

To Ephesus: Remember your First Love

(Sermon 4 – Rev. 2:1-7)

9.22.24

Please turn in your Bibles to the Book of Revelation, ch. 2.

Imagine Jesus writing a letter to CrossPointe Church. What areas would he be pleased with, where we are being faithful to the gospel, to the mission we are called to? And what areas would Jesus bring correction, where we are missing it, or where we have not been faithful?

Here in the Book of Revelation, Jesus does just that for a handful of churches. After giving the Apostle John this amazing vision of the glorified Christ, walking among his churches, Jesus instructs John to write out seven letters to seven different churches.

These churches are identified by the cities where they are located: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, all in Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey. Over the next couple of months, Lord willing, we are going to make our way through each of these 7 letters. Today, we start with the letter to the church at Ephesus. So let's read the Rev. 2:1-7, then we'll pray and ask for God's help.

Rev. 2:1-7

[2:1] "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.[2] "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.

[3] I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. [4] But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. [5] Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

[6] Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. [7] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

(PRAY)

The 7 Cities

When you see these 7 cities on a map, you find that they are relatively close together. A day's boat ride from Patmos, where John was exiled, you first come to Ephesus, a coastal city. Then moving about 40 miles north, you run into Smyrna, then Pergamum. To the east you have Thyatira, then below that to the south, you have Sardis, Philadelphia, and finally, Laodicea, completing the circle. Connected by Roman roads, these major cities also made up the central mail route of the time, which meant the letters they received could be easily distributed through the whole area.

Now, some interpret these 7 churches as representing different stages, or "dispensations" of church history, assuming they represent a timeline of the spiritual condition of the church through the years. But there is nothing in the text that even hints at that. These are 7 real churches with real people and real problems that Jesus is addressing.

Something else to remember - all of the letters were distributed to all of the churches. So, this letter to Ephesus for instance, would be read not only by the Christian there, but by all the other churches as well.

Which is a reminder, just as the number 7 is symbolic in the Book of Revelation, representing wholeness and completion, in these 7 letters, Jesus is addressing His Church as a whole. His words to them are meant to instruct all Christians through the ages.

The Content of the 7 letters

Now, in the content of these letters, 2 of the 7 churches get nothing but praise. No corrections from Jesus at all. The other five get a mixture of praise and rebuke. Each one starts with some aspect of Christ Himself, a reflection of the vision of Christ in ch. 1. And each letter ends with an admonition for them to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Last week in John's vision of the glorified Christ, we saw Jesus walking among the lampstands, representing these churches. A double-edged sword comes from the mouth of Christ, representing God's word. It is double-edged because it both wounds and heals. God's word brings comfort as well as correction. And that's exactly what Jesus is about to bring to the church at Ephesus.

We're going to unpack this letter in three parts:

- The City*
- The Commendations*
- The Corrections*

I. The City (Ephesus)

If Jesus did write to CrossPointe Church, and he was addressing things specific to our congregation, and someone from another time and place were to read that letter, it would help them to know something about the time we lived in, something about our community, and about our culture.

So, if we want to understand these instructions to Ephesus, we need to do the same.

Ephesus was the 3rd biggest city in the Roman Empire. In fact, at one time, it was the capital city of the empire. It was a bustling port city, full of wealth and cultural diversity. It was like the New York City of its time. Lots of people, lots of diverse culture, and lots of idolatry and immorality.

The gospel first took root there in 51 or 52 AD with the faithful work of a Christian couple named Aquila and Priscilla. The Apostle Paul spent almost 3 years there, the longest time he spent in any one city, helping to strengthen and encourage these new believers.

Now it's difficult enough to be young Christians growing in the faith. Add to that all the idolatry that surrounded them. Ephesus was a "free city", meaning they could govern themselves without a heavy Roman presence. But they got that status by being very loyal to Rome, and to the "Imperial Cult", or the practice of worshiping dead emperors as gods. This practice made life very difficult for Christians who lived there.

Ephesus had one of the biggest libraries of the ancient world, with the inscription over the door, "Caesar Augustus is god". If you visit the ruins, that inscription can still be seen today.

Ephesus boasted of one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world, the temple of Artemis, which was 3 times the size of the Parthenon, and had a stadium that could seat 25,000 people. This was the place, back in Acts ch. 19, where the Apostle Paul faced an angry mob wanting to kill him because the preaching of the gospel hurt the business of the idol makers, selling statues of Diana.

