

Restore Your First Love
Revelation 2:1-17
Key Verse: 2:4-5

by Dr. John Jun

"Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first."

Revelation chapters 2 and 3 are Christ's letter to the seven churches in Asia through Apostle John. At that time, the author of this book, the Apostle John was preaching the gospel when he was arrested by Roman Emperor Domitian. He was sent to the island of Patmos and forced to do hard labor. He went to a cave and prayed. There he saw a vision and wrote the Book of Revelation. So this book is the prison Epistle of the Apostle John. Here the seven churches were actual churches. However, these seven churches represent the Church of the entire world. We want to think about this passage in Revelation 2 in two parts: First, (2:1-7), The Lord's letter to the church in Ephesus. Second (8-17), the Lord's letters to the churches in Smyrna and Pergamum. As we study this passage, I pray that we may restore our first love for our Lord.

I. Christ's letter to the church in Ephesus (1-7)

What kind of city was Ephesus? Ephesus was the largest port city of Asia Minor. It was the trading and business center of Asia Minor. The temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, (Acts 19:35) was there. The people practiced Emperor worship and magic. So, Ephesus was a city of idol worship, hedonism and corruption. What did Christ look to the church in Ephesus? Look at verse 1. "These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands." Jesus is "he who holds the seven stars in his right hand" (1b). Jesus appeared to the churches as the Sovereign Lord. Christ rules over his church and the saints with love and power. How did he commend the church in Ephesus?

Verse 2a says, "I know your deeds, your hard work." Christ acknowledged their deeds of faith. In the church of Ephesus, there were many acts of faith done by first generation Christians. He also commended their perseverance (2c). In 1 Thessalonians 1:3, Apostle Paul said that we persevere because of hope. The reason we can persevere in spite of many temptations and hardships is because of our hope in Jesus' second coming. This postmodern atmosphere is like that of Sodom and Gomorrah. The secret of overcoming this atmosphere is to hold on to the hope of Jesus' second coming. Jesus commended the church in Ephesus for not tolerating false apostles (2d, 3, 6). Our community must be a community of love. At the same time, we must guard against bad influence from false apostles who hinder and destroy the Christian community. We should not follow evil trends of the time. At that time, false apostles (Nicolaitans) spread gnosticism and hedonism. This hindered gospel faith. However, the church in Ephesus exposed them and warned against their false teachings.

How did Christ rebuke the church in Ephesus? Look at verse 4. "Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love." Then, what does it mean that they have forsaken their first love?

First, they have forsaken their first love for God. They say the first love is pure and sincere. This is not the humanistic "eros" love. The Ephesian Christian community's love for Jesus was greater than that of today Christian community. Although they were gentiles, they experienced greater love of Christ through the Apostle Paul's sincere Bible study and they became men and women of God. They had kept this great love of Jesus in their hearts. It was their first love. How did we experience our first love? 1 John 3:16 says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers." When we know and experience Jesus Christ who laid down his life for us on the cross, we can have his burning love in us. How can we express our first love to Jesus? We also should lay down our lives for our brothers. (1 Jn 3:16b). Because of their fervent love for Jesus, they took care of God's flock. Because of their fervent love for Jesus, they endured hardships.

In Mark 12:29-31, a teacher of the law came to Jesus and asked about the greatest commandment. Jesus answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." At that time, Pharisees kept all the laws meticulously. Even though they said that they loved God and prayed regularly and praised God, the temperature of their love toward God was cold, and their hearts were far from

God. Jesus said, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Mark 7:6). In the West, people love others and sometimes even their spouses with their lips only. Their hearts are far from true love. So they divorce easily. We should love God not only with our lips, but with our hearts. When we sin, we must repent with contrite hearts and tears like King David. Then we can restore our love relationship with God. Jesus told us to love God with all our soul and with all our strength. When we love our 1:1 Bible students or coworkers, we can sacrifice time, money and pride for them. Moreover, when we love God, we should not spare our soul and our strength, not even our lives. Maybe we can love God once, but it is not easy for us to love God with all our soul continually for our lifetime. We have to make a daily decision to do so.

