

FIRST LOVE

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Scripture: Revelation 2:1-7

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2 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:

² I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; ³ and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵ Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent. ⁶ Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.’

Heavenly Father, let the words of Your Son settle upon our hearts through the inspiration of Your Spirit. And may they bring about the required result or consequence of us always engaging with Your word. Lord Jesus, we pray in Your name. Amen.

For the next 7 or 8 weeks we’re going to be looking at the different churches that are mentioned in Revelation chs. 2 and 3. We are looking at the church at Ephesus today. In fact, I want to read something to you before we even get started: Rev. 1:3 says, “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy and heed the things which are written in it for the time is near.” So, for us who read and hear, and then are able to heed or listen to the things, there is blessing.

Let’s look at the church of Ephesus that Jesus has come to, and is speaking into.

BACKGROUND:

The apostle John is writing this when he was exiled to Patmos. It was an island where he got this revelation from God. He wrote it down for the seven churches that are named in the second and third chapters, and these messages were intended to address the spiritual state of each church, providing encouragement, correction and warning.

The ancient church of Ephesus is in current-day Turkey. It was started by Paul in his second missionary journey. We read in Acts 18 that Paul started the church, and then in Acts 19, we read how he spent 3 years there, helping to grow that church. He was also helped by Aquila and Priscilla, and later by Timothy who was tasked with setting things in place there. But as we look at that background, I also want to look at some words that we find sprinkled in these seven verses, before we get into it.

Significant words:

- In v.1 itself, the **seven stars**. The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand. The One that’s being referred to here is Jesus. He is the one who holds the seven stars. The seven stars represent the angels or the messengers of the seven churches, and they can symbolize

the leaders, guardians, or spiritual overseers of the churches. But really highlighting Christ's control over His church.

- The **seven golden lampstands** is a reference to the seven churches themselves. Christ walking amongst them signifies His continued presence, His care, His involvement in all of these churches, and we see Him wanting to guide these churches.
- In v. 7, "To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the **tree of life**. The tree of life symbolizes eternal life and a restored fellowship with God in the paradise of God – almost akin to the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve had such wonderful communion with Him. That kind of utopian sense is what is intended here, and that's what will be given to those who overcome.

THE CHURCH AT THAT TIME:

But this church also lived in the midst of a lot of trouble. This was not the best of times. It came under the rule of Domitian who was there from about 81 to 96 AD, and he was quite a narcissistic ruler. In fact, people had to refer to him as God, when they talked about him, and he brought a lot of persecution on the Christians. There was also social ostracization because Christians were ones who "followed the way". The 'way' was away from the path that others were leading. So, there was a lot of social tension.

There was also false teaching that was prevalent at that time. There were many heresies: Docetism (said that Jesus was not fully human), Gnosticism, Ebionism (said that Jesus was just a mere prophet and not the Son of God). Then the Judeasers who wanted the Christians to follow the path of the Old Testament in terms of circumcision and all the laws that were laid down.

So, in the midst of this tension, the church at Ephesus was trying to thrive. They also lived in conflict with Jewish leaders. And because of the Way that they were following, they were counter-culture, as you and I can find ourselves even today. So, they were trying to thrive in pretty difficult situations.

WHAT DOES JESUS SAY TO THE CHURCH?

In vs. 2-6 Jesus speaks to them about how they are doing. And the first thing He does is to commend them. In vs. 2, 3 and 6, He says, "I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. ⁶Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."

So, He gives them a good commendation about the things that they have been doing well – not tolerating evil men, still going after good deeds, testing people who call themselves apostles and who are not, for their perseverance, their endurance, and then even in the midst of all this, not growing weary. And then hating the Nicolaitans, whom Jesus says He also hates because of their immoral standards and their idolatry.

So, there's a lot of good that they were doing in this church at Ephesus. We could stop there and say, "That's a good church. That's the kind of church that we would like to follow".

But then, in the midst of all this, Jesus says, "But I have one issue with you," and we find that it is a very important issue. In v. 4 he says, "But I have this against you, that you have left your first love." You have left or forgotten your first love. It's one sentence in this whole narrative. Yet, you see how important this indictment is against the church. He says this, "Remember from where you have fallen

and repent and do the deeds you did at first. Or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place unless you repent.” Strong words! I have this against you, that you have forgotten your first love, the first fellowship that we had, the first love relationship that we had that’s no more there. if you don’t repent of that, then I’m going to remove your lampstand from you.

