

FIRST LOVE

Future Faith (Part 2)

Text: Revelation 2:1-7

This message was provided by Christ Church of Oak Brook and Love Changes Life, the broadcast ministry at Christ Church of Oak Brook.

I

The City of Ephesus at the end of the First Century A.D. was something to behold. Situated along a prosperous trade route between Rome and the civilizations to the East, Ephesus attracted the wealth of nations. You can still make out some of the fabulous marketplaces and shopping districts of this city once known as "the metropolis of Asia." You can see the ruins of the magnificent town-homes and mansions and marvel at the remains of the luxurious public baths and steam-rooms.

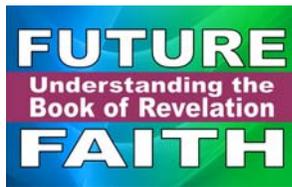
The sidewalks, homes, and plazas of Ephesus were adorned with masterpieces of mosaic art, intricate reliefs, and marble statuary. It had a premiere library -- the magnificent façade of which has now been rebuilt -- and a 45,000 seat amphitheater with acoustics so fine that you can stand at the front, whisper, and be heard in the last row! I've done it. Perhaps the most famous of the city's attractions, however, was its colossal Temple to the goddess Artemis or Diana. The Artemision Temple is no longer standing, its place now only a muddy swamp. But it was once considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

The most marvelous feature of ancient Ephesus, however, you'll never see on an archeological tour. You see, once upon a time, Ephesus also had a church -- not one distinguished by its steeple and its pews, but by its people and good news. The Book of Revelation says that the One who "**walks among the seven golden lampstands**" -- symbols for the shining witness of the Church -- knew that Congregation intimately, even as he knows this one. Out of this understanding flows three specific words of commendation offered by Jesus to the believers at Ephesus and to every church like them today.

II

First, of all, Jesus commends the **diligent work** of the church at Ephesus. "**I know your deeds, your hard work...**" he says. This was no congregation of casual spectators, but a community of committed servants. We can imagine each member of the church was active in some ministry, caring for the sick or visiting the elderly, teaching the young or clothing the poor. There must have been those who labored in unsung tasks of service, and those who actively sang the song of faith for others to hear. Yet whether recognized by the world or not, each person's labor was essential to God's work, and the Lord of the Church saw its significance.

Secondly, Jesus commends the **patient endurance** of the Ephesian church. As more people became followers of Jesus, membership in the pagan cult of Diana began to decline. A once-booming tourist trade in silver ornaments shaped like Diana's Temple and good luck pieces known as "Ephesus charms" also took a precipitous drop. Hostility toward the Church grew until eventually the silversmiths of the city actually rioted against the Christians, as reported in Acts 19. Because such things continue to happen to believers in many parts of the world today,



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we can imagine that Christian businesses may have been boycotted, children ostracized, adults assaulted. But the believers at Ephesus had not given up. **"I know your... perseverance,"** Jesus says. **"You have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary."**

Finally, Christ also commends the doctrinal and moral purity of the Ephesians. **"You have this in your favor,"** says Jesus, **"You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."** Exactly who these "Nicolaitans" were isn't entirely clear to scholars. The word "Nikolaos" literally means "destroyer of the people." Whoever these people were, Christ applauds the Ephesians for discerning the error of their teaching and rejecting their immoral practices.

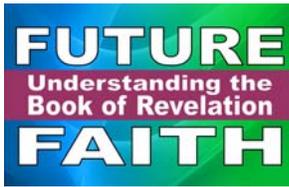
III

There are important lessons for us in all of this. If the church of today is to honor Christ's calling in our time, then it must also be marked by these same three crucial qualities. It needs fewer consumers or spectators and more hard-working servants committed to excellence in all that they do. It needs more people who are willing to endure hardship and opposition as they patiently strive to advance God's purposes through the church, the workplace, the social circle and home. The church needs more people who know God's Word intimately enough to discern the distortions and imbalances often peddled as spiritual "truth" or described as moral "health" in our time.

But there is one even more *primary* quality needed in the Church, without which even the aforementioned virtues are destined to degrade over time. It is what Jesus was getting at when, following his three *commendations*, he also issued a sharp word of *challenge* to the believers at Ephesus: **"Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love."**

We must assume from these words that there was a time when the Ephesians had adored Christ with all the passionate devotion that every generation associates with that term "first love." Can you recall the passion of yours? I remember, for example, those giddy first days with my wife, Amy. I recall how thunderstruck and wonderful I felt at the realization that this amazing, gorgeous, vibrant, and otherwise intelligent female loved *me*, of all people! The very reality of her love for me just naturally reoriented and enflamed my heart. I not only loved her more; her love for me overflowed the container of my life into all my other relationships and behaviors. I began to sing in the rain, to treat even my enemies with more grace and, for as long as that season of first love lasted, I was a pleasure to be around.

At some point, but on an even more significant level, something like that happened for the believers at Ephesus, as I hope it has happened to you. There came a moment when it first penetrated their consciousness WHO it was that had loved them. There came a time when they realized that the *Lord of the Universe* had descended from the glory of eternity to find *them*. *He* had given his life upon the cross to save *them*. *He* had opened up the doors of his Father's



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house to include *them*. He had poured out his Spirit to empower *them*. He had given his Word to instruct *them*. He had called into being a new kind of family to companion *them*. And the awareness of this reality simply filled and overflowed and reoriented their lives.

As long as that first love was in their view, their lives could never be the same. Inspired by the love Christ first had for them, they grew in love for Him. They wanted to listen to Him, to learn from Him, to please Him, to bring glory to Him. They wanted to care for the people He cared about, to treat others the way He had treated them. One of their pastors, the Apostle John himself, summed it up in this way: now **“we love, because he FIRST loved us.”**¹

IV

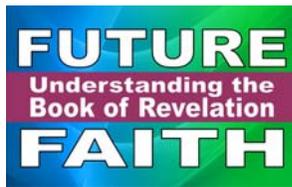
The importance of this “first love” in the Christian life cannot be overstated and is underlined again and again throughout the Scriptures. The **“Greatest Commandment,”** says Jesus, is not to work diligently, or endure patiently, or even to be doctrinally pure – as important as these things are. The Greatest Commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and then, filled and informed by that love, to love neighbor and self – as God loves us.²

We will fail without this love at the center. If we do not have a daily awareness of the radical love with which we have first been loved in Jesus Christ, then our ethics (our work), our psychology (our endurance), and our theology (our doctrinal purity) will decay over time. Without a recurrent view of the loving grace God has given us, in time our ethical deeds will embody less and less of the character of Christ, and will become instead acts of mere civility, self-justification, or dogged duty. Without a personal conviction of the conquering love at the heart of the Universe, our psychological endurance in the face of life’s pressures and pains will either disintegrate or else become a self-righteous or bitter drudgery. Unless a vision of the towering love of God in the cross of Christ is at the center of our theology, then our devotion to the truth will quickly degrade into an arrogant, judging spirit instead of a humble, discerning one.

These principles apply in our marriages and our parenting, in our friendships and vocational lives, just as they do in our spiritual lives. To paraphrase the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, we can do all sorts of noble deeds, and persevere in faith, and have all kinds of head knowledge, but without God’s first love to root us, we’re on a slippery slope that ends in **“nothing”** worthwhile or lasting.

V

Obviously, this slide had begun to occur in the lives of the Ephesians, as perhaps it has for some of us. But that’s why Christ gives them and us the three-step rescue plan He does. To put it simply, Jesus commands us to Remember, to Repent, and to Resume.



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First, Christ calls us to **“Remember the height from which you have fallen!”** The charge is to recall those mountaintop moments when our experience and practice of God’s love has been at its height and aspire to that place again. With God’s help, we can get there. Secondly, Christ calls us to **“Repent”** – to confess that we’ve too often relied too heavily on our deeds, our will, and our knowledge instead of living out of the overflow of His love for us. It is appropriate to ask forgiveness of God and others for having done so. And then, finally, Christ calls us to **Resume** living. **“Do the things that you did at first,”** he says, when first you fell in love with Me. We need to start listening, and serving, and seeking intimate fellowship again, for Christ is Lord of new beginnings.

My friends, a great deal rests upon our response to Christ’s counsel here, and Jesus makes that clear with a concluding warning and promise. The warning is that if we **“do not repent”**, if somehow we can’t or won’t allow His love to enflame our hearts, we’ll lose the Light He wants to shine through us. God’s love IS that Light. I find it very sobering to consider that within a few short centuries of the writing of this letter, the lampstand of the Ephesian Church was gone.

But the promise Jesus gives is as splendid as the warning is sober. **“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, which is in the paradise of God.”** This is the assurance of Jesus Christ to those who rediscover and live their lives from the first love of God. It is the promise of a return to Eden, of sorts. It is the chance to taste here and now, and share with one another and the world, the first fruits of a Love we’ll one day see NEVER has an end.³

Let us pray...

¹ 1 John 4:19

² Mark 12:28-31

³ 1 Corinthians 13



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