

***All Things New: Remember Your First Love!***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***Isaiah 58:1-11a; Mark 4:21-23; Revelation 2:1-7***

Our final Scripture reading today is from Revelation 2:1-7. May God bless the reading of this portion of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “[Jesus says,] “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: 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. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. 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. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 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.””

Letter writing seems old-fashioned. We text everybody. If we’re quaint, we still use email. But sitting down and writing a letter by hand, with ink and paper? Seems way too time consuming, not to mention expensive at 55 cents just to mail a letter these days. Most of the snail mail is garbage – advertising, pleas for money, you know the deal. But I pay attention to a handwritten note, a genuine, honest-to-goodness letter. It stands out in a sea of junk. It means a great deal because someone went to some time and effort to make it happen. It shows they care.

Over the next several weeks, we’ll study the letters Jesus wrote through John to the seven churches in Asia Minor, part of modern-day Turkey. The seven churches represent the whole of the church universal, and the problems they face are universal too. We’ll see concerns and encouragement that speaks to the modern church. You might find some of them challenging; you might find it difficult to accept some of their ideas. But just as a friend reaching out to us with a letter is a blessing, so too are these letters a blessing from Jesus, who so loves the church that He sent these letters so that His church would thrive in the midst of troubled times.

Today’s letter is to the angel of the church in Ephesus. Last week we learned the angel represents the church in the spiritual realms. Angels are God’s messengers and spiritual protectors, and the letters are addressed to the angels because these are not just matters of minor importance. They have spiritual, eternal consequences.

Jesus starts by introducing Himself as “him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.” The seven stars are the seven angels of the churches, and the seven golden lampstands are the churches themselves. Jesus is confirming His identity, but it’s more than that. He’s holding fast to the angels; He walks among the churches. He is with us in our struggle. He is in the midst of our situation. Jesus is not watching everything go down from afar. He assures us that whatever is going on, he knows about it.

Jesus has a lot of praise for the church in Ephesus. Ephesus was the center of the worship of Artemis. The city was a hotbed for mysticism, new religions, and magical arts. You might remember from Acts how the artists there started a riot against Paul because they were afraid Christianity might destroy the lucrative business they had selling religious trinkets to the masses.

It was a hard place to be faithful, yet in many ways, they were. They were doing good works; they put a lot of effort into them, and they persevered through trying times. We don't know all their hardships, but the fact that they hadn't grown weary tells us they were strong in faith and kept going despite the difficulties of ministering in a totally pagan culture.

They also loved proper theology, which Jesus commends. They didn't take wickedness lightly and tested those who came to them with false teaching. Ephesus welcomed every faith, and there were plenty of false teachers claiming to be apostles, offering to teach "the secrets of Christ" for a fee. The Ephesians saw right through these guys and kicked them out.

They were strong when it came to doctrine. Yet the Pharisees loved doctrine too, and debated the finer points of it all the time, yet Jesus condemned them for their lack of love towards others; He attacked the loopholes they made in the law for their own gain. Like the Pharisees, Jesus has something against the Ephesians: They have forsaken their first love.

Paul's letter to Ephesian church a dozen years back mentioned that was encouraged to hear about their strong faith and their love for all the saints. Their strong faith wasn't in question now; what they'd lost was their love for the saints. This was a group once known throughout the church as having deep and tender love for each other and for all the believers everywhere. They still were devoted to God, still trusted in Jesus, still kept right doctrine. But they had lost the love for Jesus and His people. Dry, cold religion was seeping into this once-warm congregation.

This was a huge misstep for them, a catastrophic one. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Your love for one another, for all the saints, was so well-known that it was lauded by the apostles as an example for everyone else. Now it's nearly gone! So Jesus tells them, "repent and do the things you did at first." Go back to what you were doing at the beginning when your hearts were full of love for Jesus and grace towards one another.

It's so serious that Jesus warns them: if you don't turn around, "I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." The church will be brought down by God Himself. It will stop shining as a lighthouse for the Kingdom of God; it will come to nothing. We don't know if they turned around for a time or not, if God left their light in place for a while still. But God does remove His light when His people become inward focused and lose their love.

