

3. The loveless church

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When I was a brand new Christian in 1987, you couldn't give me enough sermons a day for me to get tired of them. When it comes to telling about the Gospel of Jesus Christ to others, it didn't matter to me whom I could talk to. Without a whole lot of Bible knowledge and tactfulness, I used to tell anyone and everyone whether they'd like to hear about Jesus or not. I don't believe that I have lost my first love and zeal for Jesus in last 17 years of my Christian walk with Him. But I became more tactful and more sensitive to the Holy Spirit's lead.

I've asked you guys to pray for me, before I left for the trip to Korea to visit my mother last week. I thank you for that. Your prayer has been answered in the Southwest Airline airplane to Los Angeles. Sitting next to me, a young teenage brother and sister who were on their way to their grandma's home in Spokane, WA. The young lady was in teary eyes, because she didn't like to fly and was scared. As the Holy Spirit led me, I told her that I have no fear of flying or even death because I have Jesus in my heart. That led our conversation to what Jesus have done on the cross for her sins. At the end of my explanation, I asked her if she would like to receive Jesus as her Savior and Lord. She said, "Yes." So, she repeated her sinner's prayer with me and she gave me a big smile at the end of prayer. She told me, "I feel so light and happy." I told her that you guys were praying for someone to come to know Jesus on this trip. That was her. She couldn't believe that the people in Calvary Chapel of Sahuarita were praying for her.

You see, it is not a part of Christian life to lose our first love for Jesus like the people of the church of Ephesus whom we are going to study today. It is a choice to lose or keep it going. Let's learn how not to lose our first love for Jesus from this church. If you have lost your first love for Jesus, let's learn how to get it back.

A. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH OF EPHESUS FROM JESUS

Rev. 2:1 "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:

1) The format of the letters to the churches

The seven letters are, with some minor exceptions, organized in the following general pattern:

1. A description of Christ derived from the vision of chapter 1
2. A commendation of the congregation
3. A rebuke for spiritual deficiencies
4. A correction for what is wrong
5. A promise to overcomers

2) The background of the city of Ephesus

Ephesus was a famous city in the ancient world, with an equally famous church. Ephesus was the city where Paul ministered for three years. Ephesus had the notable temple of Diana, who was a fertility goddess worshiped with immoral sex. This tremendous temple to Diana in Ephesus was regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was supported by 127 pillars, each pillar sixty feet tall, and it was adorned with great sculptures.

3) Finding a right church

If you have ever moved to a new community and had to select a new church home, you know how difficult it is to examine and evaluate a church and its ministry. Imposing buildings may house dying or dead congregations, while modest structures might belong to active and exciting assemblies on the march for the Lord. The church we think is "rich" may turn out to be poor in God's sight, while the "poor" church is actually rich in spirit.

Only the Head of the church, Jesus Christ, can accurately inspect each church and know its true condition, because He sees the internals, not only the externals. In these special messages to the seven churches in Asia Minor, the Lord gave each assembly an "X-ray" of its condition. But He intended for all the churches to read these messages and benefit from them.

A great theologian G. Campbell Morgan said, "The church of Christ persecuted has been the church of Christ pure. The church of Christ patronized has always been the church of Christ impure." That is why I am praying for persecution against the churches in America. It will strengthen her, revitalizes her, it will make her pure before the eyes of Jesus, and there won't be a half hearted Christian-pretenders.

4) Not just to the churches, but also to individuals

But the Lord was also speaking to individuals, and this is where you and I come in. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Churches are made up of individuals, and it is individuals who determine the spiritual life of the assembly. So, while studying these messages, we must apply them personally as we examine our own hearts.

5) Stella leadership

The Ephesian assembly had enjoyed some "stellar" leadership – Paul, Timothy, and the Apostle John himself. How easy it is for a church to become proud and forget that pastors and teachers are God's gifts who may be taken away at any time!

