

RESTORE YOUR FIRST LOVE

Revelation 2:1-11

Key Verses: 2:4-5a

“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.”

In chapters 2 and 3, the glorified Jesus addresses messages to seven churches in Asia Minor. It is the only place in the Bible where the glorified Jesus speaks directly to churches. The church consists of those whom Jesus has purchased with his blood and called out from the world to himself. Jesus is the head; the church is his body. Jesus is the bridegroom; the church is his bride. Jesus is the good shepherd; we are his sheep. These biblical metaphors tell us that Jesus is the source of life and love and everything for his church. The church is very special to Jesus. These days, many church leaders in America are concerned about how the church should operate. Some want to apply business principles to the church, others a sociological framework, and still others, psychology. Some recommend programs for church growth. These approaches may be helpful. But basically, we should understand that the church is different from any other organization on earth. The church must listen to Jesus' words more than anyone's. As Jesus speaks to these churches in Revelation, he reveals different aspects of himself to each. He commends and rebukes churches distinctly. We need to understand his words to each church in their context. Then we can discover what Jesus' words mean to us. Today we will study his words to the churches at Ephesus and Smyrna.

The church at Ephesus was born by the Holy Spirit through Apostle Paul's ministry during his third missionary journey. Paul taught the words of God daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus for two years. There was such a great work of God that the whole city of Ephesus was stirred. All the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord (Ac 19:10). New churches were established, including the other six churches addressed in Revelation. Tradition tells us that Paul's successor in Ephesus was Timothy, who was followed by Onesimus. Later, Apostle John moved to Ephesus, together with Jesus' mother Mary, and shepherded the church. The Ephesian church had a rich history and was very influential. Jesus commends this church in significant ways. Yet, one thing displeased Jesus: They had lost their first love. We want to think about why. What made this such a serious matter? How could their first love be restored? What does this mean for us?

First, Ephesus, the mother church (1-7). Verse 1 begins, “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write....” Here the word “angel” literally means “messenger.” At that time the New Testament had not been canonized. Apostolic letters were circulated among the churches through messengers. Some scholars claim this messenger was a heavenly angel, others say he was a human messenger, and still others a personification of the church. But one thing is clear: the angel is a messenger whose task is to deliver this message to the church. What is important is that the glorified Jesus himself is speaking to the church. Jesus' message to all seven churches begins, “These are the words of him...” (2:1b,8b,12b,18b; 3:1b,7b,14b). Jesus' words are not mere human words, but God's words. We must listen carefully to his words and take them to heart. Jesus begins his message to each church by revealing a distinct aspect of himself which is significant for that church. To the Ephesians he is “him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands” (1c). This means that the glorified Jesus protects, provides for and guides the church's messengers and reigns over them. He

walks among his churches, observing their deeds and motives. He is not just far away, sitting on his heavenly throne and giving commands. He is present with his church to minister among us.

In verses 2-3, Jesus commends the good deeds of the Ephesian church. He begins by saying, “I know,” which is repeated ten times in chapters 2-3 (2:2[2],9[2],13,19; 3:1,8[2],15). Jesus knows the deeds and condition of his church. When we do good deeds, we want to be recognized and appreciated. When no one notices, we may feel sorry and wonder whether we should keep on doing good deeds. Remember that Jesus knows! We don’t need to advertise our good deeds; Jesus will eventually make them known. 1 Timothy 5:24b says, “...good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not obvious cannot remain hidden forever.” So, let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up (Gal 6:9).

Jesus’ evaluation of the Ephesian church was generally that it was very good. First of all, he commended their deeds, hard work and perseverance (2a). “Deeds” is a general term summarizing all that follows. “Hard work” means toil to the point of sweat and exhaustion. They were not spectators, but active workers who gave their hearts, minds and strength to serving Christ. When they faced hardships, they did not give up but pressed on and overcame them. We don’t know exactly what they did. But we can assume that they were dedicated to evangelism and discipleship in their city through Bible teaching and prayer. Ephesus was the center of worshipping the Greek goddess Artemis (Diana to Romans). This idolatry was extremely immoral and vile. Ephesus was also a center for emperor worship. In that environment, the church was engaged in spiritual warfare. Moreover, as the mother church for the province of Asia, they supported the local churches. Many people were coming who needed spiritual and practical care. The members welcomed guests warmly, shared the word of God with them, provided lodging and food, and even took them sightseeing. The Ephesian believers were also very discerning (2). They knew what was good and evil, right and wrong, true and false. They did not tolerate wicked people. They tested false apostles and found them to be liars. In this way they guarded the gospel and remained the pillar and foundation of the truth. They had been working hard, struggling for the truth, and enduring hardships for Jesus’ name for several decades and had not grown weary (3). Many people work hard to get rich or famous, but this church worked hard for Christ and his kingdom.

