

DON'T LOSE LOVE THE MESSAGE TO THE CHURCH IN EPHEBUS

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REV 2:1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: ²I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. ³You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

REV 2:4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. ⁵Remember 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. ⁶But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

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 the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. NIV

I have entitled my sermon, "Don't Lose Love." This is the first of a series of sermons on the Seven Letters John wrote to the Seven Churches. The first letter is to the church in Ephesus. These churches were all in Asia Minor, a province of the Roman Empire, and are all mentioned by name in Revelation 1:11. I shall attempt to share what Christ, the Lord of the church, was saying to the churches mentioned, and, if I can, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, apply the teaching to our church and the church in general today.

Ephesus, though not the capital of Asia, was its first and most important city. It was entitled "lumen Asia," meaning, "the light of Asia." Ephesus was the major trading center of Asia, and was called, by scholars, "the vanity fair of Asia." Strabo, the ancient writer, called it "the market of Asia." The river that ran through Ephesus met the sea and formed one of the great harbors of the ancient world. Moreover it was the trade route where three important roads converged. The Apostle Paul stayed in Ephesus longer than any other place on his 3rd missionary journey, and was responsible for starting most, if not all, of these churches. Later, Timothy, Paul's "son" and co-laborer, was Bishop of Ephesus.

The Ephesians also had a great temple, built in honor of Diana, which most of Asia had contributed to build, and which many people came from the cities around to observe and to worship the goddess Diana. Perhaps they also bought the silver statues of the famous temple. Tragically, however, the temple was the work place of thousands of sacred prostitutes. Further the temple was a refuge for criminals who could not be

apprehended if they made it to the temple. Heraclitus, the great philosopher, called ‘the weeping philosopher’ said that Ephesus was the reason he wept.

Here is John’s introduction: REV 2:1 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: (v. 2) I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. (v. 3) You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.”

Clearly, Jesus is saying in these introductory words, “The Church belongs to me; I hold it in my right hand.” The obvious deduction is that the church does not belong to any member, any deacon or pastor, any clique in the church, or, for that matter, any religious or political or governmental agency. The church belongs exclusively to Jesus Christ the Lord. Barclay says that so long as the church submits to the authority of Christ it can never go wrong. Truly our safety and our security lies in the fact that Jesus holds us in His hand. Not just the church, he holds the stars also, that is, the elders of the church. The pastors too belong to Jesus. They are not their own, they are bought with a price. As are, indeed, all the church members.

His hand holds us all. In the Greek the meaning is that His hand surrounds us giving us absolute security. In John 14:28, Jesus says, “And I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish; neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.” The church, wherever it is planted, be it Protestant, Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox, or whatever, owes its very existence to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is His! And the people of God in that church, born again by His Spirit, are the ‘apple of His eye’ and in His right hand. We must recognize that and not get upset when another denomination doesn’t share our doctrine. There is but one creed, “Jesus Christ is Lord!” You may not agree with their practices or their doctrines, but if they know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord they are His also, and also in His Right Hand! Do you believe that? If you are a Christian yourself you must believe that. I remember an old Orthodox Romanian priest I met in Urzicheni, Romania. He mumbled something, and I asked my interpreter what he had said. My interpreter said, he quoted the scripture of Jesus saying, “Other sheep I have which are not of this flock.” I recognized immediately he was quoting the prayer of Jesus in the Gospel of John.

Not only does He have a good grip on all His people, He walks amidst the seven golden candlesticks: He is present in the church. Jesus is walking in this church today. He is here. Did you feel His presence when you entered? I did. I almost saw Him walking down this aisle to address His people. He entered the churches around us today and walked among His people. He walked down the aisle of the Old Regular Baptists today. He walked down the aisle of the Methodists today. He walked down the aisle of the Pentecostal church today. He walked down the aisles of all the other “Christian Churches.” He promised, “Where two or three are gathered together in my Name, there am I in the midst.” His name is Love, don’t miss Him. Jesus is Lord of every believer! Yes He is, and don’t you deny it.

The clear implication of His Presence is also in His words to the Ephesian Church: "I know your deeds." What a sobering implication! He knows me, He knows all about me, and still He loves me. He hasn't lost love. Whenever we meet He is here; whenever we come to Church, He is present: He sees all we do, He knows all we think, He searches our hearts and our souls and knows everything about us. There is not one thing that we have done that He doesn't know about. He knows all our deeds all week long. Like a young college student said in his testimony to other students: "I always confess every sin I do to God. He already knows what I have done; but it helps me to confess my sins and my weaknesses to Him, so that He can cleanse me. After all, He already knows what I have done." Jesus said, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the ends of the earth."

So then, when we lay down at night we do not have to fear, He is with us. When we arise in the morning we need not be anxious, He is beside us. When we go out into our day we need not be perplexed, He will lead us. "Lo I am with you always..." Praise God! But we do have to confess our sins when we do wrong. Then the blood of Jesus Christ will cleanse us from all sin, even as He promised. Jesus knows about us. We can't hide anything from Him. We should not try to hide anything from Him.

He knows our works. The good thing about the Ephesian Church was that Jesus complimented them about their works. Listen to what He says: REV 2:1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: (v. 2) I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. (v. 3) You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

Having complimented them for their works, He then says: REV 2:4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

I. THE EPHESIAN CHURCH PUT WORKS ABOVE LOVE.

I don't know how this happened, but I know it happens to other churches. When a church (or an individual) loses the joy of salvation, they become judgmental replacing grace with law, and love with creed. They are still Christians; but they have replaced joy with duty, so that service becomes a chore to be done and not a joy to be shared. God is Love. He is described in the Old Testament by the words Loving Kindness; He is called Love (Agape Love) in the New Testament.