The church at Ephesus is no more. It died out. In fact, today it’s just a barren piece of land in Turkey. And what it is remembered for is not the church that Paul founded, but the temple to Artemis. Jesus says, “I will remove that lampstand from you if you don’t get back to this place of having the kind of love that we had in the beginning.”

Then He also adds that there is a reward for overcoming. “But if you do overcome, if you do get back this love, then you will be with Me.” We look at the church at Ephesus and all that it stood for, all that it went through and what happened to it. and yet, v.7 draws us into this passage. We cannot just look at the church at Ephesus and pass judgment, because v.7 says: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Holy Spirit says to the churches.” We who have ears to hear, better hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches.

What is the Holy Spirit saying? That it is possible for us to do a whole lot of things. It is possible for us to do all the right things, to do good deeds, to endure, to persevere, and yet to miss out on the relationship that we have with Jesus, which Jesus says is of no use then. Everything that can be done, all that the church at Ephesus was doing, would have come to naught if they hadn’t got back that relationship, their first love with God.

This raises a very pertinent question in our own hearts and in our own lives. Do we still have the same fervor that we had when we first met Him? Do we still love Him with the same passion? Do we still have the same fellowship, the relationship that we had with Him when He first tapped us on the shoulder and introduced Himself, and came and began to live in our hearts and in our lives and we walked hand-in-hand with Him? Or are all the things that we do today out of rote, just something that we know we should do. It’s Sunday so I guess I’ll go to church; it’s expected of me. Rather than it’s Sunday and I want to go and spend time with Jesus and with other believers because of the love that I share with Him. The things that I do, the good things that I do, the things that I’m a part of, do I do it because I love Him or because it’s expected of me?

We have to take that question seriously because the ramifications for getting that wrong are pretty huge. The church at Ephesus was made up of people. They were all part of the church of Ephesus. Just as everybody who is here is part of the church at Powai. You make up the church at Powai. Even as we ask the question of the church, “Have we lost our first love?”, we are not asking the building. we are asking every single person sitting here, listening. We are the Church at Powai, and the question for us is: Are we still operating with our first love? Or are we just going through the motions?

John 21, when Jesus met with Peter after his denial, Jesus didn’t castigate him and say, “Why did you do this? We walked three years together. How could you have let Me down? How could you have denied Me?” All He asked Peter was, “Peter, do you love Me?” three times. And then finally, “Do you love me more than these? – almost saying, put anything you want in that word. Anything, and answer that question: Do you love Me more than that thing?

But here’s the kicker really in that conversation. Only after Peter answered that question, did Jesus release him for ministry. Only after Peter answered the question: “do you love Me?” “Yes Lord, I do.” “Feed My lambs.” “Do you love Me?” “Yes, Lord, I do.” “Tend to My sheep.” “Do you love Me?” “Yes, Lord, I do.” “Shepherd My flock.” Ministry came only after that question of love was answered. And

it's a wonderful stark reminder to each one of us, that everything that we do must come out of that relationship, or else it is of no use.

Jesus says in Matthew 7:22, "Many will come on that day and say, 'Lord, I prophesied in Your name. Lord, I did miracles in Your name. Lord, I cast out demons in Your name.'" and He says, "I will say to them – I never knew you. Depart from Me." That's how strong this whole idea of love with God is, in the midst of everything that we may do for Him.

Look at the things that the church at Ephesus was doing. Good things. They persevered, they endured, and they were commended for even not weary in doing all those good things. But it was of no use, because as Jesus said, it must emanate from a loving relationship that you have with Him. So the question for each one of us this morning is: the things that we do or even don't do, which we ought to do, are they being done out of a love relation with Him? Have we lost the first love? Can you cast your mind's eye back to the place when you first met Him? And the joy that filled your heart and soul, getting up each day and saying: It's going to be a great day because I'm walking hand-in-hand with my God. Are you still enjoying His presence? Is that love still there?

