

Sermon 15: Revelation 2:1-7: Ephesus: Part Two

OUTLINE

Powerful rebuke
Parting praise
Paradise regained

INTRODUCTION

Gordon Macdonald was a successful and famous Christian writer and speaker who fell into adultery. After being restored he wrote a book and in it he gives an illustration of the Christian life. The Christian life is like a yacht, you can have a spotless yacht, new sails, fresh varnish, bright upholstery, polished brass fitting and still sink if you do not pay attention to the condition of the yacht under the water line where the eye does not see unless we deliberately go inspecting. Ephesus was like a yacht, to the casual observer it looked to be a good yacht, but underneath the surface, in the area of their hearts there were dramatic problems. Our hearts are the hardest part of ourselves to maintain because they are invisible and so we have to be deliberate. The letter to Ephesus teaches us the danger of having a busy and doctrinally correct church that has lost its heart.

As we continue with Christ's letter to His Church in Ephesus we want to look at Christ's rebuke, the advice He gives and the final parts of the letter.

Powerful rebuke

In the Olivet discourse Christ speaks about the coming satanic tribulation that will fall upon the church. Matthew 24:9-13, "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. 10 And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. 11 And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. 12 And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. 13 But the one who endures to the end will be saved.' Here we see the three enemies of the church, tribulation, false teaching and lawlessness afflicting the church, but notice the terrible words, 'the love of many will grow cold.' Growing cold in love is an effect of losing the spiritual war we are in. Revelation paints a graphic picture for us of the war that Ephesus was a part and they are living those words, and so Christ rebukes them, Revelation 2:4, 'But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.'

There is a love we have at first that is zealous, dedicated, that cannot do too much for the object of our affection, and is spontaneously given not demanded. This is the love we have at first. It is real, unforced, energetic and pure. The question we have to answer is what love is Jesus referring to. Is Jesus rebuking them for the loss of their first love for God, each other, or that original evangelistic zeal towards the lost? It is not clear but I do believe

that all three are connected. If we lag in our love for God then this directly bears upon how we love each other in the church and the lost. So we will look at all three.

Jesus after rebuking the Ephesians then gives them advice, to remember, and to repent. If your heart needs a jump start, Christ by His Spirit uses these two things, remembering and repenting to get you going again.

Love for God can lag quickly and easily. Jeremiah 2:2 speaks of how Israel had a first love, "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD, "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.' The idea of a newlywed bride is the picture used to describe Israel's love, but she forsook God and went after idols. In Israel's case it was because of the bounty of the land that hardens her heart. In the case of Ephesus it might have been the overemphasis on good things like doctrine, it might have been the practiced criticism that turned them sour and angry, it might have been a survival mentality against the persecution. We are not told what caused it, we are merely warned that an apparently healthy church with every possible privilege is not immune to backsliding and must check below the water line regularly.

Jesus calls upon us to remember. This means that this church had grown content with their half-heartedness, that they were not striving for a higher standard, they had forgotten what love for God should look like and were content with their meagre accomplishments. Remember back to the time when God was a fresh discovery, when His holiness overwhelmed your soul drowning you in despair and guilt and then His grace washed away your guilt and set you free. As John Newton says, 'the grace that taught my heart to fear, that grace my fears relieved.' Remember your first impressions of His love, how valuable you discovered Him to be and how you saw that He was given in exchange for you. Ponder the amazing wisdom of God in orchestrating such a salvation that a substitute could take your punishment, that another's righteousness could be seen as yours and how it was all freely offered to be received not by works but by faith. Remember the terror turned to joy as you discovered that God was no longer your judge but your Father and that there is nothing in all creation that can snatch you out of His hand. Remember the wonder at the magnitude of his provision in giving you the person of the Spirit to dwell with you forever, the open door of prayer, the community of the church, and an eternal inheritance and eternal fellowship with Him. Remember how that joy fuelled all your obedience, how willing you were to give up sin, how sorry you were when you sinned, how freely you spoke to others about the change you had experienced.

This impact of salvation and God on your life laid the foundation for your love for other Christians. You would see how Christ saw them and recognised that if Christ was willing to serve them unto death so should I be. You joined with them in your common delight in your common salvation and spent every spare hour with them, under the apostle's teaching, breaking bread together, visiting in one another's homes. The prayer times together were sweet, the singing times heavenly, and you gladly sacrificed time to help others, gave money and gifts to any who had need, and saw the best in everyone.