Second, to forsake one's first love means to forsake God's commandments. To love God is the first commandment. To love one's neighbor as one's self is the second commandment. (Mark 12:31). Jesus taught us that the first commandment demands a love relationship with God and the second demands a love relationship with our neighbors "Love your neighbor as yourself". We think we work hard for God, sacrificing our bodies and our time. However, we love ourselves more than anything else. Even when we make some sacrifices, it is our instinct to ultimately desire to keep our bodies whole and improve them. Jesus taught us to love others genuinely and secretly, and as consistently as we love ourselves. Jesus acknowledged that we love ourselves. In reality, those who mistreat themselves cannot love their neighbors. Only those who love and appreciate themselves are able to love others in the right way. How did Jesus teach us to love our neighbors? "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12). As Jesus says in this verse, we must do to others what we would have them do to us. Jesus said to Peter, "Do you truly love me more than these?" Then Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." (Jn 21:15) When I experienced Jesus' love at first, Jesus told me to feed God's flock of sheep with this love. In my early medical school days, because of my first love for Jesus, I invited all of my classmates to group Bible study. I divided them into 4 groups and taught them the word of God. Why do we have to love God with all our heart and soul?

First, because God is our Creator, and we are His creation. (Gen. 1:1) God is the origin of all things. He is our Creator. As children obey and love their parents, we must love our God with all our hearts because He is our Maker.

Second, because God is our Savior. (Jn 3:16). God sent his one and only Son Jesus to us when we were doomed to perish because of our sins. Jesus died on the cross to save us from sin and destruction. Moreover, He freed us from the power of death, which makes our lives miserable. Therefore, it is natural for saved sinners to love God with all their hearts and minds.

Third, because we live a happy and fruitful life when we love God with all our hearts. When God created man, he was very happy. God blessed man and gave him a mission to be fruitful, increase in number and fill the earth. (Gen. 1:28). God gave man a mission to bear abundant fruit. When we love God with all our hearts and make a deep love relationship with God, we become happy and bear abundant fruit (John 15:5).

What life direction did God give the Ephesus Christians? Look at verse 5, "Remember the height from which 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." In order to recover one's first love, one should realize how and why one has fallen from it. So, Jesus says, "Repent and do the things you did at first!" (5a). He means that they should restore their first love. This means they should restore their first love for their neighbors. What was the reason the Ephesus church lost her first burning love?

First, because the love between brothers grew cold in the course of exposing and punishing false teachers in the church. In the beginning, the church in Ephesus had a burning love toward God. (Acts 20:36-37). However, this love grew cold when arguments and division grew among Christians.

Second, because they did not renew it everyday. 5a says, "Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first." It is not easy to remember continually. We should renew everyday to remember always. It is just like the saying: "Out of sight, out of mind." As we feed a fire charcoal in order to maintain the fire, our love can cool down unless we fan it into fire everyday. Likewise, we should renew our burning love for Jesus everyday through God's word. Otherwise, our love for him will gradually cool down and become cold. Jesus said, "If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" (5c). This means that Jesus, who is the head of the church, will leave the church. I experienced the burning love of Jesus on the cross when I first

studied the Bible. I was willing to give my life for Jesus. When I gave up my career as a physician in order to be a UBF staff, my love for Jesus was strongest. But as time passed by, my love for Jesus grew cold. Whenever I repented and newly meditated on the love of Jesus on the cross, the temperature of my love again rose--sometimes from 70 degrees to 140 degrees

When I see myself, I am like the church in Ephesus. I too have forsaken my first love. I must repent and meditate on the love of Jesus and accept his love and restore my love again up to 212 degrees F. The Lord rebuked the church in Laodicea, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other. So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth." (Rev. 3:15,16) There is a movie titled, "Hot is Better." Our Lord also likes "hot". Is your faith lukewarm? If so, the Lord will spit you out of his mouth. Even if you are so hot to burn his tongue, he would like it. What was the conclusion of Jesus' letter to the Ephesian church? Look at verse 7. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." Jesus promised to give the tree of life which is in paradise to those who overcome by faith.

II. Letters to the churches in Smyrna and Pergamum (8-17)

Verses 8-11 are the letter to the church in Smyrna. Smyrna was a port city located in the north of Ephesus. It was protected by the Roman Empire because of a pledge of loyalty to Rome. So the place became the central location of emperor worship. Jesus did not rebuke this church, but only encouraged and commended them. Jesus appeared in a resurrection body to the church in Smyrna. They had struggled to keep their faith in the midst of afflictions and poverty(8). Jesus comforted them saying, "I know your afflictions and your poverty" (9a). Jesus told them that they were rich even though they were financially poor (9b). Jesus acknowledged their faithfulness and blessed their future. In Smyrna, there were many Jewish immigrants. So the place had very strong Jewish traditions and ideas. Many Jewish people persecuted Christians. In the midst of persecution, what direction did Jesus give to the Christians? Look at verse 10c. "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." What does it mean to be faithful to the point of death?

