

The Letters to the Seven Churches, Part I- *First Love Forsaken*

Call to Worship: Matthew 22:37b-40

Hymn #731- *And Can It Be*

1st Scripture: Jeremiah 2:1-13

Hymn #127- *Let us Love, and Sing, and Wonder*

2nd Scripture: Revelation 2:1-7

Hymn #548- *More Love to Thee, O Christ*

Introduction:

I want you to imagine for a moment that you are one of those avid, old school “barbequers,” who barbeques pretty much every day throughout the warmer months of the year. Being old school, you refuse those lazy, luxury gas grills that most of us use, and prefer to work with a charcoal grill to do all of your grilling. And so, each day you take out the briquettes and gather them together in the BBQ, you add a little lighter fluid, you spark it up, let the flame burn out, and fan the briquettes for a while until you spread all around that nice glowing gray color that says your ready to throw on some meat. And so, you add your chicken and burgers and steaks to your “man grill” and take pride in cooking them just right. And then, when you are done cooking and eating, you make sure that the coals are no longer burning, let them cool off, dump them, and prep the BBQ for the next day. Each day, you do this as long as the weather permits.

However, as you pass through another cold season, and prepare to enter spring, you determine that it is just too much work changing the briquettes every day, and so, for this year, you are just going to work off of the same coals for the entire summer. For the first few days, you somehow manage to do this, but soon enough, you find that all you have left in the grill are ashes. And they are all dead; they have nothing more to offer you. You attempt to relight them again; you even spill in some extra lighter fluid and get that nice flame for a few moments, but it doesn’t take long for you to realize that this is just not going to work. You need fresh, new coals if you are going to eat for the rest of the summer. Gaining wisdom from your experience, you recommit to going through the tedious process of setting up new briquettes, patiently igniting them and cleaning out the grill each day, so you can enjoy the wonderful grilled feasts you have

always enjoyed in the past. If you are going to use your “man grill,” you will just have to continue working at it, as you always have in the past.

In some ways, you might say that this illustration helps explain the vibrant, prosperous Christian life. We can only prosper in our walk with the Lord when we are constantly, daily, rekindling new coals in our hearts. And when we grow slack, we may endure for a short time, but eventually our Christianity will come to a point, where it is consistently nothing more than a heap of dead ashes; a routine of going through the motions, and “Sunday church.” You see, perhaps with our jobs, our daily responsibilities, driving from here to there, our exercise regimens, our diets...etc, we can get away with that type of a commitment. We can survive pretty fine, following routines in many areas of our lives, as long as we perform our routines well. But we cannot survive the Christian life when we allow it to become “routine,” because the Christian life involves a conscious, active relationship with the living God, who created us for His own glory. Our hearts must be consistently and growingly “in it,” if Christ is to be in it in truth. And so, we cannot simply float ahead on the burning coals of yesterday or times past, expecting to faithfully make it to the end. In fact, the Apostle Paul tells us to forget about yesterday’s coals, and to run for the prize all the more today with the same diligence and fervor.

The church at Ephesus obviously fell into the rut of “routines” and the “status quo,” and because of this, they were on the verge of losing their testimony (their lampstand) altogether, if they failed to repent and to renew the things that once were. And brethren, I want to suggest to you that the church at Ephesus, perhaps more than any of the other churches listed in these two chapters, best represents a “Reformed” church from the west (in either Europe or the U.S.A.).

This morning, I want to begin by providing you with a little of an historical background of the city of Ephesus, before moving to work through the headings of the chart you were given last week.

I. Ephesus: An Historical Background

Robert Mounce provides us with the following brief overview of life in Ephesus:

“It is appropriate that the first letter should be sent to Ephesus. It was the most important city of proconsular Asia. Situated at the mouth of the Cayster River on a gulf of the Aegean Sea, it flourished as an important commercial and export center for Asia. The traveler from Rome landing at Ephesus would proceed up a magnificent avenue thirty-five feet wide and lined with columns that led from the harbor to the center of the city. Ephesus was part of the kingdom of Pergamum, which Attalus III bequeathed to Rome in 133 B.C. By NT times it had grown to more than a quarter of a million in population. Its commercial importance was heightened by the fact that three great trade routes converged at the city (from the Euphrates by way of Colossae, from Galatia through Sardis, and from the Maeander valley to the south and east).

