

The Seven Letters of Highly Effective Churches – Ephesus

16th Sunday after Pentecost

September 20, 2009

We're starting our look at the seven letters to the churches in Revelation this week by taking a look at the first letter to the church in Ephesus. I invite you to open your Bible to Revelation with me, and let's go to the second chapter, starting with verse one.

Revelation usually gets pegged as a book that's all about the end times – fire, death, destruction, the mark of the beast, and on and on. What we sometimes forget is while that is true, there is another part to Revelation in the very beginning that's not focused on the 'end times' at all, but instead are letters to churches from Jesus Himself. That's what we are focusing on in this series – what Jesus says to the churches in these letters.

Today we're looking at the letter to the church in Ephesus. As we usually do, let's set the context, and I hope you're ready to do some writing in your Bibles! Here's another little hint about reading your Bibles: a couple weeks ago we mentioned that a good way of reading your Bible is to have a pen, pencil or yellow crayon (but never a highlighter because it will bleed through the page!) and underline or color in those verses that speak to you, and then pray about it. