

FBC POWELL, 8-4-19 AM NOTES
"Return to Your First Love"
Revelation 2:1-7
1 in Series, "Letters from Jesus"

The Speaker – Jesus is the speaker to these 7 churches, but He identifies Himself in a way that is fitting for what each individual church is going through.

The Strengths – With a couple of exceptions, Jesus has a word of commendation for these churches.

The Sin – With most of the churches, Jesus exposes a major problem, a sin in the church that must be dealt with.

The Solution – Jesus doesn't just tell them what is wrong; He tells them what they must do to make it right and what will happen if they don't make it right.

The Success – Jesus closes out the letters with a promise of what the church can expect if they are obedient and thus pleasing to Him.

I. The Speaker (v. 1)

Revelation 1:20 (NASB) "As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."

To be in His right hand means that the messengers are **protected by Him** and **accountable to Him**.

II. The Strengths (vv. 2-3, 6)

A. Jesus Commends Them for Their Deeds (v. 2a)

B. Jesus Knows Their Toil (v. 2b)

Acts 20:29-31 (NASB) ²⁹ "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears."

C. Jesus Knows Their Perseverance (v. 3)

III. The Sin (v. 4)

Matthew 22:37-38 (NASB) ³⁷ "And He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and foremost commandment.'"

Matthew 10:37 (NASB) "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me."

1 John 4:20 (NASB) "If someone says, 'I love God', and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen."

“Abandoning one’s first love means, then, that one has strayed from both love of God and love of fellow believers. The two are inseparable. The church at Ephesus was persistent and orthodox, but a hardness, a callousness had arisen in its ranks. They needed a renewed fervency, a renewed tenderness for the Lord and for one another.” —Tom Schreiner

At Ephesus, Jesus was no longer precious; He was a doctrine to be defended.

“Doxology (praise) had slipped into cold orthodoxy—right belief. They had lots of activity for Christ, but very little intimacy with Christ. They had full heads, busy feet, but empty hearts.” —Steven Lawson

Possible indicators that you have left or are leaving your first love:

1. Your personal devotion to Christ begins to wane.
2. Your Christian life begins to lack the element of the radical.
3. You begin to lose your spiritual sensitivity. Your heart becomes calloused.
4. Your passion for ministry wanes.

IV. The Solution (v. 5)

- A. Remember (v. 5a)
- B. Repent (v. 5b)
- C. Repeat (v. 5c)

V. Success (v. 7)

1 John 5:5 (NASB) “Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”

(See Genesis 2:9, 3:22, and Revelation 22:2)

Sermon 1: Return to Your First Love

Revelation 2:1-7

Today, we begin a new seven-part series from Revelation 2 and 3 entitled, *Letters from Jesus*. In Revelation 2 and 3 we have seven letters from Jesus to seven late first century churches. We tend to think that the first century churches were close to perfect, and that they were without serious problems. People will sometimes say, “We need to get back to the first century church.” In reality, many first century churches were a mess! That shouldn’t surprise us! These churches were filled with people who, like us, struggled with the power of sin, the flesh, and the same devil we deal with today. From these seven churches, we will learn some things to emulate and some things to avoid.

Early in the book of Revelation (chapters 2 & 3), the Lord tells John to write down seven letters to seven literal churches. Why did the Lord pick these specific churches? From these seven churches we clearly see what pleases the Lord and what displeases Him. We also see how churches lose their way, even to the point that they cease being a church.

My heart, my longing is that we would be a church that is commended by Jesus. We will see that Jesus, the founder and Lord of the churches, makes very clear what pleases Him and what doesn't please Him. In the next six sermons we will look at each of these churches and make application to our church.

All too often when people come to the book of Revelation, they skip or skim over Revelation 2 and 3. Many want to jump ahead to those action packed, what Ray Steadman calls "blood and thunder" sections of Revelation that deal with the future. While prophecy is important, there is nothing more important than the truths we learn from these seven literal churches in Revelation 2 and 3.

In each of the seven letters to seven literal churches we find a common pattern (with a few exceptions).

- The Speaker – Jesus is the speaker in all of these seven letters to the seven churches, but He identifies Himself in a way that is fitting for what each individual church is going through.
- The Strengths – With a couple of exceptions, Jesus has a word of commendation for these churches.
- The Sin – With most of the churches, Jesus exposes a major problem, a sin in the church that must be dealt with.
- The Solution – Jesus doesn't just tell them what is wrong; He tells them what they must do to make it right and what will happen if they don't make it right.
- The Success – Jesus closes out the letters with a promise of what the church can expect if they are obedient and thus pleasing to Him.

The first church we will focus on is the church at Ephesus. Before we focus on the text, let me share some facts about the city of Ephesus. To go to first century Ephesus would be similar to going to New York City or to Los Angeles today. The population of this city was estimated as high as 500,000. That was huge for a first century city.

