

Revelation 2:1-7

First Love

There is an old saying which says, "The good is ever the enemy of the best." There is no place where this is more important to understand than in the church. A simple study of the New Testament shows that the devil uses many tactics as he tries to derail the work of God. At times he attempts to introduce false doctrines into the family of God. At other times he will set up fights and schisms knowing that united we stand and divided we fall. When we refuse to allow sin to harm us, Satan will bring us persecution and troubles.

But there is also another tool that he uses to harm the work of the church. When we cannot be deceived or divided he will try to dull our love. The love we once had for God and Christ and the family of God cools. We settle for the good rather than the best. Other things become just as important or more important than loving God and walking in love. And that is a bad thing to have happen.

This morning we begin reading the first of the seven letters from Jesus Christ to the churches of Asia Minor or modern day Turkey. And even though there are seven individual letters written to seven individual churches, all the churches that read John's letter of revelation would read every other church's mail. In other words the church in Smyrna would see what Christ said to Ephesus. And Pergamos would see what Christ wrote to the church at Smyrna.

This obviously is purposeful. And it could be very humiliating, especially when your sins are made known to others. But the risen, glorified Christ, the one who walks in the midst of the lampstands, who knows the strengths and weaknesses of all of his churches, desires for all of us to take heed to what he says. All of us can take encouragement and warning from what Christ says to the churches in Revelation.

The first church is Ephesus. It was founded by the apostle Paul. And you can read about this in Acts 19. Paul was there for two years and the Word grew mightily and the name of Jesus Christ was glorified. Ephesus was a major city and the center for the worship of the pagan goddess Artimus or Diana. In fact there was a riot over the temple of Diana, because Christianity was growing and sales of the statue of Diana were diminishing. But now many years had passed since then. Let's read what Jesus said to the believers at Ephesus.

To the angel of the church of Ephesus write,

'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:
(Revelation 2:1)

First, the word "angel" has caused some trouble for Bible teachers. Among the many interpretations of this word, some believe the word should be translated as "messenger." They assert that the messenger is the pastor or leader in the church. Angel can mean a messenger, but not a pastor or leader. And the Greek word for "angel" is translated as "angel" throughout the rest of Revelation.

In Matthew 18:10 Jesus said that little children have guardian angels. In Hebrews 1:14 we are told that the angels minister and serve those who will inherit salvation. And so apparently every church has an angel assigned to it working especially with the leaders or the pastor of the church. This is why 1 John 4:1 tells us that there are good and bad spirits or angels influencing teachers. And so we should test the spirits, that is their doctrines.

We also learn in verse 1 that Jesus Christ holds these stars, these angels; they are under his absolute authority. And Christ not only stands in the midst of the lamp stands¹ he walks in the midst of them. Didn't Jesus say "For where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there in the midst of them"?² Jesus Christ is here with us, his people and he inspects our hearts and he knows us, knows all about us, even as he knew all about the believers in Ephesus.

I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars;³ and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.
(Revelation 2:2, 3)

Our Lord saw a lot that was very good about the Ephesian church. He praises their work and their labor. These were believers who did not gather together to be served, but to serve, just as their Master had taught.³ These were committed hard working saints. And they had great patience or perseverance. Again this is the Greek word *hupomone*, which means they courageously served even when under great stress and pressure.

¹ Revelation 1:13

² Matthew 18:20

³ Mark 10:40-45

They could not stomach those who were evil. They could smell a heretic or a hypocrite a mile away. Their church had a passion for sound doctrine. They had a well-defined and well-defended faith. There was no room for false apostles and teachers.

Long before this, when the apostle Paul was with these believers for the last time he warned them about savage wolves that would come into the church to destroy it. He even warned them there would be false teachers rising up from their own ranks.⁴ Such wolves and false teachers are still on the prowl today. This is why the charge in 2 Timothy 4 needs to be heard. It declares,

I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: ²Preach the word! Be ready in season *and* out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. ³For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, *because* they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; ⁴and they will turn *their* ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.
(2 Timothy 4:1-4)

The Ephesian church was prepared and ready for this. Every believer, in every age must be on guard against deceptive teaching. The Ephesian church worked hard. It was a well-oiled machine. That was the good news. Now, the hammer comes down!

Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.
(Revelation 2:4)

What does the ugly gorilla in the room look like? It looks like a cold, loveless heart. In Ephesus their hands have been busy, their heads are clear on doctrine, but the heart is cold. They have left their first love. Was this serious? Yes! The first and great commandment states,

you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.¹ This *is* the first commandment. ³¹ And the second, like *it*, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as

⁴ Acts 20:25-32

yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."
(Mark 12:30, 31)

Without love the church's work is empty.⁵ Our priority is to love God, love other people and to love the Lord Jesus Christ. It is significant that the apostle Paul ended his letter to the Ephesians with the statement, "Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity."⁶ Love is the commandment of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.
(John 13:34, 35)

The apostle Peter wrote,

But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. ⁸ And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins."
(1 Peter 4:7, 8)⁷

It is sad, but you can find churches where people assemble, songs are sung, sermons are preached, but hearts are hard and judgmental.

Here is a good question. How do we lose our first love? We lose it gradually as our focus shifts from God's love and grace to us, to the pleasures and pressures of the world. If we've lost that loving feeling how do we get it back? Our Lord tells us how.

Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.
(Revelation 2:5)

Our Lord says to get our priorities right the first thing to do is remember. Can you remember when you really loved God and Christ and other believers?

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13

⁶ Ephesians 6:24

⁷ 1 Peter 1:22, 23

Do you remember when every time you read God's Word it would touch your heart? Do you remember when praying and giving and serving was a joy? Remember. This is where revival starts.

Then secondly repent. To repent means to change the direction of your heart. It is a change of mind that causes you to turn away from that lover you cheated with against God. And anything can cause you to cheat: your job, entertainment, the good life, family, troubles—anything. Repent. James put it this way, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”⁸

Thirdly, act. Do the first works. Get back to basics. Acts 2 gives us a snapshot of the early church devoted to the basics.

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

⁴⁶So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.
(Acts 2:42-47)

These believers were devoted to doctrine and prayers. But they also enjoyed one another's company. And they loved and cared for one another deeply. I've always been inspired by this beautiful portrait of the church.

Jesus told the church at Ephesus “Remember...repent...do the first works” or else the lights will go out. Jesus will remove the lampstand. I was stunned that some modern Bible teachers say that the punishment does not fit the crime. And I thought to myself “Really?” The punishment **does** fit the crime. Think about this: a loveless church—no love for God, no love for Christ, no love for people, no tenderness, no kindness, no compassion, no empathy—how is that a church?⁹ Jesus continues,

⁸ James 4:8

⁹ Ephesians 4:32-5:1, 2

But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitians, which I also hate.
(Revelation 2:6)

Notice how sensitive Christ's heart is towards his people. He guards against totally flattening this church by praising them again. They hated the deeds of the Nicolaitians. We will look at these people more in another teaching. But simply put, they used people and were grossly immoral.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.
(Revelation 2:7)

Are we listening? Are we taking this to heart? Notice this admonition is not just to the Ephesian church. It is to "the churches" plural. That includes us. Each of these seven letters ends with a promise to those who obey the message in the letter. Here the one who overcomes will eat from the tree of life in the future paradise.

You can be an overcomer in two ways in the New Testament. You can be an overcomer in terms of salvation. And you can be an overcomer in terms of sanctification. Concerning salvation 1 John 5:4, 5 states,

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world.
And this is the victory that has overcome the world—
Our faith. ⁵ Who is he who overcomes the world,
but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Our salvation is not conditional. We cannot lose our salvation. So eating from the tree of life cannot mean to gain salvation and everlasting life here. But we can also overcome in terms of our sanctification; our becoming more like Christ. When we renew our minds to God's Word and are transformed, when we love and give and serve we can earn rewards. Or we cannot love and give and serve and lose rewards. In 2 Corinthians 5:10 we are told,

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

There are everlasting rewards to be won or lost.

There is an old saying which says, "The good is always the enemy of the best." And so we like the Ephesians have work to do. We have a fight to be fought. We have a creed to champion. But above all let us love God and Jesus Christ. And let us love one another fervently.