

Abandoned Your First Love

In the name of the First and the Last, the Living One; who was dead, and is alive forever, dear friends in Christ: The season of Lent is a time for us to look inward, applying God's Holy Word to our lives so that we may reflect with sorrow upon our sins. We do this not simply to wallow in shame and make ourselves miserable; but rather, it's by seeing more clearly our desperate need that we come to a greater understanding of *why* our Savior was sent to suffer and die for us, and from that to an even greater joy in knowing the forgiveness and salvation he earned for us because of his infinite love. Say it another way: the more clearly we see the truth about ourselves, the more amazing and dear the Gospel becomes to us. And the more we treasure and hold to the Gospel, the firmer will be our foundation of faith and the more Jesus Christ will transform us through its power to live in and reflect God's love.

So it's for our spiritual health that we spend these forty days before Easter preparing ourselves to be raised with our Lord to new heights of faith and faithfulness by first descending with him into the dark depths of our fallen state.

This year to help better see ourselves in the light of God's Word, I thought it would be good for us to consider the letters of the Lord Jesus to the seven churches of Asia. That's the ancient name of the region that makes up most of the western portion of what we call Turkey today. These letters were dictated by the Lord Jesus to St. John while he was exiled on the island of Patmos – which is little more than a rock sticking out of the sea about thirty miles off the Turkish coast. John was imprisoned there for his witness to the Gospel; and it was while he was there that he received the series of visions from the Lord that are recorded for us as the biblical book of Revelation, part of which are the seven letters I've mentioned.

These letters follow a similar pattern. First the Lord Jesus identifies himself in a way that indicates his relationship to the churches. For example, this evening we heard the Lord call himself the one "holding the seven stars in his right hand." In context, it's a symbolic way of saying that he upholds, controls, and cares for the churches. He holds them in his hand, guarding and treasuring them like precious gems, as it were. After the introduction in each letter, there usually follows a word of praise recognizing some outstanding quality or virtue the particular church displays. That's always followed by a word of rebuke pointing out something that the Lord sees in the church that needs to be changed. And finally, in each letter, there is a word of promise and encouragement.

It's important that we bear in mind that these letters were originally addressed to real churches – each with its own strengths, weaknesses, mix of personalities, and peculiar situation. That being said, we also recognize a certain universal and timeless quality to letters, because all the challenges they faced have been faced by many other churches (and individuals) in the two thousand years since the letters were written. In that sense, the seven churches are representative of all Christian churches. As such, the letters contain words of encouragement and correction that apply to all.

The first letter is to the church at Ephesus. In the first century, Ephesus was a city of about a quarter million people. It was a fairly important center of trade and culture. It was best known for its magnificent temple dedicated to the Greek goddess Artemis (whose Roman counterpart is Diana) Just to give you an idea of its size, the Parthenon on the Acropolis in

Athens would have easily fit inside this temple four times. The great evangelist St. Paul founded the first Christian congregations in Ephesus during his third mission journey, somewhere around AD 54. There he set up a temporary headquarters, spending a total of three years in the city teaching people and preparing pastors and teachers to take his place when it came time for him to move on. Thus Ephesus became major hub of the spread of the Gospel as the people Paul taught radiated outward to the surrounding areas. Some years later, no less a dignitary than St. John the apostle became the most venerable Christian resident of Ephesus – and, according to tradition anyway, he came there with Mary, the mother of Jesus – whose care and protection was entrusted to John by Jesus while he was on the cross.

So the Christian church at Ephesus enjoyed the rare privilege of receiving instruction from two men who, between them, wrote 18 or 19 of the New Testament's 27 books. If ever a church should have had been founded on God's Word, it was this one. So it's no surprise that in his letter to the church, the Lord lavishes on it some very high praise. Jesus tells them, "I know your deeds, your hard work, and your perseverance." Would that we all might hear such approval from the Lord.

Specifically, he's pleased with their careful discipline with respect to both doctrine and moral behavior. With respect to the latter, he says, "You cannot tolerate wicked men"; and later he says that they "hate the practices of the Nicolaitans." The Nicolaitans were people who believed that since Christ died for our sin, and because we were now freed from the curse of the Law, that we no longer have any obligation to live according to it. They were lax on questions of sexual morality, adopting pretty much an "anything goes" attitude. They really gave Christianity a bad name – and so the Ephesian church was right to reject them and run them out. The Ephesian Christians understood that Christ calls us to live according to the Spirit rather than the sinful flesh, and they would not tolerate in their midst anyone who claimed to be a Christian but lived in open and unrepentant sin. Likewise, they had no use for false doctrine. It seems that some men came to them claiming to be apostles of Jesus and peddling a number of deceptive teachings. The Ephesians recognized something wasn't right, examined what they were saying in the light of God's Word, and showed them to the door too. Paul had warned them that false teachers would come, and they were ready and knew what to do. That same warning applies today: Satan is always trying to get in to twist and distort the Gospel message. That's why it's necessary in every church for people to be grounded firmly in God's Word so that they can test, challenge, and approve what their pastors and teachers are saying. The Ephesians did this well.