Jesus does go back to praising them. He says, "You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." We don't know the exact practices of the Nicolaitans, but we know something from the other cults they are grouped with. Everyone knew that Jesus' death freed them from the condemnation of the old law. They now lived under grace. But these folks took it too far and said that the law didn't matter at all, and so they enticed people to sin. They argued that if God had forgiven them their sins, why not sin all the more so that the forgiveness would be that much bigger? The apostles condemned this way of thinking, and here Jesus does too.

Jesus gives a call to His people, one He repeats in every letter to every church: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Not everyone will hear this message and follow it; it’s harsh. Some won’t hear at all; others will think it is too hard or blow it off. But some will take the warnings to heart, be grieved at what they’ve done, and genuinely repent and change. Jesus is saying, “May you be the one to hear the Spirit speaking and obey.”

And Jesus ends the letter with a promise: “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” The reference here is to the Tree of Life back in Genesis 2 and 3, where God plants the tree in the garden of Eden. It will grant eternal life to those who eat from it. Adam and Eve and all of us lose access to the tree through our sin. But the tree has not gone away; God will restore it in His Kingdom, and all who trust in Jesus will have the right to eat from it, to have the everlasting life Jesus promised.

Now we’re going to step into the letter ourselves. We’re going to take these praises and warnings and apply them to us, in our situation, in our church. I’m not going to try and sugarcoat any of it, but let’s see if we can’t personalize Jesus’ message so that we see where we’re succeeding and where we’re failing.

The first bit I want to tackle may not be the most important, but in our current cultural climate we have to address it first: *God hates sin with holy passion*. It might sound weird to hear the word “hate” coming out of Jesus’ mouth about the practices of the Nicolaitans, but it does. In Luke 14:26, Jesus says, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple.” Jesus just means that our love for Him should be so strong that our love for others looks like hatred in comparison. Jesus teaches us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. He never teaches hatred of others, not ethnic or racial or social groups.

But Jesus hates sin. God cannot sin. What He does is perfect, and He cannot go against His own perfection. To sin is to do something fundamentally at odds with God’s nature and purposes and will. When we sin, we reject God’s ways for our own, making ourselves into our own little gods, determining our own truth and our own right and wrong. God despises sin because of what it does to us, and He despises it because it substitutes lies for the truth; He hates it because it corrupts us and ultimately not only hurts us, it hurts the rest of His creation as well.

We have heard it said, “Love the sinner but hate the sin.” I’ve also heard it said that since you can’t separate sin from sinners, it’s impossible to do it. But God does it. We should always default to loving the sinner, but we must hold sin out as reprehensible, as awful, the killer of the mind, body, and soul. It is so corrosive, so insidious, so dangerous, that if we saw it for what it is, we would run from it as if it were a deadly cobra or a black widow spider.

Do we hate sin enough? Michigan is banning many vaping products and e-cigarettes because of the dangers of it. Believe it or not, Michigan is still one of three states where it is illegal for an unmarried couple of the opposite sex to live together. We also can’t protect ourselves from the dangers of unlicensed lemonade stands, because those are illegal too. Point is, we make laws against things we think are harmful or immoral. We’re willing to say, “You can’t do that,” because not only we benefit, but society benefits when we follow certain rules.

If God says something is toxic to our souls, shouldn't we be willing to say, "Sin is evil?" We can never *make* someone stop sinning, and we always need to temper our message with grace. But God hates sin because it destroys our relationship with Him, it destroys our relationships with others, and eventually, it destroys us. To hate sin is to love others, because no one who truly loves others wants them to experience the horror of sin's deadly grip.

That leads us into the other key subject of the passage: *we need to remember our first love – Jesus, His saints, and those who may yet become saints*. God's first priority is love, grace, and forgiveness. He is mercy and lovingkindness. As Christians, our call is to practice the two great commandments: to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Everything else hinges on how well we do those two things. As much as the Ephesians did good works for the Kingdom, as much as they stood firm in faith despite opposition, as much as they fought the evil of the Nicolaitans, they abandoned their first love.

There are two questions here for us, important ones, probing ones. The first is this: *has Jesus ever been our first love?* You might be offended by that question. *Pish-posh! Of course I'm a Christian!* I'm not asking if you think Jesus was God's Son, or if you think you're saved, or if you've prayed a prayer asking Jesus to forgive you. What I'm asking is, has Jesus ever been your first love? Has there ever been a point in your life where you've thought, "I want to live my life for Jesus"? Has there ever been a point where you said to Jesus, "I surrender my life to you...where You go, I'll go, where You stay, I'll stay, when You move, I'll move"?