Ephesus was a key city for the spread of Christianity. Ephesus was also a center of pagan worship. One of the "seven wonders" of the ancient world was located in Ephesus – the Temple of Diana. The worship of the goddess Diana or Artemis (another name for her) was unspeakably vile and immoral.

In spite of all the evil, no church in history has as rich a heritage as the church at Ephesus. This church was planted by the Apostle Paul along with his friends Priscilla and Aquila. It is thought that Paul spent more time with the church at Ephesus than any other church (about three years). It would be worth your time to read about the church of Ephesus in the book of Acts (Chapters 18-20).

When we come to today's passage, about forty years have passed since this amazing church was birthed. Paul has been martyred, and the aged Apostle John has been exiled to Patmos. As Jesus dictated this letter to John, we see that all was not well with the church at Ephesus.

I. The Speaker (v. 1)

Jesus introduces Himself to the church at Ephesus as “the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks in the midst of the seven lampstands.” What does this mean? We don't have to guess the meaning. Jesus has already told us in Revelation 1:20: “As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” The word translated “angels” simply means messengers. Most Bible scholars agree that this probably refers to the pastors of the seven churches. Notice that the proclaimers of the Word of God are in the right hand of the Lord Jesus. To be in His right hand means that the messengers are *protected by Him and accountable to Him*. This emphasizes the fact that the messengers to the church had better be sure that the message they proclaim is from the Lord of the church. My main concern is that I speak what He desires me to speak. If I am faithful to the Word, He is my protection because I am in His hand.

What is the symbolism of Jesus walking in the midst of the seven golden lampstands? The symbolism is that He is constantly aware of all that is going on in His churches. He is the Lord of the church! He is scrutinizing, examining, assessing and evaluating His churches – this church. He is watching our actions, hearing our words and He is aware of our thoughts and motives. Never forget that Jesus is walking in the midst of His churches.

II. The Strengths (vv. 2-3, 6)

Before the Lord of the church tells this church what is not pleasing to Him, He recognizes that there are some wonderful commendable things about this church.

First, He knows about and commends them for their *deeds*. He says, “I know your *deeds*...” (v. 2a). This word translated “know” refers to a complete and full knowledge. He knows all the work done in the church. Keep that in mind when you work hard and nobody says “thank you” or seems to notice. He knows! That ought to be sufficient since He is the one we are to be doing it for.

Second, He knows their “toil” (v. 2b). That word means to labor to the point of exhaustion. There was no laziness in this church. It also seems that they practiced church discipline. He said in verse 2c, “you cannot tolerate evil men.” When a person attached themselves to the church in Ephesus and then harbored evil in their life that brought reproach on Christ and reproach on the church, the church confronted them and dealt with the evil through what we call “church discipline”.

This church not only refused to tolerate evil; they also refused to tolerate false doctrine (v. 2b). These folks could smell a heretic a mile away. Some thirty-five to forty years earlier, Paul had warned the elders of the Ephesian church about false teachers. Acts 20:29-31:

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert,

remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

That admonition from Paul had stuck, and the Ephesian church decades later had no patience with false teachers and false doctrines. We see a specific example in verse 6. We are not sure who the Nicolaitans were, but based on ancient writing outside Scripture we are pretty sure that they were the followers of a man named Nicholaus who taught that since we are under grace, sin doesn't matter. They excused immorality and even idolatry under the guise of being under grace. The church at Ephesus would have nothing to do with them. Jesus commended them for their doctrinal purity.

Third, Jesus knows their "perseverance" (v. 3a). That word literally means to bear up under a load. When persecution came, the Christians at Ephesus didn't let up. When the going got tough, they just kept going. The Lord commended this church for persevering in their purity in both doctrine and behavior.

What a church! If I had moved to Ephesus at the end of that first century, after a few visits, I would have joined that church! And yet, there was a flaw in this church. It was a flaw that evidently became a fatal flaw. The church at Ephesus later died. We don't know that it was from the fatal flaw Jesus points out in verse 4, but it likely was. What was the sin that took this church from commendation to condemnation?

III. The Sin (v. 4)

The church at Ephesus had everything but the main thing. The word "left" means to forsake or let go. The Bible constantly emphasizes the supreme priority for believers to love God. When challenged to name the greatest commandment, Jesus didn't hesitate in Matthew 22:37-38: "And He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment." Jesus told His disciples that their love for Him (God the Son) should exceed every other love. Matthew 10:37: "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me."

Let's go back to the text. What was Jesus referring to when He spoke of their "first love" in Revelation 2:4? Is Jesus saying they left their love for God or they left their love for one another? The answer is "yes"! You cannot separate these two. This same John said in 1 John 4:20: "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen."

