

FIRST LOVE

Revelation 2:1-7 To the Church in Ephesus

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

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. ²I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. ³You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

⁴Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. ⁵Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. ⁶But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

⁷Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

MESSAGE:

During our Lenten services this year we’re going to try to answer the question: “Is Our Church God’s Church?” In the *New Testament*, Jesus clearly describes what God created His church to do: it’s called the Great Commission, and you all know how it goes: “...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (*Matthew 28:19*) So the question is: is our church fulfilling the Great Commission? The sermons will be based upon seven letters which Jesus wrote to seven churches in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) which were in various stages of decline. These letters are recorded in Chapters 2 and 3 of the Book of Revelation. The churches range from one which is burning with zeal for the Great Commission to one which has become lukewarm and self-absorbed and is, so to speak, stewing in its own juice.

First of all, in *Chapter One of Revelation*, Jesus appears to John in a vision in order to reveal God’s perfect design for a church and its ministry. The seven churches are symbolically portrayed as seven golden lamps through which God sends His light into the world. Jesus stands among the lamps, tending to them and keeping them burning by supplying them with His Word and Spirit. In His hand, He holds

seven stars which represent the messengers or pastors who have been sent to each church to proclaim God's word. As long as the messengers—or pastors—do this, they remain in Jesus' hands, so to speak, and the church will be inspired to do what God created it to do. But if the messengers fail to preach the message they were sent to proclaim and start preaching a message of their own, the church separates itself from Jesus and its lamp starts going out. According to Jesus, this all begins with the loss of what He calls "first love."

Read Revelation 2:1-3 2 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. ²I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. ³You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

There was much that was good and right and healthy and strong about the church at Ephesus. The members of this church put their faith into action—toiling to persevere in good deeds and hard work in the Name of the Lord. They have also practiced discernment by refusing to tolerate evil. "Evil" could refer to flagrant sinning or sacrilegious behavior on the part of some members. While no one should be excluded from the fellowship of the church for sinning—if we did that we would have no members at all for we all sin daily—there is a difference between repenting of our sins and publicly embracing our sins. If someone in God's church insists on their right to sin—and makes it obvious through their behavior—that member should be counseled by the pastor or by fellow members to stop doing so. And if he ignores the warning, he should be asked to leave the church. I once knew a pastor who, when it came to light that he was carrying on an affair with a woman in his congregation, defended himself by claiming that his Christian freedom gave him the right to do what he was doing. The point is, there is a difference between sinning and flaunting our sins. We all do the former—that's why there is such a thing as repentance. The latter is unrepentance and it has no place in the church.

"Evil conduct" could also have taken the form of an attempt to introduce false doctrine into the preaching or teaching of in their church. "...*you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.*" Being solidly grounded in God's word would have given the Ephesians knowledge of the truth and the ability to discern false teaching when they saw it. Sadly, from the very

beginning—even during *Old Testament* times—there have been false shepherds who have tried to bring false teaching into the church. There’s an old saying to the effect that where God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel. These false shepherds either distort God’s word or ignore it and replace it with their own word. They are called “false prophets” and they usually preach what people like to hear rather than what they need to hear. In our day, this often takes the form of characterizing the message of the Bible as harsh and unloving and their own message as tolerant and progressive. They replace the sharp two-edged sword of God’s word with comfort food. They come dressed as sheep but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. The members of the church at Ephesus have tested those who “claim to be apostles but are not” and have found them to be false prophets. This has caused them to endure hardship for the sake of Jesus name but they “have not grown weary.” All of this is good—very good indeed.

There is only one problem: they have forsaken their “first love.” Now what do you suppose Jesus means by “first love?” “First” could refer to the first **time** one experienced love, or it could refer to the thing one loves more than anything else. In this context I believe the primary meaning is the latter: “first love” refers to whatever one loves above all other things. Now what do the Scriptures tell us to love above all other things? When Jesus was asked that question by one of the Pharisees, He replied: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. (Matthew 22:38)* Now it’s important to understand that when Jesus used the word “love” he wasn’t talking about **feeling**, He was talking about **doing, acting, serving**: He was admonishing us to give God first place in our lives—to serve Him first and foremost in our thoughts, words, and actions. Unfortunately, in an age where “self-esteem” is honored and where songs entitled *“Learning to Love Yourself is the Greatest Love of All”* become blockbuster hits, it can be tempting to put something other than God at the top of our list.

For example, many people in our day and age have made nature or “the environment” their number one love. Creation has replaced the Creator as the object of their worship. God anticipated that this would be a temptation for His children when He said through Moses, *“When you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars—all the heavenly array—do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things the Lord you God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven.” (Deuteronomy 4:19-29)* This is not to say that we shouldn’t be concerned with nature and our environment; after all, the first instructions God gave Adam when He put him in the Garden of Eden was “...to work it and take care of it.” (*Genesis 2:15*). We are commanded to be good

stewards of nature. But it's important to keep things in perspective: nature is not going to atone for our sins; only God can do that and so we must serve God first.

Another false god that draws people's worship is the idea of human progress—that man can continually make things better without God's help—maybe even create utopia one day. This has been called “secular humanism” and it springs from the intellectual pride which was man's original sin—the desire to “know what God knows.” This god received new life in the 18th Century—the so-called Enlightenment or “Age of Reason”—when intellectuals like Rousseau and Voltaire argued that man's power of reason could accomplish more for mankind than religious worship. That idea took root and attracted more and more people during the following two centuries. In the modern age it dominates what is taught in our institutions of higher learning.

There are other first loves that flourish in the modern era. Wealth is many people's god. Physical pleasure is another. Social position, fame, the admiration of others, victory in sports and politics—all these are the first love of millions of people. And all of it is idolatry, for as Luther said, *“Whatever you trust the most to keep you safe and make you happy is your god—and that will either be God Himself or it will be an idol.”* The terrible, terrible thing about idols is that instead of rewarding those who serve them—they turn and devour them, which is why it has been said that anyone who loves an idol, loves death

First love idolatry can even creep into the heart of our religious thinking. The Nicolaitans, whom Jesus hated, were examples of this. They understood that God's mercy was the source of salvation and that faith in Christ freed them from the authority of the law, but they made the fatal mistake of reasoning that since they were no longer under the Law, they were free to indulge in as much sin as they liked. They perverted the Gospel to justify lawless living and became what were called “hedonists”—people who made the pursuit of pleasure the sole purpose of life.

When the church ceases to make God their first love some other god will creep in. When the church ceases to make the Great Commission its goal, some other goal will replace it. And that god and that goal cannot be good because only God is good. There was much that was good about the church at Ephesus but a crack had appeared in their veneer. Nothing may have crept in yet, but something would. In our next letter—the Letter to the Church in Pergamum—we will get a glimpse of what that something could be. Amen.