Although Ephesus was not the titular capital of Asia (Pergamum retained this honor), it was a city of great political importance. As a free city it had been granted by Rome the right of self-government. It also served as an assize city in which the Roman governor on a regular schedule tried important cases and dispensed justice. It boasted a major stadium, marketplace, and theater. The latter was built on the west slope of Mt. Pion overlooking the harbor, and seated some 25,000 persons.

The imperial cult was not neglected in Ephesus. Temples were built to the emperors Claudius, Hadrian, and Severus. The major religious attraction, however, was the Temple of Artemis (Diana in Latin), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. About four times the size of the Parthenon, it was adorned by the work of many great artists. After a devastating fire in 356 B.C. that destroyed the first temple, it was rebuilt, with Dinocrates (who later built Alexandria) as architect. Pliny the elder gives the dimensions of the temple as 425 feet long, 220 feet wide, and sixty feet high. He also notes that the 127 pillars were of Parian marble, with thirty-six of them overlaid with gold and jewels. Artemis herself was originally an Anatolian fertility goddess, but under the influence of Greek culture she had become the focus of an extensive religious cult.

The Christian faith came to Ephesus perhaps with Aquila and Priscilla about A.D. 52 when Paul left them there en route from Corinth to Antioch (Acts 18:18-22). On his next missionary journey the apostle remained in Ephesus for more than two years (Acts 19:8, 10), and some time later Timothy ministered there (1 Tim. 1:3). It was the apostle John, however, who is most closely associated with the city.”

William Hendriksen adds the following helpful brief statement to his own historical background of the city of Ephesus:

“Ephesus was for a long time the commercial centre of Asia. The temple of Diana was at the same time a treasure house, a museum, and a place of refuge for criminals. It furnished employment for many, including the silversmiths who made miniature shrines of Diana.”

And so, brethren, clearly, when we consider the historical background of the city of Ephesus, we find that it was a city that was not too unlike our own country. It was wealthy, well populated, busy, free, full of all manner of entertainment and luxury and overcome with financial and material success. Ephesus was a “happening” place for its time.

Having this historical background in place, let us then begin to work through the letter written to the church at Ephesus, in keeping with several of the headings we have gone over last time.

II. Christ’s Self-Designation

“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...*’”

What is the significance of this self-designation given by King Jesus? Well, in the latter part of this letter, our Lord threatens to come quickly and remove their lampstand if they fail to give heed to his call to repent of their grievous sin. We will see in a few moments that this church had so much going for them. At first glance, they seemed like the ideal church. Many good things were in place, but that which was lacking was so significant that it threatened to destroy the entire operation. And so, they needed to understand that although they had many positive and much to be coveted qualities, those qualities in themselves were incapable of properly bringing forth the necessary light that would reveal the glory of God. What they didn’t have was significant enough to darken and eclipse all they did have. And if this remained unchanged; if this church failed to fulfill its intended purpose, then the one who held them in the very palm of His hands; the One who walked right there among them and who was able to discern the inner most thoughts of their hearts; the One who observed their worship and all of their practices and who had all power over all of the churches (to do with them as He pleases), would cast their lampstand out altogether. You see, the churches exist not for their own purposes, but for the glory of the Christ who stands among them, and when they fail to meet that essential purpose, they are in danger of being cast out.

III. Christ's Commendations

“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; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary” (vs. 2&3). Continuing on in verse 6, our lord adds, “But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”

What a tremendous list of commendations! Consider these positive, active and passive qualities of the church at Ephesus:

1) From an *active* standpoint, this church has labored fervently for the Kingdom of God. In fact, the idea here is that they have “exhausted themselves” in the process, while failing to grow weary. They were on the move. They were “duty minded” in a positive sense, and the general spirit of the church was one of Christian service and ministry. With much energy expended and with much sweat poured out, they pressed hard to make sure that their ministries were running smoothly, and that their doctrines were improving and maintaining their purity.

2) So aggressive were they in upholding their doctrine and maintaining the purity of the church that they tested all who called themselves apostles. And they carefully examined those who claimed to be teachers of any sort, ensuring that their doctrine lined right up with the truth of God's Word. In Acts 20:29-31, the Apostle Paul had warned the leaders of this church, stating, “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.” Well, the Ephesian church did well to heed this warning, and they needed to be commended for it. They had a passion for the truth. They hated lies, falsehood, idolatry and immoral practices, which were predominant in their worldly society. To be sure, some had tried to infiltrate their ranks with compromising doctrines and defiling teachings, and they were on top of it. They cast them out. They exercised church discipline swiftly and faithfully. Unlike some of the other churches, they detected and cast out the Nicolaitans, that wicked, idolatrous, compromising sect.

3) And then from a *passive* standpoint, this church patiently persevered. In a climate where emperor worship was both encouraged and pressed, and within the walls of a city that was engrossed in materialism, idolatry, immorality and entertainment worship, the Ephesian church was patiently persevering and enduring. Some of them probably lost jobs for failing to concede to the compromising practices of the trade guilds (the “unions” of the first century). Others had perhaps been shirked or considered outcasts because of their failure to partake in the immoral acts and idolatrous practices of the day. Perhaps others were even physically afflicted and oppressed in various ways for their faith. Whatever the case might be, they patiently endured and persevered. They were willing to suffer harm for the Name of Christ, while awaiting His promised return.

And so, the church at Ephesus was commended for being what Dennis Johnson called a “hard-working, tireless, enduring, discerning, truth-loving, lie-hating, congregation.” But they lacked one very significant thing.

IV. Christ’s Word of Rebuke

“Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love” (vs. 4).

The one very significant rebuke that Christ gives to a seemingly flawless and ideal church is that they have left; they have walked away from their “first love.” And in this sense, you can say that this church which was doctrinally vigilant, was failing to apply that very doctrine in some significant way. And this church that was very conscious about contending with all manner of idolatry, was at the same time, committing a more subtle gross act of idolatry.

The most significant aspect of our Christianity; the very heart and core of our faith; that which ultimately provides all life and power to our Christian services and actions; that which separates plastic, rote machinery from sincere, authentic, worship and service, namely, *true* love, was missing. And brethren, as we seek to identify the substance of this love that was desperately lacking (and in fact forsaken), there is really no need to determine if it is a God-directed or man-directed love, which Christ was here concerned about. Both forms of love are attached at the hip. If there is a failure in mutual love among the brethren or if there is a failure to love the lost,

then to be sure, there is a failure to love God, first and foremost. And if there is a failure to love God first and foremost, than to be sure, there will always be a failure to love the brethren and the lost. Ultimately, they all go hand in hand. The only difference is that a “people focused” love will be more obvious from an outward standpoint, and in fact, it will serve to help confirm a God-focused love. “Peter, do you love Me?” “Yes Lord, You know that I love You.” “Then feed my sheep.” If we are not caring for Christ’s sheep, then it is indeed our love for Christ which has ultimately waned.

And so, while I would tend to think that outwardly, there was a lack of sincere love and concern for the brethren, and perhaps even a deep lull in their evangelistic endeavors, at the root of this first love, which the church of Ephesus has left, was their failure to maintain ongoing, regular communion with Christ. Their Gospel passion was lost! Yes, they had all of the wonderful, outward trimmings; they looked so good from an outward standpoint, and their doctrinal conviction was stellar, but the sincere heartfelt passion and love for Christ was all but gone! And that is a very significant “no-no.”

Ministries were moving ahead like machines; they were busy with many, many things, but there was very little time spent, sitting at the feet of Christ. They were committed to a “revolving door,” “in and out” marriage to Christ, and Christ, who wants our hearts more than anything else, will not have that. You see, brethren, we can be very moral, doctrinally vigilant, laborious, hard working, persevering people, and yet, formulate all of that into a system of morality that lacks the most significant core of simple, daily, consistent fellowship with the living Christ. And sadly, when this is missing, we lack the power of the Spirit in all else that we do. And sadly, when this is missing, our love for one another becomes dry and routine. And sadly, when this is missing, we become so self-focused, that our passion for evangelism; our passion to see the lost saved falls flat on its face. The church at Ephesus was a body of unrepentant Marthas, running around frantically, concerned about many things, the whole time, missing what was most needed...namely, to sit with Mary at the feet of Christ.