Some churches need to be cautioned to worship the Lord and not their pastor! I have seen some people who practically kissed the ground the Christian TV preachers walk around. Those preachers call themselves as "God's anointed," and tell people not to dare to challenge their authority. According to my Bible, we ought to test all spirits.

1John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

B. COMMENDATION

Rev. 2:2-3 "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.

1) How gracious of the Lord

How gracious of the Lord to start with words of commendation! To begin with, this was a serving church, busy doing the works of the Lord. No doubt their weekly bulletin was filled with activities.

2) Right on the money to be in the right doctrine with discernment

The Bible tells us that in the later days, people will heap up the teachers who would tickle their itching ears. They are the same people who would go from one doctrine to next emotionally exciting doctrines even though it has no biblical ground. To make the matter worse, they don't even check it against the Word of God and they accept it as is because of the fame of the false teachers.

2Tim. 4:3-4 For 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; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

However, the people in the church of Ephesians was right on the money to be in the right doctrine with discernment. They didn't get caught in emotional hypes. I am not saying that we should not get excited emotionally at all. But if that is the only thing without spiritual food from the Word of God, the congregation will be starved to death spiritually.

Eph. 4:14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting,

C. REBUKE

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

1) There is something dead wrong

Despite all the good in the Ephesian church, there is something dead wrong. They have left - not lost - their first love. They once had a love that they don't have anymore. The distinction between leaving and losing is important. Something can be lost quite by accident, but leaving is a deliberate act, though it may not happen suddenly.

2) But there is a hope for this though

But there is a hope for this though. Since they left the first love, they can always go back and find it from where they left it. As it was our choice of action to leave our first love for Jesus, it will be our choice to go back to our first love for Him.

3) What is "first love"?

So what is "first love"? It is the devotion to Christ that so often characterizes the new believer: fervent, personal, uninhibited, excited, and openly displayed.

It is not just the congregation of the church of Ephesus. We, too, are in the same situation. How many of us got so excited about Jesus when we got saved sometime ago? We couldn't wait to tell about Jesus to everyone we have come across. We couldn't read the Bible enough, we couldn't talk about Jesus enough. We were madly in love with our Savior and Lord. Do you still have that fervent love for your Savior?

I am sure that you've seen a couple who sit right next to each other in their car. There was an older couple driving right behind a truck that has a driver and his lady companion sitting very close to each other. The old lady sighed deeply and blurted out to her husband. "What did it happen? We used to sit so close to each other like them. How come we grew apart?" The husband glanced over to his wife and said, "I have not moved. I am still sitting on the same seat."

What ever had it happened? Did He make you to leave that first love? No, some of us chose to grew apart. It was not God's fault that you kept your distance away from Him. You did. As much as it was your choice to keep that distance, it is your choice to renew and rekindle that love back with Him.

4) Sometimes a focus on doctrinal purity will make a congregation cold

The Ephesians church was a doctrinally pure church. Sometimes a focus on doctrinal purity will make a congregation cold, suspicious, and intolerant of diversity. Just think of it: it is possible to serve, sacrifice, and suffer "for My name's sake" and yet not really love Jesus Christ! The Ephesian believers were so busy maintaining their separation false doctrines that they were neglecting adoration to Jesus. Labor is no substitute for love; neither is purity a substitute for passion.

They were doing Martha's work so much that they completely forgot to be like Mary (Luke 10:40-42).

D. CORRECTION

Rev. 2:5-6 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. But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

1) Jesus gives them a stern warning and it worked

Jesus gives them a stern warning. Unless they repent, He will remove their light and His presence.

Apparently, at least in the short term, the Ephesians heeded this warning.

2) Who are the Nicolaitans and what were their deeds?

They are complimented because they hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans. But who are the Nicolaitans and what were their deeds? The doctrine of the Nicolaitans is also condemned in Revelation 2:15, and in that passage is related to immorality and idolatry.

