

What Christ Expects of His Church II The Letter to Church at Ephesus: Love

Revelation 2:1-7

Danny Massie

First Presbyterian Church
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If you did not join us by livestream last Sunday, then let me explain that we have begun a series of sermons in which we are seeking to discern what Christ expects of his followers. Forgetting for a while what others inside or outside the church may expect of us, we are investigating any clues as to what Christ himself expects of those who bear his name. After all, Jesus alone has the right and the authority to determine the course of this body of believers who bear his name. He is the church's head, its founder, its redeemer and its Lord. Consequently, what Christ hopes for his church supersedes what any other person or group might hope for the church. And make no mistake about it, every person, every interest group, every institution has an agenda and a mind of its own.

Now what is different about the task we have undertaken is that we are not turning to the Gospels where the words and deeds of Jesus were remembered and recorded by the apostles, but rather we are examining John's opening vision of the risen and reigning Christ as it is recorded in the first three chapters of that strange book we call Revelation.

In this mysterious and majestic vision given to John while he was exiled on the Isle of Patmos, the word of God is given through Jesus to John and is directed to seven churches of Asia Minor. Note in verse 7 of Chapter 1 that John claims to see rather than hear the word of God. If you look at the location of these towns in Asia Minor (present day Turkey) you will discover that they almost form a circle as it were. They are the chief towns along an ancient circular road that linked together the most populated, the most prosperous, and the most influential areas of the Roman province of Asia. These letters were to be read in all of the churches, so each church heard as it was read not only the message directed to them, but the message directed to the other communities of faith as well. Verse 3 of Chapter 1 seems to indicate that John's vision was being read aloud, perhaps as a part of worship.

All of these churches were experiencing persecution and suffering under the Roman Emperor who claimed to be divine and who sought to eliminate or discredit any who followed and worshiped the Christ.

We will examine this series of letters together looking for the timeless and universal truths that may apply to all churches in all ages and in all cultures, but especially churches in a culture such as ours where those who take the will and the way of Jesus seriously are frequently at odds both with the prevailing culture and often with fellow believers. Like the seven churches of Revelation, followers of Christ today experience prejudice, abuse, marginalization, error, evil, heresy and immorality. And if we wish to follow Jesus faithfully today it would behoove us to see

and consider what Jesus commended to his followers near the close of the first century, the probably date for the writing of Revelation.

Before reading the first letter to the church of Ephesus, look briefly with me at the close of Chapter 1. After John sees and hears this glorious figure that addresses him, he is awe struck and terrified. In verse 17 he says that he fell at the feet of this vision addressing him, which unquestionably is the risen Christ, and the figure speaks again. Jesus attempts to comfort him this frightened follower by placing his hand upon him and saying to him, "Do not be afraid." Lest we forget, Jesus comes to his servants, not to strike terror in their hearts, but preeminently to comfort and encourage them in the midst of their trials.

Notice too that Jesus aids the hearers and the readers of this apocalyptic message by explaining some of the imagery that is used in the vision, images that will appear frequently. The seven golden lampstands are symbols of the churches, a fitting image because a lamp stand, like a church, is not the light itself but rather contains and carries the light, that being the light of the world. And the seven stars Jesus has or holds in his right hand represent the angels of the seven churches. And what are we to make of these representative angels? Are they literally angels, messengers of God to these specific churches? Do they represent the presiding elder or bishop in each congregation? We are not told.

William Barclay sees much significance in the fact that the Greek verb used here and translated for holding or having in the hand, *kratein*, is a very strong word and suggests that nothing and no one can remove this angel from the Lord's hand (see also John 10:28) but also suggests that he holds the entirety of the church within the palm of his hand. In other words, the whole of the church and all of the churches are firmly in the hand of Jesus Christ and no one can remove them from his grasp, and what a comfort this must have been to churches living under the threat of cultural and political forces where their very lives were threatened.