What is your devotional life like this morning? What does your daily Bible reading, meditation and prayer life look like? You might say, “Well, it is not great, but I still do a lot of God honoring things. I come to church. I stand out as a God fearing, obedient person at work. I don’t partake in sinful practices. I stay away from “R” rated movies, I don’t curse, I don’t drink

or do drugs, I don't look at pornography, I am celibate or I maintain fidelity in my marriage, I withstand the mockery of those who are not Christians, I donate money to the poor, I tithe to the church...and a million other things.” But are you spending time, daily, with Christ? Have you put “fellowship and communion with Christ” at the top of your *daily* list of priorities? I am not asking if you read a devotion from the “Today” pamphlet or “The Daily Bread” each day or if you even read a chapter in the Bible or even ten each day. Do you meet with the living Christ? Is your walk with the Lord a mechanical, daily routine, or is their intimate fellowship with Christ? Are you renewing the coals, day after day, not counting on yesterday's coals to sustain today's fire? Does your heart actively engage your blessed Savior?

Brethren, what makes this first letter so frightening is that there is so much good going on that can cloud out what is most significant, if we are not careful. Over a period of time, it is just too easy to allow a checklist of things to become all that defines our Christianity. We can carry all of the Kingdom of God trimmings into our world of busyness and assume all is well, when Christ calls us to live in the Kingdom of God *now!* We must be on guard, brethren! We must guard our hearts, ensuring that Christ maintains His throne there. Christianity can never become a system of morals, good deeds and “Sunday church.” It must be much, much more! It must be a constant, ever increasing loving relationship with the living Christ. And when we begin to drift away from this, we must come back to give heed to our Lord's solution.

V. Christ's Solution

“Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works...”

Consider that love for Christ that you had at the beginning, when you were first married and rapt in His glory. Consider where you have gone off course; where you have fallen from the great heights of being consumed with a passion to know, love and serve Him. Repent and do what you did then. Do all that is necessary to restore that true passion for Christ and His glory. Restructure your life, and set Christ at the center of it all. Make a desperate, unwavering, non-budging commitment to spend sufficient time with Him every single day! Consider conscious, pro-active ways of showing sincere love for the brethren. Look for ways to present Christ to

others; to those who yet remain in their sin, lost, dead and without any present hope. Get the lampstand flickering and then glowing again...or else.

VI. Christ's Exhortation (Warning)

"...Or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent."

"So important is this matter, so significant is this concern of Mine, that if you fail to repent; if you fail to heed My solution, I will cast out your lampstand altogether. You will become a lifeless, dead, empty shell, serving no good purpose unto the glory of God whatsoever."

You see, brethren, the heart has always mattered to God. People love to treat God like He is some robotic machine, that just lets you role through a check list of obedient exercises, and is more than satisfied with just that. But, such has never been the case. God wants sincerity! God wants true, authentic, heart commitment. God wants passion and fire. God wants your heart and He will settle for nothing less. In fact, if He doesn't have your heart, He will cast you and everything else you have right out of His sight. And at some point in time, that is exactly what happened to Ephesus. The town is nothing but a heap of ruins in the present, bombarded by satanic, Muslim practices.

VII. Christ's Promise to Overcomers

But for those who stand strong to the end; for those who repent when necessary and strive to keep Christ at the center of their lives and affections; for those who "have an ear to hear what the Spirit says to the churches," we have this promise: "To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God" (vs. 7b).

A promise that will be further opened up and expounded upon throughout the course of this Book, namely, the undoing of all that had transpired as a result of the fall of our first parents; the promise of living eternally in perfect fellowship with the living God with no curse to exist or

ever hinder that fellowship. That tree, which was blocked from Adam and Eve after they had sinned, lest they should partake of it and gain eternal life in their corrupt state, would now be open to those who overcome; to those who conquer in Christ.

You see, those who are passionately consumed with a love for Christ now; those who have regular consistent fellowship with Christ now, will come to have what they have moved toward all along...only then, it will be perfect, without any hindrance whatsoever. They will dwell in the Paradise of God with Christ forever! No more tears, no more sorrows, no more pain, no more sin, no more death...for the former things will have passed away. And God will be their God and they will be His people! I ask you brethren, does this reality still drive you? Is this sure hope, that which carries the day for you or have other things, even not necessarily sinful things, but other things nonetheless, crept in to rob you of this eternal joy? What does your love for the brethren look like? What does your evangelistic zeal look like? What does your personal communion and fellowship with Christ look like?

AMEN!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25