Now, fast forward 40 years, from Paul's time in Ephesus to John writing these letters from Jesus. In those 40 years, Ephesus became a city in decline. They were already in moral decline, but now their economy was dying as well.

This made life even more difficult, and divisions deepened. The Romans persecuted Christians for not worshiping the emperor. And since Rome viewed Christianity as a sect of Judaism, the Jews hated the Ephesian Christians for making their lives more difficult under Rome.

So the church at Ephesus felt the pressure – living in a pagan city, with moral and economic decline, and dealing with conflict on every side. So Jesus begins their letter this way...

[2:1] “To the angel [or messenger] of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands...”

Remember the stars represent the messengers (or pastors) of the churches, and the lampstands represent the congregations. In other words, Jesus is holding these pastors and churches in His hand.

This is to remind the Christians in Ephesus, (and to remind us today), that even though the church is often surrounded by enemies, and facing pressure on every side, the Lord is with us. He holds us in his hand, because Jesus is still the head of the Church, and He knows how to care for those who are His.

That’s some background of the city. Now, we come to their commendations from Jesus, the things the church was doing right...

II. The Commendations

[2:2] “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.

Jesus points out 3 specific areas that the Ephesian Christians are being faithful...

1. Their labor in the gospel.

Jesus says, “I know your works” and “your toil”, which means – not only their good deeds – but their work on gospel mission, in making disciples. That word “toil” means efforts that lead to exhaustion. They are doing the work of ministry, they are serving one another, they are evangelizing the lost, even to the point of exhaustion.

Some of you know that feeling. Volunteering to serve on Sunday. Opening your home for hospitality through the week. Participating in your care group and your discipleship group. Serving your spouse and your family. And sometimes it feels like you spent. But you do it, you serve the church and one another, not just as another box to check off, but you know you're serving a bigger purpose.

You're helping to make and grow disciples. You're serving Jesus' church because you love Jesus. You're not content to just come in on a Sunday and be a consumer. You serve. You're not content with watching while other people evangelize, but you're out sharing the gospel with others and living out life together, on mission. And to those, Jesus looks at you and says, "Well done".

2. Their patient endurance.

This means to suffer well under difficult circumstances. Remember back in v. 9, John called himself a brother and partner in "the patient endurance", encouraging those churches who were suffering persecution because they would not give in to the pressures of the culture or false religions. They stayed true to the gospel, they stayed faithful to sound doctrine and living holy lives, and Jesus is saying, "Well done."

3. Not tolerating false teachers.

End of v. 2, Jesus commends them in "...*how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.*" The Ephesian Christians valued and protected the purity of the gospel. And from that, they were able to discern when a false gospel was presented, or even when leaders among their own congregation were teaching things contrary to Scripture.

Dropping down to v. 6, Jesus identifies this group of false teachers and commends the Ephesians for standing against them...

[2:6] Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Now we don't know exactly who these Nicolaitans are. It seems this was a group within the church and even leaders who were influenced by a man named Nicolas, who tried to convince Christians they didn't have to give up their sinful lifestyle, they didn't have to live holy lives to follow Christ.

I think there could be an appropriate comparison for today: How there are some in our culture who claim to be of Christ, yet promote sinful lifestyles,

who affirm things like homosexuality or sexual immorality or abortion, and even celebrate in the church things which God's word clearly condemns. And they often do so under the guise of love and inclusion.

Be assured, "tolerance" as the world defines it is not a Christian virtue. We are never commanded to tolerate unrepentant sin – starting with our own hearts. What Jesus commends is not tolerance, but grace-filled holiness and faithfulness to His word.

And regarding those in the church who refused to leave their sinful lifestyle, Jesus says to the Ephesian church, *"I commend you for hating their works, because I hate their works too."*

Part of spiritual maturity is to love what Jesus loves, and to hate what Jesus hates. Jesus says He hates the work of those claiming to be Christian who gradually, deceptively, try to water down and pollute the gospel and distort God's grace.

This is an ongoing challenge for us as well. We must be aware of our own culture and our own hearts being tempted to stray from the gospel, to use God's grace as an excuse for our sin. And we must warn our children, and warn the leaders we are raising up, to never try and improve on the gospel. Never leave the centrality of the cross. And to walk in God's grace as an empowerment to resist sin, not as an excuse to give in to it.

