

## RESTORE YOUR FIRST LOVE

Revelation 2:1-7

Key Verses: 2:4-5

*“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. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”*

Today’s passage is the first of the seven letters that Jesus told John to write to the seven churches in Asia Minor. In the letter, Jesus first commends the believers in Ephesus for their good deeds. Then he rebukes them for their serious problem and urges them to repent. May God help us to accept and apply the words of Christ to us!

### I. JESUS WALKS AMONG THE CHURCHES (1)

Look at verse 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.”* As we learned in Chapter 1, Jesus appeared to John in a vision and told him to write letters to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (1:11). Why seven churches and why these particular ones when there were other churches, some of them bigger and better known (such as Antioch and Corinth)? We can find a clue to this question in verse 7, which says, “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” This statement is repeated at the end of all seven letters. Notice that the Spirit says to the “churches,” not singular but plural. In other words, the seven were chosen to represent all churches. In the book of Revelation, the number 7 is used for completion, fullness and perfection (e.g., seven stars, seven eyes, seven horns, seven seals, seven trumpets, etc.). It is the number of the Holy Spirit. The seven churches represent all churches of Jesus Christ. In addition, the seven churches in Asia Minor were chosen probably because their strengths and weaknesses represented those of all churches throughout history--past, present and future. Therefore, the messages of Jesus in the letters are directed to not only the churches in Asia Minor in John’s time, but also all churches in the world throughout history. The letters contain Jesus’ commendations, rebukes, encouragements and promises. The contents are very relevant to us today. May God help us to have ears to hear so that we may hear what the Spirit says to us!

Look at verse 1 again. *“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.”* Who are the recipients of the seven letters of Jesus? Each letter is addressed to the “angel” of the church—or the “messenger” of the church (NIV footnotes). So some people say that the letters were sent to the spiritual leaders in the church while others maintain that they were sent to the angels who were appointed to protect the churches. Either way, the words of Jesus are directed to the church of God, that is, all believers. More importantly, verse 1 says that the letters are the words of Jesus who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. The seven stars are the angels or the messengers of the churches. The seven

golden lampstands are the seven churches (1:20). In other words, Jesus is the Lord of all churches. These letters show how much Jesus cares about the spiritual conditions of his churches. Jesus walks among us. He knows what is on our minds. He is aware of our joys and sorrows. He knows our situations and he cares about us. Let us never forget this fact that Jesus walks among us and with us!

## II. JESUS KNOWS OUR GOOD DEEDS (2-3)

Ephesus was an important city in the Roman province of Asia. It was a great commercial center and a crossroads of the Roman Empire, connecting all her major cities by highways and sea ways. The city was also known for its worship of the goddess Artemis (or Diana). The great temple of Artemis was larger than two football fields in length. It had 127 impressive marble pillars, some of them covered with gold. It was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. In this idol-worshipping environment, how did the church in Ephesus please the Lord?

Look at verses 2-3. *“I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, 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.”* Jesus commends the believers in Ephesus for their deeds. They showed their faith by their actions. Hard work and perseverance characterized their faith. They were different from some Christians today who talk their talk but do not walk their walk. It wasn't easy for the Ephesian believers to live by faith in the midst of the pagan culture. They were a minority who lived a holy life among people who loved fun and pleasures. They worshiped the Lord on Sundays when other people enjoyed the day with various activities. I am sure the believers were marginalized for their life of faith. They were persecuted for not following the trend of the society. But they persevered and endured hardships for Jesus' name (3). Jesus mentioned their perseverance twice. They did not grow weary.

In addition, they did not tolerate wicked people (2). They tested those who claimed to be apostles but were not. They found them false. No doubt they studied the word of God diligently in order to develop a sense of spiritual discernment. This was important for their faith because there were not only idol-worshippers but many false teachers among them.