I want us to let go of all our illusions about what it means to be a Christian, because to be a Christian is not to believe in God. (James tells us in his letter that even the demons believe that and shudder at it!) To be a Christian is not to believe all the right things about Jesus – the Ephesians did that well. To be a Christian is to be a follower of Jesus, His disciple, to surrender to Him in a way that He gives you your marching orders as your commanding officer. To be a Christian is to desire to be like Jesus and to obey Him the rest of our lives, not because we are very good at it, not because we are worthy or deserving of Him, but because we know He gave His life for us that we would be saved, that we could belong to Him and enter into His Kingdom.

A key sign of the love of Jesus is to love His saints that make up the true church and to love the people that could someday become saints, those people who need to hear the gospel that they might turn from sin and become followers too. If Jesus is your first love, you desire more than anything your friends and relatives to know Him and to be saved. You want the guy on the street and the gal in the car next to you to know His love. And you do things that show that love to others, whether serving at a soup kitchen or working for a non-profit or serving little kids that need love, because you know it's so little in comparison to the love God has shown you.

Parents and grandparents can teach you the faith, they can teach you the truths of the gospel, but they can't make you believe it, and they can't make you disciples. Only you can do that. If it's never mattered to you that others know you're a Christian, where you stand, if you've been happy to hold off Jesus at a distance, if you've never really cared if your co-worker or neighbor was a believer, not that you just didn't know how to reach out to them but you never really cared, if the people in the church were a necessary evil and not people you learned to love as your brothers and sisters, you may never have really become a follower of Jesus.

And if Jesus hasn't ever been your first love, your first priority, it doesn't mean you've doomed. You're here today. God is giving you the opportunity today to hand over your life and to live for Him. Until you're in the ground, it's not too late to make Jesus your first love, your first priority over all, your everything. But that needs to happen. Make that step today.

So the follow-up question is, *is Jesus your first love now, shown through your love of others?* This is something where we have to go home and examine ourselves. We might say He is. Do our hearts and minds and actions all go together to show that it's real? The Ephesians did, once, love Jesus excellently. They lost it in the midst of staying true in a devilish city. They knew all the right words, but they had lost their love of Jesus in the midst of it.

There is an ebb and flow to our love of God. Some seasons, it seems God is close and it's easy to pray; other times, things are tough and it doesn't seem like our prayers are answered and the temptations to sin are really attractive. That's not what we're talking about. If you're crying out to God in the midst of those hard times as best as you can, you haven't lost your love; you're trying to hold onto that love in the midst of the madness this world is throwing at you.

The question is more, do your actions currently show that Jesus is Lord of your life? What's taking up your time and thoughts? Are you making Christ a priority on a regular basis? It's tough, I know. So many other things are vying for our attention. But friends, this is what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus. It doesn't mean that we give up our jobs and families and school and sit around waiting for Jesus to come back. It means that we integrate our faith into all of those things, so that it's part and parcel of our days.

I'll be the first to admit that I don't know how to answer that question some days. Back in high school, I was wearing Christian T-shirts every day to give people the opportunity to talk about faith. I went to Russia while I was engaged because I believe Jesus told me to. I pursued seminary and ministry because I believe I'm called to do those things. I believe we're here in Metro Detroit to spread the gospel. But I have to check myself every day because every day, we are in a war against the flesh, a war against everything in this world that wants us to quit believing, to quit following. Some days I win; some days I lose. But I am determined that in those places I have attempted to de-throne Jesus with my own ways, I am going to let Him have control. I encourage us all to do the same.

And since this letter is addressed to the church, we have to understand that it's a group responsibility too, not just personal. Do we, the people of CrossWay, show that Jesus is our first love by the way we love others? In some ways, yes, I believe we do. We definitely care for one another; we check on each other, give rides to each other, help in hard times. Some of us went out to try and help CrossWay reach more people last weekend at the North Gratiot Cruise. But do we do those things enough to say it's our habit? Are we faithful in meeting together around the Word, not just Sunday mornings but during the week? Are we together looking for ways to bless the community to show them God's love? We must work together to make sure we do.

Next week, we'll hear Jesus' words to two more churches. Until then, let us remember our first love and show that love by caring for one another and the people God has put in our midst.