Tom Schreiner said it well: "Abandoning one's first love means, then, that one has strayed from both love of God and love of fellow believers. The two are inseparable. The church at Ephesus was persistent and orthodox, but a hardness, a callousness had arisen in its ranks. They needed a renewed fervency, a renewed tenderness for the Lord and for one another." [*ESV Expository Commentary, Revelation*, page 571]

That first love is when He is so precious to us, we continually delight in Him, we love to meditate on Him; we delight in His Word; we can't get enough of worshipping Him. We don't have a quiet time as some legalistic item to check off our daily "to do list". We delight in Him.

There is an analogy in marriage. A newlywed couple can't stand being apart. Their two lives have become one and there is deep desire to be together, to experience life together. It is not

uncommon for that flame to die down because life happens. The demands on our lives pull us apart and soon, if not remedied, the affection, the constant thoughts of the love of our life are squelched by other things that have crowded in. Soon the couple begins to almost feel like strangers. That is what happened at Ephesus between this church and their Lord. *He was no longer precious; He was a doctrine to be defended.* Their ministry had become mechanical. Steven Lawson described it as “Doxology [praise] that had slipped into cold orthodoxy – right belief... They had lots of activity for Christ, but very little intimacy with Christ. They had full heads, busy feet, but empty hearts.” [Steven Lawson]

We are not talking of a point in time turning away from Christ in rebellion. We are talking about a *gradual coldness that develops over time.*

Allow me to share some possible indicators that you have left or are in the process of leaving your first love. I came across these “indicators” several years ago, so they aren’t mine, but I have forgotten where I got them. These aren’t meant to be a litmus test; they are simply some symptoms to use to examine your life to see if you have lost or are losing your first love.

1. Your personal devotion to Christ begins to wane. Your desire to spend time with Him in prayer and the Word decreases to the point that it is neglected or that you are just going through the motions without a heart that treasures him.
2. Your Christian life begins to lack the element of the radical. You find yourself playing it safe, staying away from things you are not comfortable with. You have ceased to put yourself into situations where you are forced to trust him to accomplish the task.
3. You begin to lose your spiritual sensitivity. Your heart becomes calloused. You find yourself letting down some fences you put up in your life to avoid sin because you did not want to disappoint the Lord Jesus who was so precious to you. You find yourself rationalizing sin. You seldom are moved during the worship time. The messages become something you endure. You have lost your spiritual sensitivity and it is because you have left your first love.
4. Your passion for ministry wanes. That which used to give you delight is now something you have to do that you wish you could get out of doing.

Those are just a few of the indicators that you have left or are leaving your first love.

IV. The Solution (v. 5)

When the Lord points to the sin of His people, He tells them what to do about it. What do we do about the sin of leaving our first love? Let me say that if a church or individual has left its first love, there is a necessity for drastic action. Spiritual band-aids won’t do. Jesus says that to fail to take the commanded action will result in removing their lampstand. That means He will take away their privilege of holding forth His light in the world. They may continue to open the doors and have people show up, but Jesus won’t be there. What are the three steps?

A. Remember (v. 5a)

The word “remember” is a present imperative. That means that it is a command and the present tense means to keep on remembering. He is talking about setting your mind on what it

was like when your first love ruled and how you forsook that first love. Re-focus on what it was like when He was precious to you. The road back starts with remembering.

B. Repent (v. 5b)

To repent means that you call your coldness of heart what it really is – sin, evil, disobedience to God. To repent means that you are willing to do whatever it takes to turn around. It may mean a job change. If it was an area of disobedience, go back to where you disobeyed and obey! If it was some hobby, trash your hobby. If it was a ministry you left, go back to the ministry. Repent.

C. Repeat (v. 5c)

What are the first works? I think that it means the basics of the Christian walk. We have the first works detailed for us in Acts 2:42-47. They were continuing in the study of the Word, worship and especially the Lord's Supper, prayers, a giving lifestyle, fellowship, and worship with large groups and growing in small groups in the home.

V. The Success (v. 7)

1 John 5:5: "Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" The one who overcomes is a true Christian. A Christian is an overcomer. The Lord is saying that the overcomers, the true believers will eat of the tree of life in Paradise (Revelation 22:2). I believe it is a literal tree, but it symbolizes eternal life. The Paradise of God is a synonym for Heaven as it is used here.

CONCLUSION

History tells us that the church at Ephesus did not repent and their lampstand was taken away. Don't allow this to happen in your life. We must not let it happen in our church.

One of the things that God used to launch the Welsh revival in the first part of the twentieth century was a teenage girl who stood in a meeting and said, "I do love the Lord Jesus." She began to weep and repeated it over and over as she wept. God moved in revival that eventually swept across the whole country. May we come back to the place that our heart overflows with that first love – "I do love the Lord Jesus."

NASB (New American Standard Bible)

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