The Ephesian church was commendable in many ways. But one thing displeased Jesus. Let’s read verse 4: “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.” The word “forsaken” is a strong word, which can also be translated “abandoned” (ESV). They probably thought they were okay. But Jesus’ strong language indicates that there was something seriously wrong with them, especially their motive. We don’t know exactly why they had forsaken their first love. But we can try to understand. Perhaps, in their pursuit of sound doctrine, they had become legalistic, self-righteous and judgmental. This can cause grace and love to diminish. Furthermore, after being established as a church, they thought of themselves as a success. They might have focused on maintaining their membership and finances instead of loving Jesus, each other and lost souls. What is worse, they gradually fell under the influence of Ephesian culture. Ephesus had a huge international marketplace full of all kinds of luxury items—even Cleopatra shopped there. They also had entertainment, including Greek dramas and gladiator games. There were numerous temple prostitutes in the city whom the devil used to tempt believers. Living in that environment, Ephesian believers succumbed to the culture of idol worship. This makes love grow cold. The author John, in an epistle, says, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in them” (1Jn 2:15). On the outside the Ephesians served the Lord faithfully. But inwardly, their

spirit was different; their priority had changed; they had lost their first love for Jesus, love for one another, and love for lost souls.

Why did Jesus use such strong language, saying, “I hold this against you,” and, “you have forsaken the love you had at first”? It is because Jesus wanted an intimate, passionate union in love with them. Jesus had shown his love by giving his life as a ransom, dying on the cross for people’s sins. His love is limitless and unchanging. He wanted them to love him in the same way. It is like a marriage in which love should be reciprocal. If one spouse loves wholeheartedly, but the other is tepid and uncommitted, the loving one will be upset. Their marriage will not be happy or healthy. Jesus is our bridegroom and we are his bride. He wants us to love him as he loves us. As we love him more and more, we can have a happy, fruitful Christian life.

Jesus was very serious about helping them restore their first love. So, he said, “Consider how far you have fallen!” This implies that their love for Jesus had cooled significantly, though gradually. They probably did not realize this, like a frog in a pot of water on a stove. If the water had been boiling from the beginning, the frog would have jumped out. But if it warms up gradually, he feels good and comfortable. He becomes drowsy and is cooked. Jesus wants us to stop and think about how we loved Jesus at first. How did you love Jesus at first? Though everyone’s experience is different, the nature of “first love” is generally the same. It is pure, passionate, and joyful. There is no second thought or hesitation. No sacrifice seems too great, but rather a privilege. We feel that we can do anything for Jesus. When Jesus says, “go,” we go; when Jesus says, “stay,” we stay. This love compelled many in our church to go out as missionaries, sacrificing their careers and placing their futures in Jesus’ hands. God has blessed their love and faith abundantly.

As I prepared this message, I remembered the early days of marriage to Dervilla. We had nothing but our faith in Jesus and each other. I was a full-time shepherd, receiving constant training and little pay, and she found a job as a receptionist. We prayed earnestly and worked hard from early morning to late at night. Many UIC students came and went from our residence. We had spirited Bible studies and joyful eating fellowship. But at times food was scarce. Once, I looked at Dervilla and she was so thin. I felt ashamed. So, I scraped together the last few dollars we had and took her to an “all you can eat” buffet on Devon Avenue. During the meal, a metal screw was discovered in her plate. The waiter profusely apologized and gave us the meal free of charge. It seemed to be Jesus’ special love for us. This is one of many events in which we were comforted and could live as a humble shepherd family. Those were great days because of Jesus’ love for us and our growing love.

There is a saying that maintaining God’s blessings is harder than obtaining them. In the time of blessing, we should be more alert and struggle harder to please God. If we don’t, we will become complacent and lose our spirit. Then we become complicated and anxious. Has this happened? Honestly, I often feel overwhelmed by responsibilities. I assume that if I survive the next upcoming event, I will be okay. But what I really need is to restore first love for Jesus. Perhaps some of you feel the same. How can we? Jesus said, “Repent and do the things you did at first.” The word “repent” may sound harsh and burdensome to us. But this comes from Jesus’ genuine love. To “do the things you did at first” is not to become even more busy with tasks, but to renew practices that draw us into Jesus’ love: spending time in God’s word, prayer, evangelism, fellowship, etc. As for me, I have decided to study Revelation deeply, sharing Sunday messages regularly, as before. We all need to take this call to renewal seriously. Jesus warns, “If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place” (5c). If first love is not restored, a church loses Jesus’ presence. If Jesus is not there,

there is no life or spirit. The church withers and dies. Now we can see that the Ephesian church has disappeared. All that remains are dusty stones that attract tourists. We should take Jesus' warning seriously.