This led also to a love for the lost. You would ponder Christ's tears over Jerusalem, and His prayer for His enemies on the cross and realise the compassion He had for the lost and would go out and speak to them. Remember how you broke down those personal barriers and overcame fears as you stepped out of your comfort zones to speak words that might offend some. Remember that pity you felt when you realised how blind people were, how overwhelmed you were at the number of unbelievers and yet the gospel is free for anyone who would believe it. Remember those prayers that were prayed with tears for lost loved ones and friends.

These are the things that Christ was calling the Ephesians to remember, to realise what the fullness of spiritual life is. It is not a doctorate and a shrew criticism of all heresies but a community that loves God, each other and the world. If we will stop and think again upon who God is and what He has done for us in the gospel, then I believe that the love will flow to Him, others and the lost.

In v5 we see Jesus threat of removing their lampstand, 'Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.' When a light no longer gives light, or salt is saltless or a church is loveless it is cast out as useless. It is our love for God where we show that we love Him more than our own comfort and we endure trials with patience, as we show He is more valuable than satisfaction and do not indulge sinful desire, when we show that we love His character by emulating His holiness, this is a love that gives light before a watching world that is against God, pursuing fleeting pleasures and exalt in sin not holiness. When this love for God results in a love for each other where live as a sacrificial community serving people we would not choose for friends but accept and love because we are one with them and Christ has died for them. This is a love which will shout in a world of broken relationships, hatred, racism, sexism and murder. When we love the lost and seek to be as Christ to them laying down our lives, willing to endure their scorn to deliver a most important message, this will speak to a people who feel lost, abandoned and hopeless.

So how are things below the water line, do you have a slow and unseen leak? The boat should be in the water but not the water in the boat, the Christian is to be in the world but the world is not to be in the Christian. Are you doubleminded? Are there pleasures and pursuits that you want more than God? Have you become self-absorbed, and asleep at the wheel going forward not on the fuel of love but on autopilot? Has a missions driven life turned into a self-centred pursuit of consumer goods and play? Remember! Repent!

Parting praise

Christ does not only speak words of disapproval to His church, He is a good shepherd who knows we would be crushed with relentless disapproval and so we see a point of parting praise in v6, 'Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.' There is no solid evidence as to who the Nicolaitans are. Some have theorised that they come from the deacon Nicolaus in Acts 6:5, but this is the conjecture of later church fathers.

Some have tried to derive meaning from the name Nicolaus. 'Nico' means conqueror but can have negative connotations of destroyer, and laos is the Greek word for people. So destroyer of the people has been suggested. It seems from 2:14-15 that they were linked with Balaam type sins that led God's people to participate in the first century idolatry and sexual immorality. Christ commends them for their zeal that rejects sin and idolatry. This praise does not nullify the seriousness of the former rebuke and helps us see that we are not defined by what we are against but what we love. J I Packer is right when he says that Western Christians can smell a heretic a mile away but do not excel at works of love.

Paradise regained

V7 brings this letter to a close with a universal admonition, 'He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' This reminds us that this message is not exclusively for Ephesus but for all the churches of God. The sins they struggle with and the traps they fell into are perpetual and typical of human nature.

At the close of every letter Christ sets the minds of His people on eternal realities and the hope that is set before each one of them, 'To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.' He calls His people to take their mind off earthly things and to remember what is at stake. We are told that the one who conquers will have a portion in paradise. This is an important theme that will come up again and again in this book. The bible does not see the Christian life as a walk in the park but it is a difficult road that calls for perseverance through the many trials that we will face. Those who endure to the end, those who conquer, these are the ones who have God's seed in them and they are born again which is evident in their perseverance. Those who do not conquer but like in the parable of the sower confess faith but fall away when things get tough, these were never saved to begin with.

Christ speaks of paradise regained, the tree in Eden was lost to Adam and Eve, all the fellowship, bliss, purity and other conditions that reigned in Eden are lost to us. But if we endure to the end, we have a hope that awaits us, another Eden, a better Eden. We will eat from the tree of life and live in the paradise of God. This is worth enduring for, and worth more than any pain or struggle we can put up with here.