Our society is not much different from Ephesus in terms of spiritual and moral degradation. Many people worship money and pleasure. Ephesus had a huge amphitheater for entertainment. We have many more stadiums for that. We also have many false teachers. So what can we learn from the church of Ephesus? Let us not grow weary as we give fully to the work of the Lord. Let us persevere and endure hardships for Jesus' name. Let us also study the word of God sincerely and diligently so that we can discern false teachers and find their teachings false.

## III. DO NOT FORSAKE THE FIRST LOVE (4-7)

Look at verse 4. *“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.”* The believers in Ephesus were exemplary in many ways. They pleased the Lord

by their lives of faith and mission. But there was one thing that Jesus held against them—they had forsaken their first love. What does this mean? The Christians in Ephesus had been very happy when they first accepted Jesus as their personal Savior. They had been eager to serve Christ. They were willing to sacrifice themselves to show their love for Christ. But over time, their love for Christ became cold. They no longer loved Jesus with all their hearts as they had done at first. Their love grew cold (Mt 24:12). This was a very serious matter. Jesus warned them that if they did not repent, they would lose the main function of the church, that is, to keep the lamp of God burning for the people around them. Jesus told them that he would come and remove their lampstand, if they did not repent.

The church of Ephesus was pioneered by Paul (Ac 18:19-21) in his second missionary journey. He spent three years there in his third missionary journey, focusing on discipleship training in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Ac 19). The church began as a humble, manger ministry. The believers resisted the popular culture of the city, known for its sexual immorality and the worship of the goddess Artemis. Their number was small but their influence was great. Those who used to practice magic burned their books. The silversmiths who used to make money selling trinkets of the goddess Diana lost their source of income. But now the church grew big. And the second-generation believers seemed to have been influenced by the culture of the city. They lost their purity and love for Christ. They compromised with the world. They were busy with various church activities, but without deep love for Christ. Many activities that are not motivated to please the Lord are meaningless before God, no matter how impressive they may be. Like Martha of Bethany, they were too busy doing things for the Lord that they had no time to sit at Jesus' feet to listen to him. Jesus wanted to spend time with them, but they were too busy to pay attention to him. To the eyes of people, their church was vibrant with many impressive programs. There was always something going on in the church. But to Jesus, the most important thing was missing--their love. They had forsaken their first love. They didn't know that hard work was no substitute for love. We should work hard for Jesus out of our love for him. But we should not be mistaken to think that keeping ourselves busy means we love Jesus. Jesus said, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Lk 10:41-42).

Why do we tend to lose our initial enthusiasm and excitement we had when we first met Jesus personally? I think it's in our human nature that our love toward another person wanes over time, unless we make a continual effort to captivate and maintain our relationship with the person. Take, for example, the relationship between husband and wife. A woman came to her pastor to seek his counsel for her stale marriage. She said, "I hate my husband. I hate the way he looks. He has gotten fat, and doesn't take care of himself. I hate the way he sounds. He slurps his food, and chews with his mouth open. I hate the way he brushes his teeth. He gulps the water in his mouth and swishes it around. He snores at night and makes all kinds of noises when he blows his nose. I just don't love him anymore." After hearing her long list of why she hated her husband, the pastor asked her, "Has it been always this way?" After a moment of silence, she replied, "No, it hasn't always been this way. He used to be kind, gentle, and sensitive. I can remember our courtship and how romantic he was. I remember intimate conversations

and soft music and candlelight. I remember a wonderful wedding and honeymoon. I remember those early years of struggling together when we were having children and trying to find enough money to pay our bills. There were some good times. There was a time when we were very much in love.”

Likewise, our relationship with our Lord Jesus can get cold if we take him for granted and neglect our personal time with him because of our busy daily life. We tend to lose our first love if we focus on ourselves or what we have rather than the Lord. We lose our enthusiasm when we forget the grace of salvation and depend on ourselves. Do you remember how much you were excited to meet Jesus personally and invite him into your life? No doubt you were happy to sing praises of him, study his word with eager learning mind, and share your personal testimony with others. You were happy to live for his name’s sake. But then over time, we all experience a decline in our zeal for Christ. Things tend to become routine. We still love Jesus, but the fire in us does not burn as intensely as it did before.

