship.org

Series: For the Time is Near
Raul Montano, Sr. Pastor
October 4, 2015

How to be a Conquering Church
Revelation 2:1-7

Please open up your Bibles to Revelation, chapter 2. This is kind of a series within a series. We call it a series because we give it a title, but really, we're going through the Bible. I mean the series in it's entirety is titled *For the Time is Near*, but this little mini-series within it are the seven letters to the seven churches in Asia and is titled *How to be a Conquering Church*. I know I put "Part 1", but it'll be part 1 of several parts as we break down and study these letters that have been written to these churches. Like I told you last week, these letters that are written to the seven churches are not for us to be selective with and try to figure out where we stand as a church here locally. We are to take all seven letters and receive them as one, because in every single letter there is something that we ought to heed, learn, and apply within our own church, within our own hearts.

Now, let's begin first of all by looking at the seven letters. I just want to point out a few things to you. Jesus is speaking here. Jesus is the One who is the Author of these letters. We know that He's the author of the Bible in it's entirety, but this is something that John was told personally to write down what Jesus says. He tells John to write this: "I know your works." He says it to the churches in Ephesus, in Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. He says to all of them, "I know your works." Now to some, not all, He says, "But, I have this against you", or "I have these things against you." So there's this accusation, but also an admonition. He doesn't just leave us there. He gives us the solution to the issue. He says, "I have this against you, but listen, I desire that My church be victorious."

It was to the apostle Peter that Jesus said, referring to himself, **"...on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."** [Matthew 16:18] "Rock" didn't mean Peter, it meant the "rock that was rejected by the builders", Jesus himself. We know that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church, but He desires that His church, the bride, be victorious in everyday living; that we would be a conquering church; that we would be an advancing church. He says, "I know your works." He also points out here that He knows our hearts. "Even though these things are good, I know what's going on really, sincerely, genuinely in your heart. But don't lose heart because I'm going to give you a way through this, to a place to where you will be a conquering church, and you will eternally be with Me."

There are many books out there on how to be a "successful" church; many, many out there. And rarely will we read one that doesn't talk about marketing, production, leadership strategies, as well as consumer practices,

How to be a Conquering Church

current trends, and ways in which you can have a higher retention rate. The church does not exist to tickle the ear of the attendee, or to satisfy the need of the consumer, but rather to serve as a vessel that glorifies the Groom in purity, in righteousness, in worship, in praise, to the glory of God. It is to be a people who worship the Lord in spirit and in truth.

I don't know a pastor that does not desire for the church to be "vibrant" and "growing" (I say those in quotes for those who are listening to the podcast) in numbers. People within the church will say, "If you're not a growing church then there's something wrong." I don't take that as the indicator of whether we are a healthy church, or not. I know a lot of growing churches that aren't healthy; that are only tickling the ear; that are just giving you what you want to hear. People run to them.

But seven times, to all seven churches, this is what Jesus has to say to *all* of them: **"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."** He doesn't talk about children's ministry, or youth ministry. He doesn't talk about anything else. In fact, that's not in here. He talks about His Word and worshiping Him, growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This is the one thing that He tells *all* seven churches. So you, church...he who has an ear, let him hear what Jesus has to say to the seven churches. I pray that it would touch us in some way, that it would help us to grow in the Lord, to mature, to a place to where we are more effective and we understand how to love Him more today than ever before. That's what most important. When I see you come together and get through difficult issues. When I see you have little squabbles, but yet come to a place of reconciliation. When I see you have differences in any area and stick it out, I say that God gets the glory. We're all growing. A family sticks together.

Now, the whole of Jesus' message to these churches is not to point out how good or how bad they are, but to make sure that they are glorifying God and that they are prepared for Jesus, the Groom, in purity and righteousness. In other words, He's concerned if you are clothed right. Are you standing uprightly before the Lord? That is what He's concerned with.

This morning we're learning from one of seven churches that Jesus writes to through the apostle John. We will learn what they are doing right, what they are doing wrong, and how they can make it right. And it's something that we need to take to heart. There are warning to all seven churches to either correct what is wrong, to keep what is right while enduring persecution, and to commit wholly to Jesus, or else. He does give the consequences of not heeding His word, or else, you will lose your fellowship. There are areas that the church needs to correct from, keep to, and be committed to in wholly following Jesus. We need to always come to the altar with humility. We don't have it figured out. We're all growing together, but He desires that we would conquer.