I was talking to somebody after the first service, and he was so thankful for these words in Revelation, because it gives us an opportunity for course changes. Before a lampstand can get taken out of us, God gives us the opportunity to repent and get back to where we need to be. As individuals who make up this church, can we take a good hard look at our lives and say: Am I living in that kind of a relationship? Am I enjoying the love that I must have for Jesus? Maybe, your answer is "No, I'm not. And that's probably the positive answer that you're giving: I don't think I have it.

I'm going to give you six ways that it can be recultivated in your life and in mine, because it's so important for Jesus for how we walk.

1. Remember, reflect on your past relationship with Christ.

Recall the passion, the joy, the commitment you had when you first believed. Think about the fervor, the devotion, the personal connection that you had and once enjoyed. And as you remember, allow it to re-ignite that flame within you. All of us have wonderful memories when we first allowed Jesus to come into our hearts and then reign as Savior and Lord in our lives. Ask for that back. Remember that. And as you remember it, try and put it back.

2. Repent.

Acknowledge areas where your love has grown cold. Acknowledge those areas where routine, or distraction, or other priorities have taken the place of Christ. And remember too, that repentance is more than just feeling sorry about it. repentance is turning a whole 180 degrees and saying: I will not go down that path again.

3. Return to first works.

Return to the things that you used to do at that time, out of a love relationship with God. Re-engage with the practices and habits that you had at that time. It could have been spending time with the Word in prayer, reading, meditating, worship.

One of the things that we do so little of is the whole idea of worship. And yet, worship is such an integral part of connecting with God. We come here to worship and we have about half an hour of worship that our worship leaders put out. Can I say this as gently and as harshly as possible – some of us pick and choose how much of that worship we're going to actually take. We treat it like a buffet table. It's going to be 30 minutes of worship; I'll catch the last 10, or the last 5. I make no apologies for that statement, because God is waiting for

us at 10:30. He's here! He waits to welcome us into His presence as we look at turn our gaze up and worship Him. We get only that much time here on a Sunday. But have we ever thought of putting that in during the week? How about worshipping 10 or 15 minutes? I speak to myself here. So easy not to do it, but to just be able to sing worship songs to God, to worship Him. There's such a connect that comes when we worship. Or even take the psalms and read them out loud. The psalms are full of praise and worship. To put that into our days would be so wonderful.

4. Renew our focus on Christ.

Shift our focus from mere religious duty to a genuine relationship with Jesus. Make Him the center of your daily life. don't just go through the motions. Make it the most important thing that you're doing. Whether you're reading the Bible, praying, worshipping – give Him your full attention. Anything that we're doing, make Him the center.

5. Guard against distractions.

Identify and remove the things that have drawn you away from your first love. Think of the things that have taken you away from Him that you used to do once but don't do anymore because now there's something else that has taken that place. Maybe it's an unhealthy habit or misplaced priorities or influences that have pulled you away from being with the Lord. friendships, ones that don't really mean anything but to pull you away.

6. Cultivate a heart of worship and gratitude.

Regularly express gratitude to God for what He has done for you. We can never ever get to the point where we say: Yeah, I get the cross. Thank You for the cross. That must be our chorus every day. A heart that is filled with gratitude is a heart that is close to the One to whom gratitude is given. When we thank somebody who's done something for us, we're close to that person. And every time we remember that kindness, then that love flows.

And it's the same with God. He gave Jesus for each one of us, so that we can sit here and enjoy His presence and know that one day we will be in eternity with Him. What a glorious gift. We can never, ever get tired of saying thank you. And James would say, "Out of that thankful heart, do the good works." Out of that love relationship, do good deeds.

So, we ask the question of each of ourselves as we look at the church at Powai and say, "Do we still have our first love? The question is for each one of us sitting here. Do we still have our first love? Or is there something that we need to do to reignite it, to fan the flame? There are such serious consequences that we just can't take it lightly.

But this I have against you, that you have lost the first love. May it be that today, for those of us who may say, "Yes, Lord, I have," that we also say, "Lord, I want to reconnect. I want to reignite. I want to fan and to flame that love that I once had, which now may be just a burning ember.

Amen.