So how can we restore our first love? What steps can we take to renew our commitment to Jesus? In verse 5, Jesus teaches us three things that we can do: Remember, Repent and Return: “*Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first...*” **The first** is to **remember** (μνημόνευε). Jesus says, “Remember therefore from where you have fallen” (NKJV). To restore the sparkle of our love for Christ, we must first remember the joy and gratitude we had when we first met Christ. We need to take inventory of our spiritual life to see how far we have drifted from our first love. There was a young man who did not appreciate his father’s love. He couldn’t wait till he got out of his house and enjoy the world with unlimited freedom. So he asked and got his share of inheritance even before his father died. He went to a far off country and squandered his money in wild living. Many people came to his lavish parties. But when his money was gone, so were his friends. He became a homeless person. He was miserable. With no skills, the only job he could get was on a pig farm. He was so hungry that he wanted to eat the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. Then finally it hit him. He remembered his father’s love. He remembered his father’s generosity. He remembered how he rebelled against his father’s kind words. When he remembered his father’s love, he came back to his senses. It was a turning point in this young man’s life. He decided to come home to his father. His wandering life was over.

**The second** thing we must do in order to restore our love for Jesus is to **repent**. How do people react when they discover that something has gone wrong? Some blame others. Some despair. Others rationalize. Still others become resentful. But we must learn to accept the personal responsibility for our actions. To repent is to admit our wrong, turn away from our sinful ways and walk with Christ. The prodigal son did this. He said, “I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you” (Lk 15:18).

**Finally**, we must **do what is right** in order to restore our first love. Feeling sorry about what happened is not enough. We must bear the fruit of our repentance, that is, we must show our repentance by doing what is right before God. Jesus wants us to return to the things we did at first—when we first met Christ. He says: *Repent and do*

*the things you did at first.* He wants us to obey his words. In John 14:15 Jesus says, “If you love me, you will do what I command.”

Look at verses 6-7. *“But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. 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.”* Jesus told the Ephesians that they did not have to start from scratch. They still had some good in them—they hated the practices of the Nicolaitans. Who were the Nicolaitans and what were their practices that Jesus hated? There are a couple of different explanations. We will explore this in more details when we talk about church in Pergamum. Jesus rebuked the believers in Pergamum for holding to the teachings of the Nicolaitans (2:15). For now, it is sufficient to say that they promoted the Gnostic ideas and tempted many believers to compromise with the world. We can see why Jesus hated their practices.

Hate is a strong word. But Jesus commended the Ephesians for hating the practices of the Nicolaitans. He said he also hated their practices. Why use the strong word? To overcome the temptation to compromise with the world, we must have a strong resolve to resist. We must hate it. If we gave in just a little bit, we would be in the middle of it before we know it. We should not be like Lot in Genesis. He pitched his tent outside Sodom, saying to himself, “I am not going in.” But before he knew it, he was in the city. His family became deeply involved in the wicked culture. His wife could not give up her desire for the city even when her life was on the line. His two daughters were engaged to young men who thought he was joking when he told them about God’s impending judgment on the city. We must hate the practices of this evil world. We must hate compromises.

We learn that we should hate what our Lord hates. We must learn to say no to compromising life, instead of saying, “It’s not too bad” or “It won’t hurt my faith.” We should not rationalize our sinful deeds. We need to restore our personal relationship with Christ through our personal struggle with the word of God and prayer. We should have ears to hear the word of Christ. Jesus gives a wonderful promise that to the one who is victorious in this battle, he will give us the right to eat from the tree of life, which is preserved for us in the paradise of God.

In conclusion, Jesus praised the Ephesian believers for their good deeds: their hard work, perseverance, and spiritual discernment. But he held one thing against them: they had forsaken their first love. Jesus urged them to remember, repent, and return to their first love. May God help us to remember the grace and love of our Lord Jesus! May God help us repent and return to the first love so that everyday for us is like the first time we met Christ!