2 Timothy 2:12, the first part of that verse says, **"...if we endure, we will also reign with him..."** You see, Jesus desires and intends for the church, His bride, to be a conquering church, and thus, in these last days we are encouraged by these words on how to be just that because He wants us to reign with Him.

This morning we begin our lessons on how to be a conquering church with the first one, in verses 1-7 of chapter 2. The Church in Ephesus, which is often referred to as "The Loveless Church", "The Careless Church". I don't believe they were careless in the things to do, being busy, being about the Lord's business, but it was a matter of the heart, of love toward the Lord. Let's begin by reading chapter 2, verses 1-7:

How to be a Conquering Church

“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.

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. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 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. ⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 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.’

[Prayer] *Father, we come humbly once more before you and just ask that You would speak to us, Lord. Speak into our ears; the ears of our hearts; that we would desire Lord to glorify You. I pray that we never willfully intend to shame You, or do anything that would bring shame to Your name. I ask, Lord, that You would help us to understand this morning how it is that You are speaking to the church in Ephesus, but really through that, how it is that You are speaking to us this morning. And how it is that we can get to a place to where we can be going through the motions and yet not be displaying any love toward You. I pray, Father, that You would help us to see and that you would help us to get back to that place where we are passionate in our devotion to You. We thank You for this morning. We want to commit this time of study into Your hands, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

The Loveless Church (Ephesus) vv. 1-7

Now, each of the seven churches received a personal description of Jesus, which came from the first chapter; the vision that John was given of The Lord. For the church in Ephesus, this was the letter that came from Jesus: ***“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.*** We see there that He wanted them to know, to be reminded of the fact that, "Listen, I am in your midst. I am here. And as I'm going to write to you these things know that I am the head of this church." Yes, He is writing to the church as the head of the church, as the governing authority.

Now, there are three components of the correction that the Lord is seeking from the church in Ephesus. There was the *approval* (that he's encouraging them) He says, "This is what I see that is right with you." He starts with that and gives His approval, but then He also says, "But this I have against you" and so there's an *accusation*. There's a place where we need to acknowledge this accusation also, and we'll learn about that in a few moments. So the accusation is the Lord pointing out, "This is what is wrong." And then, the *admonition*, or how to correct is what He gives us as, well.

The Approval

He gives a list of things that He approves of, number one being their works. This was a serving church. Everyone lent a hand. They were busy serving. They had a full schedule. They had a lot going on. We know that this wasn't just a light work because it's described as "*toil*". Now *toil* is working to the point of exhaustion. When

How to be a Conquering Church

was the last time you did work and at the end of the day you were *exhausted*? Now, let me ask you, when was the last time you served the *Lord* to the point of exhaustion, to the point of, as we say, "spent"? This is what they were being commended for. They weren't rebuked, but commended for that!

Not only did they work to the point of exhaustion, but in the midst of it, they were also patiently enduring trials. How often, church, do we really come face to face with a trial and the first thing that goes is...what? "Sorry, Pastor, I won't be there...I can't do that...I'm going through this...I have a headache." Listen, we're all guilty of that. But come and pray! Let's pray for that! Let's do something! But the first thing that is put on pause, generally speaking, is the church.

This church in Ephesus was commended for working to the point of exhaustion even though they were experiencing trials. Was Jesus telling them, "I know these things! Now, listen, you deserve a break. Relax! You deserve to be happy."? No! He didn't say that! That should really be a point of conviction for all of us, because we've become a very complacent and lazy church. We need to be a conquering church! When we hear the voice of the Lord we should hear it like a trumpet, like the call, right? We hear His voice and it should be like, "Man! Let's do this thing!" I want to be like the pitbull of the faith! I want to be like Paul! He's one person, one brother in the faith that we would do good to imitate. They were being commended for being like Paul. These men and women were self-sacrificing, working to the point of exhaustion while enduring trials. Nothing was stopping them from serving the Lord! Not even difficult times. No matter what.

They were also a group of people who were set aside. Even in the midst of all that, they were testing the teachers, those who claimed to be apostles:

"I'm an apostle. I'm a messenger of the Lord."