The first of John's visionary letters is addressed to the church in Ephesus which was regarded as the "metropolis of Asia" in those days. Some of you here, no doubt, have visited the ruins at Ephesus (called Kusadasi in modern day Turkey.) Even the remains of this ancient city, still being unearthed by archeologists today, reveal its magnificence and its wealth as a city. It is a remarkable place to visit. It was also the nearest of the seven cities to the Isle of Patmos and it would have been logical for the reading of these seven letters to begin here. Ephesus was the most influential of all the cities, though Pergamum, which we will consider later was the capital of Asia. Elsewhere in the New Testament we are reminded of just how significant Ephesus and its church was in the spread of the Gospel throughout the empire. Paul desperately wanted to go to Ephesus on his second missionary journey, but he was prevented from doing so. He did visit on his third journey and seeing how critical this church was for the Christian missionary enterprise, he returned later and spent two and a half years there. He preached, he taught, he healed, he pastored. He was imprisoned there, and his preaching actually caused a riot when the sale of idols and trinkets honoring Diana fell off. You see, Ephesus had a great tourist trade because a magnificent temple honoring the Roman Goddess Diana (Artemis in Greek) stood in Ephesus and it was one of the wonders of the ancient world.

And what is Jesus' message to Ephesus and how might it apply to followers of Jesus Christ today? (Read Revelation 2:1-7)

First, we are reminded that Jesus knows this church as he knows others. He walks among the churches and sees into their hearts and habits. Consequently, his message is not based on hearsay or conjecture. He is not mistaken in his judgments and his assessment of each church is on target.

There is much that Jesus finds in the church in Ephesus that is praiseworthy. To their credit the Christians in Ephesus are a hardworking bunch. Others may be accused of lethargy or apathy but not this congregation. The word used for work here, *kopos*, literally means exhausting, sweaty and back breaking physical labor. The Christians in Ephesus were not mere spectators in the service of Christ. No, they were active and involved and committed. And that is a good thing, even a Godly thing! Hard work has always been a part of God's plan for the human race. Adam and Eve were put to work in the garden and labor was a part of God's original plan before the fall. Only after the fall did labor become burdensome and tiring.

What about us? Are we an active, hard-working church? What about you as a member of this church? What kind of worker are you? I read a few years ago that according to Gallop research 50% of all church members do nothing. 10% do everything; and finding a way to engage the remaining 40% is the task of most churches. I would say that pretty much describes our church here as well. Those who work, work hard and work well ---but sadly many hardly work at all.

But First Church, Ephesus, was by contrast an engaged and working church. Jesus also praises them for their steadfast endurance in the face of trials and adversities. They tested the ideas and the people about them and refused to tolerate wickedness. The word John uses for endurance and perseverance is an interesting one, *hupomone*. This word suggests not some kind of grim, stoic resignation to life's inevitable hardships but rather courageous gallantry that accepts suffering and setbacks and turns them into opportunities for grace and glory. With *hupomone* obstacles become opportunities and stumbling blocks become stepping-stones because a church characterized by *hupomone* knows that Jesus Christ is the sovereign Lord of both the church and of human history. Battles are still being waged but victory is certain.

Another commendable thing about the Christians of Ephesus is that strange as it may seem, they hate what Jesus hates and that is the practices of the Nicolaitans. The Lord hates sin, not sinners. He hates sin because it harms and hurts people and robs them of the life abundant and eternal that God wants for all of his children. Let me remind you again of that truth I learned from the writings of John Redhead years ago: "A thing is not wrong because God forbids it, but God forbids it because it is wrong. And what makes it wrong is that it harms the very creatures whom God most loved and whom he sent his son to redeem."

We will deal with the Nicolaitans at more length later but sufficed to say that most interpreters believe the Nicolaitans were an heretical sect in the early church that encouraged immorality and licentiousness. But the Ephesian church, to their credit, opposed the Nicolaitans. (In Acts 20:29 years before when Paul had gathered together the elders from the church in Ephesus to bid them farewell and God bless, he had warned that in the years to come savage wolves would come among this church not sparing the flock. This was a very secular and pluralistic city, and perhaps he had the Nicolaitans in mind? So, we see that the Christians of Ephesus were diligent, determined, faithful and orthodox. For the most part they believed the right things and did the right things. So, what more might Jesus have expected of his followers in

Ephesus? What does their discipleship possibly lack what with hard work, patient endurance and passionate orthodoxy?

“I hold this against you,” Jesus says. “You have forsaken your first love.” And what a sad commentary that is. It is especially sad if by it Jesus meant, as I have always assumed, that their love for him personally had been forsaken, that somehow the passion and the joy of their early relationship with the Savior was dying or already dead. Few things are sadder than the loss of a first love so full of passion and promise.