After a harsh rebuke, Jesus gave some more words of encouragement. He commended the Ephesian church for hating the practices of the Nicolaitans, which he also hated. The Nicolaitans abused grace in the name of liberty. They promoted self-indulgence and hedonism. Their teaching was like a poison that contaminated the pure gospel truth and spirit. Such teaching and practice cannot be tolerated. Jesus hated it, the Ephesians hated it, and so should we. This is another side of love. Romans 12:9 says, "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good."

Jesus concluded this letter in verse 7. First, he said, "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (7a). This phrase is repeated to each of the seven churches. The Holy Spirit is speaking this message to all churches, including ours. Then Jesus gave a promise: "To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (7b). In this context, the victorious are those who restore their first love for Jesus through sincere repentance. They grow in their union of love with Jesus and bear the fruit of a vibrant life with true joy and peace. They have eternal life in the glorious kingdom of God.

Second, Smyrna, the suffering church (8-11). Now Jesus speaks to the church at Smyrna through its messenger (8a). Jesus did not rebuke the church at Smyrna, as he did the Ephesians. The city of Smyrna was a harbor city, located about 35 miles north of Ephesus. It was a beautiful city with paved streets, a library and a gymnasium. It claims to be the birthplace of Homer, the Greek poet. It was a center of emperor worship, as well as the worship of Roman and Greek gods: Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite, and especially Cybele--the mountain mother of the gods. We don't know how the church in Smyrna was founded or grew. Presumably it arose during Paul's Ephesian ministry. During Emperor Domitian's reign, there was a fanatical zeal to worship the emperor. It was very difficult for this church to survive. However, they stood for the truth and refused to compromise. They loved Jesus and remained faithful to him. As a result, they were hated and persecuted. In the second century, John's disciple Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna. He was martyred for refusing to worship the emperor.

Jesus revealed himself to this church, saying, "These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again" (8b). Jesus is described as "the First and the Last" three times in Revelation (1:17; 2:8; 22:13). This means he is the eternal, infinite God, who already existed when all things were created and who will continue to exist after they are no more. Jesus transcends time, space and creation. Yet, amazingly, this eternal God became a human being who died for our sins and came to life again, destroying the power of sin and death. Jesus is the living God who has authority to give life. Hearing from this Jesus must have been a great comfort to the suffering Christians in Smyrna. This Jesus knew their afflictions and their poverty (9a). Sometimes when we experience hardships, we feel all alone and that nobody can understand us. But Jesus knows our sufferings and poverty very well. Though he knows everything, he may not comfort us with human sympathy. Rather, he turns our eyes to his spiritual blessings. He said, "...yet you are rich!" Though Smyrna was materially poor, they were spiritually rich. People think that poverty is bad. But it is not. It purifies our hearts and minds and helps us think about the meaning of life and eternal things. As our brothers and sisters in Venezuela have experienced, the time of material poverty can be a time of great spiritual revival.

Jesus also knew about the slander of those who said they were Jews but were not (9b). As we see in the book of Acts, whenever Paul preached the gospel, the Jews became hostile and opposed his

message. They even hired gang members to spread rumors. They accused Christians of cannibalism for celebrating the Lord's Supper, and of rebellion against the emperor for refusing to sacrifice to idols. They turned people's hearts against Christians and created a negative atmosphere for them. Jesus said they were, quote, "a synagogue of Satan" (9c). Satan is the father of lies and they were his children. Nevertheless, the believers in Smyrna were not deceived and stood on the truth. As a result, they would face even more persecution.

Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days" (10a). Knowing they would be persecuted; Jesus did not take it away. Rather he gave them strength to endure it. The devil would try to destroy the church. Yet Jesus would use it for good to test and purify his church. Though persecution may seem unending for those enduring it, Jesus limits it. After a short, intense ten days of suffering, Jesus would give them victory. In times of persecution, we should trust in Jesus, be patient and endure until he gives us the victory. Jesus encourages us, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown" (10b). Jesus concluded: "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death" (11). Victors are those who remain faithful even during persecution. They will not be judged but have eternal life. The city of Smyrna still exists and there are churches there.

As we begin the year of 2020, Jesus challenges us to restore our first love for him. Let's take his word to heart and pray to do so. Then this will be the most blessed year for all of us. We will continue to be a blessing to God's people both nearby and far away, and to lost souls on our campuses.