"Really? Let's hear you out. Go for it. Teach!"

Whenever you hear a teacher make sure that you are taking note of what they are teaching. Including me! Test it out with Scripture. If there is anything that is unbiblical, anything that is contrary to the Word of God...make sure you know the Word of God so that you *know* that it's contrary. Make sure that if it's me, point it out! I want to know! "That was not sound. That was not right and this is why." Do it in love, though, please. Set me off to the side and I'll receive it.

They were a separated people. They stood vigilant. They knew the Word. They were able to recognize the false teacher. There is a warning that John gave to them in 2 John 1:7-11, which is only one chapter, and then 1 John 4:1-6. Then the apostle Paul in Acts 20:28-31. He is with the elders in Ephesus and he tells them, "Beware! There are those who are going to be false teachers coming from without, and listen...also from within. Be very careful!" They stood guard and were commended for this.

They also tested people. They hated the work of the Nicolaitans as verse 6 tells us. He points it out there. Jesus was saying, "This is good!" Anyone who says, "Hey! Are you the judge of me?" In trying to make you go away from judging someone else, scare you off. We are, as Christians, to be fruit inspectors. We are to know the Word of God and be able to even identify someone who is falsely teaching within the church, or is false in their faith. In fact, *Nicolaitans* means "to conquer people." This meant "to lord it over the people". The church within itself had self-imposed authority, not anointed authority. These were the Nicolaitans. These were the

How to be a Conquering Church

ones who came and said, "Well, I have the authority so I'm going to tell you what to do, and what not to do." That's where we get legalism that comes into the church. People who "lord it over". This robbed people of their liberty in Christ. You can jot down these verses: 3 John 1:9-11, is an example of people that John pointed out who were lording over people.

The people of the church of Ephesus were suffering people who endured trials, but never gave up serving the Lord and being a separated people unto the Lord, all for the sake of Jesus. And the Lord commended the church for this. He didn't rebuke them for their tireless service, or warn them of burnout. By the way, burnout comes from what they lacked, which we'll learn about that in a moment. Rather, He commended them for tireless, sacrificial, persevering, vigilant, set-apart service.

The Accusation

If you were to look at this church from the outside you'd think that they were a perfect church. They had watchmen on the wall, they're serving tirelessly, they're sacrificing, everyone is lending a hand. I mean, this is a church that's like, Wow! That's an exciting church! But the thing is, God sees the heart and says, "This one thing I have against you." This is the accusation in verse 4: **"...But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first..."** You can't abandon, by the way, something you never possessed. You can only abandon something that at one point you did possess. It was in your care and you were a steward of. And obviously you can lose your first love. It wasn't that you were never a believer, or just walked away from the Lord and just going through the motions. The point is, it's important that you are full of passion and devotion. God was pointing that out. He was accusing them of abandoning their first love. It is possible to serve, sacrifice, and suffer for Jesus' sake and not really love Jesus.

First love. What does it involve? Well, it can be described as a fervent, personal, uninhibited, exciting, affectionate-filled public display, passionate kind of a relationship that is solely focused on the other person. Does that sound familiar? I know sometimes we talk about when we were dating, the honeymoon phase, and we're all gaga-goopy and say these weird things to each other, wanting to hold each other's hands, hug in public, and even kiss. Here's the thing....personally, my conviction is that dating should be approached very carefully for the Christian. For the world, I don't expect anything of them. But for the Christian, it should be approached very carefully because God has someone for you. But I also believe that as a Christian, you can select anyone, and if you're truly following the Lord's Word, if you're truly loving on Jesus first, that marriage will be successful. Don't give me, "Well, we're not compatible." In Christ, we should all be compatible. So if you're truly following obediently the Word of God, any man or woman coming together in marriage should be biblically able to be awesome and victorious in their marriage. That was just a side note, a bonus, you could say. Oh! I got carried away because of describing this "first love" thing! So, the honeymoon phase...we've grown, we've matured and have come to the place where we're beyond that. It's a deeper, richer love. We can finish each other's sentences, we know what each other will order from Taco Bell. We've just gotten to that place. That's what it reminds you of, right? I'm sure you were thinking about that!