One of my late friends from Tennessee was a country music fanatic. He knew by heart nearly all the songs and all their lyrics. And his favorite, all time country song is “Faded Love.”

*I miss you, darling, more and more every day
As heaven would miss the stars above
With every heartbeat, I still think of you
And remember our faded love.*

But long before Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys first wrote and recorded this song and long before other country artists like Patsy Cline, George Jones, Willie Nelson, Buck Owens, Loretta Lynn, Conway Twitty and others recorded versions of their own, Jesus knew all about a love that had faded. And if you prefer Rhythm and Blues it was also long before the legendary BB King recorded “The Thrill is Gone” with the help of his guitar, Lucille.

*The thrill is gone, the thrill is gone away,
You know you done me wrong,
And you're gonna be sorry some day.*

Jesus recognized that in the Ephesian church a once thrilling relationship of love had vanished or at least been supplanted for other things.

Here is a reminder that this congregation and many other churches like us needs to hear: we can busy ourselves doing a lot of good and Godly things, and that is commendable as Jesus pointed out. We can also believe all the right things and oppose sin and heresy at every turn, and that too is appropriate for the followers of Jesus. But if we do all these good things and believe all these right things at the expense of our feelings and expressions of love for the Lord Jesus, then our relationship with Jesus is severely jeopardized and in need of renewal.

Let us never forget that the Christian faith is primarily a relationship of love between the Lord and his bride, that is the church. Jesus did not originate this idea of the relationship between God and his people being analogous to the relationship of a husband to a bride or a lover to his beloved. Jesus only underscored what the prophets had alluded to previously. Jeremiah, Hosea, Ezekiel and others compared God’s relationship to Israel with that of a tender and loving relationship between a bridegroom and his bride. The Song of Solomon picks up on this imagery and there we read of tender and intimate devotion between lovers, between God and his church.

Jesus just repeats this in his vision. The Judeo-Christian religion is first and foremost about love for God and secondly love for others.

Presbyterians, I fear, have given far more attention to right thinking (doctrine) and right living (ethics) than we have to right feelings. In fact, we are often critical and dismissive of those whose faith tends to be characterized by emotion and passion. We often discourage personal testimonies of people. After all, people can get all emotional, you know, and frankly we're above all that. We're rational and intellectual followers of Jesus. Even our music, our songs, our liturgies appeal to the head over the heart. We are uneasy with all of those maudlin, emotional, contemporary praise songs that seems to be nothing more than love songs to Jesus.

But here's the thing if we don't love Jesus then clearly we don't know Jesus or understand what Jesus has done for the likes of us. Love, therefore, is the first and most important trait Jesus expects of his church.

Of course, knowledge is important. Of course, ethics matter, but these commendable traits are no substitute for love. Writing to the Corinthian church the apostle Paul speaks of the preeminence and importance of love, and not just in Chapter 13, the so-called love chapter of the Bible. In a lesser known passage, which I have never heard a Presbyterian preacher address in Chapter 8 Paul says "We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something, does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God."

Now our historic strengths as a denomination have probably been knowledge and ethics, but these must never be exercised apart from or in place of love. They should be the outworking of love. That is why Jesus asked Peter three times following the resurrection: "Peter, do you love me?" Love will result in bold action and in growing knowledge.

Do you love Jesus today as much as you did when you first came to faith? Or has the love faded and is the thrill gone? If so, then soon you will not be motivated either to think right or to do right and following Jesus will be no more exciting to you than yesterday's news. After all love is the primary motivator for both our beliefs and our actions. In II Corinthians 5:14 Paul says, "*For the love of Christ controls us (or constrains) us*" to do this or that and one can interpret that "love of Christ" as both an objective sense (our love for Christ) or a subjective sense (Christ's love for us.)

In their book *Where Resident Aliens Live*, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon tell a wonderful and true story about the preeminence of the love of Jesus:

The story is told of Clarence Jordan, the great prophet, who visited an integrated church in the Deep South. Jordan was surprised to find a relatively large church so thoroughly integrated, not only Black and White but also rich and poor, and in the early sixties, too. Jordan asked the old country preacher, "How did you get the church this way?"