First, it means to be faithful even with a few things. In Jesus' parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30), the master recognized the two servants who doubled their talents from five and two talents to ten and four talents. "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things." If the servant who had received one talent worked and brought one more talent, he would have received the same recognition. In order to be a good and faithful servant, we have to be faithful even with a few things.

Second, it means to be faithful to the end. Even Judas Iscariot was faithful for the first two years. He faithfully served Jesus as the treasurer. But in his third year, he was not faithful and he betrayed Jesus.

Third, it means to be faithful even in adverse circumstances. Polycarp, the disciple of Apostle John, the Overseer of the Smyrna church was arrested because he didn't worship the Roman Emperor as God. He was about to be burned in the Smyrna amphitheater in AD 155. An executor asked him. "I will let you free if you confess the Emperor as God and deny Christ now." But Polycarp answered, "I served Christ as my king for 86 years. Christ never disowned me once. How can I disown him now?" He thanked God that he could become a martyr, and sang hymns while he was burning to death. He is a good example of being faithful to the point of death. Some of us have faithfully served God for the last 30 years or 50 years or for a lifetime. I pray that we can be faithful to the point of death.

Verses 12-17 are the letter to the church in Pergamum. What kind of place was Pergamum? It was located 60 miles north of Smyrna. It was the capital city of the Seleucid Dynasty right after the fall of Greece. In 133 BC as Syria merged with the Roman Empire, Pergamum played the role of the capital city of Asia. So, Pergamum was a center of religion and culture. There were Caesar's temple, Serapeum temple, the temple of Zeus and Dionysius and it was famous for hospitals and medical libraries. It was the city of idol worship. What did Jesus look like to the church in Pergamum? "These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword (12)" Jesus came as a judge to the Pergamum church where there was immense confusion. The city of Pergamum was a city of confusion, idol worship, corruption and pleasure seeking. Christ encouraged his servants who kept their faith in that atmosphere. Look at verse 13. "I know where you live--where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city--where Satan lives." Antipas was martyred in Pergamum. Because of his good influence, Pergamum Christians kept

their faith in the midst of extreme persecution. How did Christ rebuke the church in Pergamum? Look at verse 14. "Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: you have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality."

Though most Pergamum Christians were sincere in their faith, some followed Balaam's teaching. Balaam tempted the Israelites to worship idols and indulge in immorality in the desert of Siddim. Even though he couldn't directly curse the Israelites, because of his love of money, he tempted the Israelites to worship idols and practice adultery with Moabite women (Numbers 22-25, 31:8, 16). As a result, 24,000 Israelites were killed by God.

According to verse 15, Nicolaitan teaching was same as that of Balaam. Nicolaitan means 'swallowing the people'. This means that they swallowed the people with corrupted and immoral teaching. They claimed that the time of law was over, and people should live without the law. So they promoted lawlessness. They taught that believers could indulge in unlimited physical pleasure since they were already forgiven. Such teaching is comparable to hedonism in our time. Our times are badly influenced by hedonism, materialism and idol worship like Sodom and Gomorrah. As described in the later part of Romans 1 (Ro1:26-31), the world has become full of shameful homo-sexuality, every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity, envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. Love grew cold and people became lawless (Matthew 24:12).

We also live in a flood of bad influences. Even in America, which is known as a Christian country, in 2 states including Massachusetts, which is known as a most intellectual state, gay marriage is legally approved. In America, the divorce rate has reached 60%. Ironically, the divorce rate among American Christians is almost the same. This shows that Christians are being influenced by the world; they are not positively influencing the society. The bad influence of the world corrupts the church. The church in America must expose evil and keep genuine gospel faith like the church in Ephesus. How then may we not be tempted by Balaam's teaching? First, we have to repent everyday and keep gospel faith (16). Second, we must study God's word with an absolute attitude and live according to its teaching.

In conclusion, We have to repent and restore our first love everyday. We have to meditate on the love of Jesus on the cross and restore our burning love for Jesus. And we must love our neighbors as ourselves.