He was talking about this is the love that was abandoned. He was speaking to the church. You serve and sacrifice, and suffer willingly and in a way that draws attention to the object of your love. Who's the object of your love? It's that other person! When you're in that place, that's all you care about! That's all you think about! You will fall asleep with one of these stuck to your ear! God is saying to the church in Ephesus, "that

How to be a Conquering Church

kind of passionate love...you have abandoned." Do you remember when you first came to the Lord? You couldn't get enough of the Word. You couldn't tell enough people. You couldn't do enough for Him. It was all about Him! He was the object of your love. And yet, somehow church, we mature to the place to where it's just routine. It's just what we do on Sunday. It's what we do on Wednesday, for some. We read a little; we pray a little; we get so little. We, as they did, need to heed this word.

Warren Wiersbe said, "The Ephesian believers were so busy maintaining their separation that they were neglecting their adoration. Labor is no substitute for love; neither is purity a substitute for passion. The church must have both if it is to please Him." Bottom line: lack of true faithfulness. We can only serve Jesus Christ faithfully, if we love Him fervently. *We can't do it faithfully, if we do not love Him fervently!* That describes a passionate heart, a completely devoted heart. He's the object of your affection, of your love in a very personal, deep, genuine, sincere and open way.

The Admonition

He says, "Restore this first love by doing these three things:"

1. Remember
2. Repent
3. Repeat

We've gone through this before, by the way, this portion...remember, repent, repeat.

Remember – He says, "Remember what you lost. Remember what you abandoned. Remember that first love? Remember that place where you were? And then, continually keep that in mind and then cultivate the manner in which you are bringing yourself back to that place. Deliberately work to get back to the place of the intimate communion with Jesus. It won't happen just because you acknowledge it. "Ok, I acknowledge that I'm not there." Great! Now, what are you going to do?

Repent – Repentance involves confession, forgiveness, and changing our minds. A complete turning *from*, and turning *to*. 1 John 1:9 says: ***"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*** But sometimes we come across that verse, and yes, He is faithful, and yes, He is just to forgive us of our sins if we confess our sin. Yes, He is faithful and just, but we're not entitled to it! We just say, "Hey! Forgive us of our sins, Lord!", and then think, "I'm entitled to forgiveness now." No! Your heart is wrong! Confession is more than just stating the facts of what you are sorry for doing, or not doing. Confession is agreeing with God that it is sin! Not just saying that something is wrong, but "I agree with you, God. This is a sin against You. I agree with You." Repentance is asking for forgiveness also. It's more than a request and then receiving something you believe you deserve, an entitlement; but it's a sincere, genuine plea.

Like a guilty subject before a judge that is about to be sentenced. Think about that. You're about to be sentenced and you're before a judge and you're guilty. How would your plea come to him of mercy and grace? Just mercy, let along grace! Would it be, "I'm going to ask for your forgiveness and I know that you are faithful and just to forgive me of my sins and cleanse me from all unrighteousness, so I just need to ask you and then, boom! It's done!" Is that how you would come across? Of course not, right? It's not manipulated external

How to be a Conquering Church

behavior. It is not a change in what you do, without a change in how you think. It involves a new way of thinking. It involves the glory of another Person. It involves a whole new perspective, mindset, and heartset.

2 Corinthians 5:17 gives us a place of repentance for the one who places his belief in Jesus Christ. **"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."** Repentance involves all three of these components and they are each essential to the whole. 2 Corinthians 7:10 says: **"For godly sorrow produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death."** And so, as Jesus had this letter written to this church what He was hoping for, of course, was this godly sorrow that leads to reconciliation, restoration, being set right before God.

Repeat – Do the works you did at first. So there is action that is necessary. There needs to be a change of mine. There needs to be a genuine confession. But there also needs to be some action here. But apparently, the works they were doing at first isn't what they weren't currently doing. What is it that they were missing? "I'm going through all of this! I'm serving You, God! I'm going out and feeding and clothing the community. I'm even teaching, cleaning, setting-up. I've got this ministry going on! What am I missing?!"