"What say?" the preacher asked. Jordan went on to explain his surprise at finding a church so integrated, and in the South, too. The preacher said, "Well, when our preacher left our small church, I went to the Deacons and said, 'I'll be the preacher.' The first Sunday as

preacher, I opened the book and read, 'As many of you as has been baptized into Jesus has put on Jesus and there is no longer any Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, males or females, because you is all one in Jesus.'

"Then I closed the book and said, 'If you one with Jesus, you one with all kind of folks. And if you ain't you ain't.'" Jordan asked what happened after that.

"Well," the preacher said, "the Deacons took me into the back room and told me they didn't want to hear that kind of preacher no more." Jordan asked what he did then.

"I fired them Deacons," the preacher roared.

"Then what happened?" asked Jordan. "Well," said the old hillbilly preacher, "I preached that church down to four. Not long after that, it grew and grew and grew. And I found out that revival sometimes don't mean bringin' people in but getting' people out that don't love Jesus."

Still another way of understanding Jesus' reference to this first love now forsaken is to see it not as a reference to the Ephesians love for him personally or his love for them but rather as a reference to their love for one another. Sometimes as followers of Jesus Christ and members of his church we fail to love our brothers and sisters in Christ as we first did, when we first came to faith, when we looked forward eagerly to gathering together in worship, in study, in fellowship and in mission. But after a while our knowledge and our arrogance caused us to look down our noses at people who do not believe or live as we do. We become critical or judgmental and we separate ourselves from the very people we ought to be loving and encouraging.

In his commentary on Revelation, William Barclay argues that sometimes "orthodoxy costs too much" (page 76, *The Revelation of John, Volume 1*). That is to say, we can have such a passion for believing right and doing right that we demonize and damn those who differ from us. Notice once again that Jesus hated the practices of the Nicolaitans but not the Nicolaitans themselves. Barclay speculates that in the church in Ephesus that perhaps "heresy-hunting had killed love: it may well be," he adds, "that the eagerness to root out all mistaken men had ended in sour and rigid orthodoxy." Whether or not that was the case in Ephesus, I do not know but what I do know is that mean-spirited orthodoxy and judgmentalism has destroyed many churches. The reason we have so many denominations and so many competing Christian communities is because we've made orthodoxy more important than love. But God help us if anything in the church matters more than loving God our neighbors, especially fellow believers.

So, in conclusion while much is commendable and praiseworthy in the Ephesian church the fact that their love had grown cold was a serious failing. So, Jesus gives them a three-fold solution that could bring them back to the love they had lost. Look at Verse 5 and note the three actions that he recommends. First, remember. Remember what it was like when your love was fresh and new and exhilarating. Can you remember what young love felt like --- the excitement, the anticipation, the joy of being in the other's presence:

Secondly, Jesus says to repent. That is to say, turn around and change your direction. Confess the error of your ways and resolve not to continue down that same old path.

And finally, Jesus say to do the things you did at first, when your love was thrilling and new. When you first came to faith did you not relish opportunities to study and worship and pray and commune? So even if your feelings have not returned, go back and do the things you did at first out of love for your Lord and love for his church.

This advice works not only in our relationship with the Lord but also in our personal relationship with a spouse. In other words, if you suspect you've fallen out of love with your mate and you would like to feel again what you once felt, then start doing again the things you used to do when your love was passionate and all-consuming. Write a love letter. Pick some wildflowers, Plan a surprise picnic. Be spontaneous. Light some candles, Steel away to a lonely and favorite place. Feeling often follows action and sometimes when we begin to act as if we do love the other person that person becomes much more loveable in response and we find our old feelings returning. Love wasn't really gone it was just forgotten and covered over by layers of other distractions seemingly more important.

And as Jesus draws this first letter to Ephesus to a close he seems to warn them that if their love does not return then he will remove the lampstand from its place. In other words, the church there will no longer continue to exist because it will no longer carry the light of God's love. The light will have become extinguished. And yet the promise Jesus offers in conclusion to the church in Ephesus and to the church in Greensboro as well, is that if we hear what the Spirit is saying to us in this letter we can begin to live victoriously, no matter what trials we may encounter. We will eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God. I won't belabor the point here but let me just say that this does not mean that we will simply go to heaven when we die. No, it means that we will experience that life abundant and eternal which God desires for us in the here and now, a life that will continue into eternity. We will experience the life of love that God intended for us when he places us in the garden, a life we may have lost through our own defiance and self-will, but a life that Jesus came and died and rose again to restore to us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.