Some 50 years before this, the Apostle Paul was departing Ephesus never to see them again. He warned them of this very thing...

"I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them." (Acts 20:29-30)

Paul's warning came true. False leaders, false apostles, rose up, even from among their very congregation, who perverted the gospel, attempting to bring division and make disciples for themselves.

And Jesus commends the Ephesians, saying, *"You saw these false leaders, you discerned they were false by testing them against my word, and you got rid of them."*

You see, not all church departures are bad. Whether it's a member who's being divisive, or a leader who is not pointing people to Christ, sometimes a departure is a good thing.

And when it comes to our church and our leaders, that's why we value accountability with one another and with the congregation. If I can't humble myself and confess sin to my fellow pastors, if I can't receive gracious observations from brothers and sisters in the Lord concerning my walk with Christ, or how I treat my wife, or how I raise my children – then I have no business pastoring a church.

Leaders must first be followers of Christ. Teachers must be teachable before Lord. Shepherds first must be sheep of the Great Shepherd in order to be faithful to their call.

These Christians in Ephesus, surrounded by idol worship and false religions outside the church, and faced with false leaders and false doctrine in the church, they stood firm in the faith. They contended for the gospel. And Jesus commends them. He says in v. 3...

[2:3] I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

He's saying, "I know this hasn't been easy. You've done hard work. But you've been faithful to hold my name high. Well done."

(Transition): Now, upon hearing this part of the letter being read aloud in their congregation on a Sunday morning, the Ephesians were probably feeling pretty good. Jesus has just commended them for their theological and doctrinal faithfulness.

If so, the next words in the letter sobered them. Which brings us to our third section of the letter...

III. The Corrections

[2:4] But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

After Jesus commends them, he now levels a strong rebuke. You have abandoned (or forsaken) your "first love", or "the love you had at the beginning."

Scholars debate the exact meaning here. Is Jesus talking about their love for God, or their love for one another? We're not sure – the text doesn't say. But we know those two loves are always connected.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is this: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all our soul and with all your strength. And the second greatest commandment is linked to the first – that we would love one another. If we don't love God, we won't love our brother. And if we don't love our brother, the Bible says that is evidence that we are not of God. The absence of one reveals the absence of the other.

This also shows us that biblical Christianity is more than being able to articulate the gospel, to know the difference in justification and sanctification. It's more than reading our Bibles together, more than expository preaching and being on guard against false teachers.

Biblical Christianity involves biblical love – a Spirit-empowered, selfless, supernatural love that comes from a transformed heart. No matter how biblically correct our teaching, without evidence of real heart transformation of love, there is no evidence of real Christianity.

So, after Jesus commends them for holding firm to Christ-centered doctrine, He rebukes them for having lost Christ-centered love. "You have forsaken (abandoned) the love you have at first", the love you once displayed when you first became Christians.

Remember the Ephesian culture. Surrounded by paganism. Surrounded by idolatry and emperor worship. Their neighbors were against them, their government was against them. Other religions were against them. It seems that they became so intent on fighting the good fight and contending for the gospel – the persecution outside the church and false leaders inside the church – that somewhere along the way, they forgot how to walk in humble, sincere love for Christ and love for one another.

No discernment, no doctrinal faithfulness, no tenacity to remain gospel-centered in our preaching, can take the place of Christian love for one another.

Well, what's the remedy? Jesus tells them in v. 5...

[2:5] Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.

Remember, and repent. Remember the good news of the gospel, not as a point to argue, but as the greatest act of love ever shown. Remember it was done for you, because of God's mercy and love for you. Remember that, and let it melt your heart afresh.

And then repent. Turn from the coldness of your heart. Turn from seeing your brothers and sisters as a nuisance, as an inconvenience. Turn back to the love of Christ, which will kindle in us the love for Christ, and a fresh love for His Church.

And notice what Jesus says about living that out. "And do the works you did at first." You see, repentance is more than an apology. Repentance is action, rooted in a changed heart. And part of that action is to "remember", to be sobered and consider how far you have fallen (by remembering where you were), as an incentive to get back to where you need to be.

In his commentary, Derek Thomas writes...

"This letter is a warning to those who can detect false doctrine a mile away, but whose hearts do not beat in tune with the love of God shown in the gospel. The danger is formalism. The cure is to repent...to re-learn the joy of love to God and to one another."