I remember years ago, enjoying time with the Lord, and I can picture the times at our dining room table, and just opening up the Word of God every morning and just reading, and reading, and reading. And then, I'd share with people. I'd talk to people about it. I remember it because that was when I had recommitted my life to the Lord. But what's missing? Prayer? Bible reading? It astounds me how many people do not read the Word of God. Why? You have His love letter right before you! Why don't you open it up? Meditating on the Word of God, which includes studying, by the way; obedient service, worship, fellowship. Why are we forsaking the assembling of ourselves, as is the manner of some? The Bible tells us in Hebrews 10:25 tells us to do so even more as we see the Day of the Lord approaching.

Psalms 1:1-3 says:

Blessed is the man

***who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;***

***² but his delight (this is where he has his delight!) is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.***

³ He is like a tree

***planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.***

In all that he does, he prospers.

Jesus warned this church that if they did not correct this, the day that He would come would be a day of judgment and He would remove their lampstands. Jesus is clear in stating that He is the head of the church, that He has complete authority, sovereignty, to do whatever it is that He desires to do. He can require of us

How to be a Conquering Church

whatever it is that He chooses to require of His church. They knew all of these things, and yet they were missing this one ingredient, this one thing that was essential to them remaining as a church.

Let's wrap this up. The church in Ephesus was a church that was serving sacrificially. They were enduring trials for the sake of Jesus, and yet they lacked the love that is essential for the one who bears the name of being a follower of Jesus... "Christian". Before you can rightly serve man on your feet, you need to sit intently before Jesus on your knees.

Do you remember the story of Mary and Martha? Who chose the better place? It was Mary. Jesus said she had the better place. Martha was concerned, and worried. "Master, have Mary get up! I'm doing everything by myself." We need both, though. But, before you can rightly serve man on your feet, you need to sit intently before Jesus on your knees. And I ask you church, how are we doing in this area? Are you passionate about Jesus? Does everyone around you know that you are passionate about Jesus? You can't hide a relationship like that and people not know about it. You just can't. It's infectious!

This church was a church that was careless and neglected their love for Jesus. That's what they were guilty of. Jesus desires for His church to be a conquering church. But the question is: are we guilty of that same neglect?

Verse 7 says: **"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."** Do we not desire to be in His presence for eternity? We do! We want to be there! And we will be there! What He's referring to as we close out, He's saying, "Listen, I want you to be a genuine follower of Jesus Christ. Not kind of like on the side, not on the fence, not lukewarm." We'll get to "lukewarm" when we get to the church in Laodicea. He doesn't want you to be lukewarm, or any where in between. He wants you to be a sold-out follower of Jesus Christ, who is passionately devoted, wholly consumed by Him and Him alone, and that you would be overwhelmed to the point to where you have to tell everyone. You have to live His life out in you. Are you that person?

If you do not have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, I would encourage you to come up and talk to me afterward. I would love to answer any questions that you have. But know that sin separates you from the Lord. There has to be a point in your life when you repent of your sin and ask God for forgiveness, and ask Him to be your Lord and Savior; personally, genuinely, sincerely. If you have not done that, if you can't point to any time to where you have conscientiously surrendered your life to the Lord, then today is the day of salvation for you. You will know eternal life and all of God's glory beyond that. Repentance! Church, I think we should all repent this morning, quite honestly. I think we should come to a place to where we say, "Oh, God! I have fallen so short. What they were commended for, I fall short. Even what they were accused of, I am guilty of. And yet, Lord, I desire to be that passionate follower of Jesus Christ. I desire to work tirelessly for You. I desire to know what it means to be exhausted for Your namesake. I desire to come into heaven refreshed in my spirit because I was exhausted in the flesh. I desire, God, for You to know that You are truly the object of my love." I think we should all do that as a church. Let's go before the Lord.

[Prayer] *Father, we come to You all together. And I pray that we, with one voice, would truly sincerely ask for Your forgiveness for falling short in these areas. Lord this is Your church, as the church in Ephesus was Your church, Your people. You tell us that the one that You love, You will discipline, You will chastise, You will reveal to us those things which fall short of what You require of us. I pray, Lord, that we would not take this word lightly.*

How to be a Conquering Church

So we come to You asking for Your forgiveness, asking that You would help us to walk with You closely, to abide in You, to return to our first love, to those things which we did at first, that we would enjoy a passionate relationship with You. We thank You for Your faithfulness. We love you. We pray these things in Your Son's precious name, Jesus Christ, and all of God's people said, "Amen!"