Rev. 2:15 Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

The Nicolaitans are the followers of that Nicolas who was one of the seven deacons first selected by the apostles. But they led lives of unrestrained indulgence.

Nikao-laos means literally "to conquer the people." Based on this, some point to presumptuous claims of apostolic authority and to the heart that sets up hierarchies and separates the "clergy" from the "laity." Perhaps the Nicolaitans fulfilled all these aspects, being both an idolatrous immorality and a presumptuous, hierarchical, "hidden mysteries" system typical of Gnosticism.

The Nicolaitans was a group of hench men for satan to destroy the first century church that was strong against persecution. When satan realized that he couldn't destroy it from outside with persecution, he brought up these people into the church to divide it.

E. PROMISE

Rev. 2:7 "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."

1) He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches

When an angel appeared to him, saying, "Your wife-to-be has conceived miraculously." The young carpenter from Nazareth could have said, "The engagement is off. Hasta la Vista, Baby" But, like the shepherds and the wise men, Joseph responded to the revelation given to him, thereby becoming an integral part of the earthly life of the Son of God. He had an ear and heard the voice of God. So, he became the earthly father of the Messiah.

After the Spirit told an old prophet that he would see the Messiah, no doubt Simeon was waiting to hear the rumble of chariot wheels and the footsteps of soldiers escorting the King of the Jews to the temple. Instead, he heard the cry of a baby in the arms of a sixteen-year-old girl. He had an ear and heard the voice of God. So, he got to hold the Messiah.

Because they had ears to hear and they heard it from the Lord. However, there was one group who knew about the birth of the Messiah, yet they chose "not to hear" and thus missed the Incarnation of the universe.

When the wise men arrived in Jerusalem and asked, "Where is Messiah to be born?" the Bible scholars were quick to answer, "Bethlehem." You see, they knew Bible prophecy like the backs of their hands. They knew the obscure verses in Micah 5 that foretold the place of His birth. The portions of Daniel 9 that foretold the time of His birth. The passages in Isaiah that prophesied He would be born of a virgin and sojourn in Egypt. They were the Bible scholars, the pastors, the elders, the note-takers. They had ears and they ignored the voice of God. These were people who, if we're not careful, we could be.

They knew the Word – and yet they never made the five-mile walk from Jerusalem to Bethlehem in pursuit of a personal, real encounter with God. And, gang, we are vulnerable to this same mentality. We can read the Book of Revelation academically. We can search for clues of typology. We can draw parallels to current events internationally – all the while missing the revelation of Jesus personally. Not so with John. When he heard a voice, he didn't say, "I know the Bible. After all, I wrote a good part of it." No, he turned to see – and saw Jesus in the process. It is my hope for all of us to see Jesus during the study of the Book of Revelation.

Calvary Chapel started her adventure with Jesus in early 1970 in California. Till this day, Calvary Chapels are famous for the well balanced teaching from the Word of God and over 900 Calvary Chapels are spreaded all around the world. We are hoping and praying that we may never lose our first love for Jesus by staying so close to the texts of the Bible.

2) The overcoming of the coldness of their hearts and lack of love

We usually think of overcoming in dramatic terms of overcoming sin and in spiritual warfare, but here Jesus seems to be speaking of the overcoming of the coldness of their hearts and lack of love marked by the leaving of their first love.

F. APPLICATIONS

1) We must examine our daily spiritual routine and put Jesus as our first priority.

If you don't spend time for reading the Bible each day and having daily devotion and daily prayer other than your prayer before each meal, you left your first love

with Jesus. I am not expecting you to find your time to spend with Jesus. You will never find time for Him, but you need to make time for Him. If you do that, the rest will fall into the right places and you will go back to your first love to Jesus.

2) We will be more sensitive to the Holy Spirit as we spend more time in the Word and prayer each day. That will lead our steps to the obedience in Him.

Many of us complain that we don't hear from God. In most cases, we don't hear Him, because we are busy doing things in our power or choose not to obey what He already told us to do.