In addition to these two high compliments, the Lord gives this church yet another word of praise for their record of standing fast in times of persecution. We know from the book of *Acts* that there were in Ephesus a number of people who were resentful toward Christians. Already in Paul's day they had stirred up a lot of trouble. Now, some forty years later, things had gotten worse. But the Ephesians were unshakable: despite hardships, arrests, confiscations, torture, and threats of death, they refused to give up their allegiance to their Lord.

So they seemed to have it all together: they were zealous about correct doctrine, tight on moral behavior, and they proved themselves willing to suffer for the sake of the truth. Outstanding. You may wonder, what could be wrong in a church that had so much going for it? More than you might guess. I suspect it was with much sadness that the Lord Jesus told them that despite all these good points, "You have abandoned your first love."

"*Abandoned your first love*": there's a lot of controversy about what Jesus meant by those words. Many (perhaps most) theologians think that it refers to the first Christian love that

was shown by the Ephesians in their dealings with one another. The thought is that when the Gospel first came to them, there was initially a tremendous outpouring of compassion and care for others evident in the church as, under the guidance of the Spirit, the members shared their possessions and looked after one another. But that now, as the church had become more settled and institutionalized, that first love had grown weary and cold. They'd lost their first enthusiasm – that fire of the Spirit that fills the newly converted, and they'd fallen into a systematic routine of organized charity that led them to be apathetic and unfeeling toward each other.

Now, I'll grant that that's a possible understanding of the criticism Jesus has for them. It's certainly true that churches can fall into such a pattern of behavior. But because Jesus specifically commends them for their tremendous deeds and works, it's better to think that he has something else in mind here – something more foundational.

We have to ask, what is the *first* love of a church? The Scriptures tell us that as Christians, we love one another because he first loved us. That is to say, our love for one another is *secondary*. It's the *result* of having received the love of God in Christ Jesus. This love is made known and given to us in the Gospel: the precious truth that God loved the world so that he gave his Son – gave him to be tortured and sacrificed as the atonement for the sins of the world. That cherished truth itself, the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in the all-sufficient death and resurrection of Jesus, has got to be the first love of any Christian church.

And strangely, it always seems to be the first thing that slips away from a Christian church. Like water dribbles away when you try to hold it in your cupped hands, so the pure Gospel is extraordinarily difficult to hang on to. The reason for this is that there is always a tendency for people to want to add something of their own to the Gospel of grace. The idea of being helpless with respect to our salvation and totally dependent upon the mercy of God doesn't sit well with us. No, it deeply offends us. We want so much to be worthy of God's grace. So we always try to find something about ourselves that we can believe merits the attention and love the Lord has for us. And since we know we cannot find it in ourselves *before* our conversion to faith, because then we were lost and dead in sin, we naturally look for it in what we do for the Lord *after* receiving the Gospel. "Now that I'm a Christian saved by God's grace, here are the things I have to do, here are the expectations, here are the standards" – whatever they happen to be.

Please don't misunderstand me. We expect a person who becomes a Christian to experience a change of behavior for the better. The mistake made so often is thinking that the change in behavior is what makes or keeps you a Christian. If you make that mistake (and we all love to do it) you've *added* something to Gospel. You're no longer completely dependent upon what Christ did for you; now it's Christ's work *plus* your part. But you see, if there's even the slightest component that belongs to you, then it's no longer solely the grace of God in Christ Jesus that saves you – and you have effectively thrown the Gospel away. You've abandoned a Christian's first love.

Paul complained of this exasperating phenomenon years earlier when writing to the churches of Galatia. He said, "I'm astonished that you are so quickly deserting the One who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no Gospel at all. ... I would like to learn one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law [your effort], or by believing what you heard [the Gospel]? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" Our human desire to add something to the Gospel always destroys it.

This can be so subtle. Some time back I heard one (non-Lutheran) local pastor remark, “I proclaim the Gospel – but not to my congregation. They already know it. When I preach, I tell them how to behave as Christians. I only share the Gospel with those who haven’t heard it.” Now, I have no question that this man knows and believes the Gospel – but he treats it as sort of a doorway that once passed through need never be entered again. Now he spends his time teaching Christians how to live – and unfortunately, how to measure their faith and commitment to the Lord by what they do rather than by what they believe. By shifting the focus of faith from Christ to Christian behavior, they are doing what the Ephesians were doing: losing their first love. And friends, we all have the tendency to do the same thing.

Which is why Christ enjoins us all to “Repent and do the things you did at first.” What was that? Well, how did you first become a Christian? You heard God’s Word and the Holy Spirit convicted you of your sin and made you feel God’s threat of judgment. Then you heard the Good News of salvation because of what Christ did for you, and through that message the Spirit created the faith and trust to believe it. That’s what you did at first. Keep doing that. The Gospel is not a doorway to pass through once; it’s a place to live everyday. It’s the food that sustains you daily. You don’t eat it once and hope to keep on living. It’s the water you daily bathe in. If you stop washing, you soon start to stink. The way to keep your cupped hands full of water is to keep pouring it in. By doing so, you keep your first love right where it belongs.

“To him who overcomes,” the Spirit says, “I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” But until that day comes, we have another Tree of Life from which we are to eat every day. It is the cross of Christ where the Lord, cursed for our sins, hangs on the tree. The fruit of this tree is his sacrificed body and blood, his Word, and his Spirit, all of which he gives us by his grace alone. May the Lord make and keep this our first love, so that we, trusting in his work alone, will endure to the end and overcome. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!