He says the danger is "formalism" – that means religious action without biblical affection. Gathering on Sunday or reading our Bibles just to check off the box. Going to community group because I have to. Instead, we will do these things with a different heart – a heart of gratitude and love that helps us obey with joy, to see these things as a wonderful means of grace that help me to grow and love Jesus more, while helping others grow and love Jesus more.

Jesus tells the Ephesians to repent, to turn from their sin, and to "do" again the works you did at first. Not just feeling different, but acting different – to return to the excitement and passion you once had for Jesus when He first saved you. Returning to the loving deeds you once joyfully did for one another, like being interested in each other's good, supporting each other in their trials, celebrating together, living out life together, working through offenses with love and forgiveness.

Because the truth is, a church marked by these things will also be growing in prayer, and worship and evangelism. A church that loves one another will love being together and will love being on mission together.

I think it's important that we stop and ask this of our own hearts:

-Am I more passionate, or less passionate about Christ now than when I first believed?

-Has my joy in Christ grown and deepened over the years, or has it diminished?

-Am I more engaged in worship on a Sunday morning and in community in my local church, or am I more disconnected?

We all have ups and downs in our spiritual walk. But if you've had a consistent downward trend, a slow leak in your boat, don't just lament. Repent. Don't be ok with a passionless heart. See Christ afresh. Ask Him to return to you the love for Him you had at first. And He is pleased to answer that prayer.

Consequences

And then, Jesus tells them what will happen if they don't repent, if they don't return to their love for Christ and one another...

[5b] If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Remember, the lampstand represents the church itself – the witness of the gospel, a church full of the Spirit, shining the light of Christ to the community. Jesus says if they fail to repent – to return to loving Him and loving one another – he would remove their lampstand. That means, they would cease to be a church.

And sadly enough, this warning came to pass. In the 7th century, the rise of Islam spread throughout Turkey, and the area previously known as Ephesus became predominantly Muslim. And that decline continues today. In 1970, there were close to 10,000 evangelical Christians in this area. Now, there are less than 500.

It would appear that the church of Ephesus of John's time, the Christians Paul helped establish, the Christians that Jesus Himself addressed, did not return to their first love.

Now let me say this to you, CrossPointe Church. I believe if Jesus were to write a letter to us, one of the things He would commend you on is your love for one another. I hear it from those who visit our church. I see it in how you serve one another and live life with one another. I see it in how

you love your families and your kids – you love Jesus, and you love one another. I can't tell you how thankful I am for that.

But just as we should never assume the gospel, we must never assume or take for granted our love for one another. Because the devil wants to plant division. He wants to create offense. He wants to spread whispers and gossip and grumbling toward each other.

But by God's grace and with God's help, don't let that happen. Instead, let us be quick to forgive, quick to serve, assume the best. As 1 Cor 13 teaches us, let us be patient and kind, not envying or boasting, not being rude, but being gentle. Enduring with each other, believing the best of each other. For that is what Biblical love looks like.

And while we will continue to value and promote sound doctrine, we must never love defending the gospel of Jesus more than we love Jesus. We must never be so intent on getting the doctrine of our songs right that we forget the truth we're singing, and who we're singing to.

Conclusion

And for this, we need Jesus' help. We need His grace and strength. So, Jesus ends His letter to the Ephesians with this beautiful promise...

[7] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

Those who will humble themselves and hear the correction of God's word and obey it, as illuminated and empowered by the Spirit, that person will be rewarded.

Jesus says "to the one who conquers", meaning the one who overcomes the temptation to compromise, the one who resists the pull of the world and stays faithful in the fight. The one who not forget their first love for Christ and for His Church, to him Jesus says, "I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is the paradise of God".

If they don't repent, they will cease to be a church. If they do repent, Jesus uses the picture of the Garden of Eden and promises they will enjoy restored fellowship with God and one another in this life, and the perfection of that fellowship in the life to come.

There is coming a day when we will all be perfectly reconciled, where there will be no more contending for the faith against false doctrine, because the truth will put an end to every lie. There is coming a day when all false religions and all deception and all sin and are destroyed, and only the pure truth of God's word remains. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my Word will never pass away."

And in that day, we will experience what God intended for His creation all along – perfect harmony with Himself and perfect harmony with one another under the perfect reign of Christ's kingdom.

Until then, let us stay faithful to His word AND faithful to love God and one another - so that the world will not only hear the truth gospel from our lips, but they will see the power of the gospel in our lives.

(Let's Pray)