Theology fails in trying to describe the nature of God, but a little boy got it pretty close. The teacher asked the pupils to tell the meaning of loving-kindness. A little boy jumped up and said, "Well, if I was hungry and someone gave me a piece of bread that would be kindness. But if they put a little jam on it, that would be loving-kindness."

Not only does God have the nature of Love, the Church must also have that Nature as well. Paul described it well in I Corinthians 13, probably better than anyone else; but Jesus showed it when He died on the cross for our sins, the Righteous for the unrighteous, the Just for the unjust, the Holy One for the unholy ones.

The minister was retiring, and had delivered his last sermon from the pulpit where he had preached many years. One of the faithful members stopped as she went out the door and asked, “Do you know what is the most important thing you said in all these years?” “What was that?” the minister inquired, so he might learn of one way he had helped someone. “You told us we cannot do anything to get God to stop loving us!” was the quiet reply. The most important thing that you can learn in life is that God never stops loving you!

The Ephesian Church hated sin, hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans, and that was good, unless hatred for sin became hatred for the sinner, or even extreme judgmentalism for the sinner. In most of his letters Paul lists the sins of the culture of his day, but he never labels individuals. We must be careful to call sin sin, and not to whitewash that which God condemns. But we must remember we too are sinners, saved by the loving-kindness and grace of a Loving God.

The Nicolaitans were a sect whose teachers had entered the church teaching the members that since they were saved, nothing was sin against them. Therefore adultery and other sexual sins were not only acceptable but were good for them. Obviously this went against the ethical teachings of Jesus and the Apostles who taught that the Gentile believers were not to eat things strangled or things that had not been bled sufficiently, and to abstain from all sexual sins.

The interesting point, however, was this: You can be right with your works, right with your creed, and wrong with God by Losing Your Love, your First Love.

II. PERHAPS THIS FIRST LOVE WE CAN LOSE IS OUR LOVE FOR THE LOST. HAD THE EPHESIAN CHURCH PUT WORKS ABOVE LOVE FOR THE LOST?

The story is told that one day Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, visited a prison and talked with each of the inmates. There were endless tales of innocence, of misunderstood motives, and of exploitation. Finally the king stopped at the cell of a convict who remained silent. “Well,” remarked Frederick, “I suppose you are an innocent victim too?” “No, sir, I’m not,” replied the man. “I’m guilty and deserve my punishment.” Turning to the warden, the king said, “Here, release this rascal before he corrupts all these fine innocent people in here!”

We can get so caught up with the work of the Church that we forget the purpose of the Church: To seek and to save that which was lost. The Ephesians were doing all the

right things, perhaps, except one. They were too busy defending orthodoxy to tell people the story of Jesus; too busy condemning the Nicolaitans to speak about Salvation; too busy testing the fruits of others than growing fruits for Christ. It is so easy to do that. I remember one man I knew who said rather nonchalantly, "I can't judge others but I can test their fruits." Can we now? Jesus indeed said, "By their fruits ye shall know them." But He also said, Judge not that ye be not judged." It seems to me that instead of getting into judgmentalism about whether others are or are not Christians, we should be knocking on doors, inviting others to the Savior, and telling the story of Jesus. Let us not Lose our Love of souls, which perhaps the Church at Ephesus had done.

III. DON'T LOSE LOVE; BUT IF YOU HAVE LOST LOVE YOU CAN REGAIN IT AND, BY ALL MEANS, SHOULD!

(v. 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. (v. 6) But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

(v. 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. NIV

Jesus tells the Ephesian Church what it needs to do to regain the Love they have Lost. He does not want them, or us, to Lose Love, but He tells us how to get Love back again. There are Just 3 little words—Remembrance, Repentance, and Restoration. He gives us and the Church at Ephesus the 3- R's.

A. REMEMBER SAYS JESUS. What are we to remember? We are to remember the HEIGHT from which we are fallen. When you leave love you are fallen from a very Great Height indeed. And the way to gain that love back comes from Remembering. I remember when I was saved as a college student of 17 years of age. God's Spirit dealt with my soul, telling me I was lost and in need of a Savior. No one had ever showed me the way of salvation. God sent a young man to me who told me that I needed to receive Jesus into my heart as my Savior. Then he invited me to do so.

The week before this visit I had been miserable, seeking God, praying each night, but my prayers went no higher than the walls and the ceiling above me. But when he told me the story of Jesus, and invited me to invite Jesus into my life, and I did, a joy came into my life so great that it changed my entire being. The Light of Jesus lit up my dark soul with a light brighter than the sun. Everything was different. The moon upon the mountains was purer and brighter than before. The stars in the sky were blinking with joy. I felt like Plato's man in the cave who suddenly had the great stone rolled away and now stood in the sunlight of love and freedom. I wanted to take the whole world into my arms and present them to Jesus. What joy! And I really haven't lost that joy; although it is a bit different. But when I remember, even now, I experience that newness of joy.

Jesus says Remember!

B. THE NEXT WORD IS REPENT. That word, metanoia, means to change your mind, to have another mind instead of the old mind. In Romans 12:2, the Apostle Paul says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Repentance means that we renew our minds, and bring them back to the place they once were. But repentance also means a sorrow, a Godly sorrow, for the failure we have made in not doing so. When we remember our First Love, when we repent for leaving it, we are well on our way to the final word: Restoration.

This important Church at Ephesus was in real danger of becoming a social club, another church without a Savior. Jesus gave them an option – Return to your Love, or lose your Candlestick. To get back to Christ they had to Remember and to Repent.

C. RESTORATION. Don’t lose love – but if you do, remember and repent. This is Christ’s restoration for this church and for you: 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 the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. NIV

The promise of Jesus is Eternal Life and Eternal Love. Don’t Lose Love, but if you do *Remember, Repent*, and you will find *Restoration*. Amen.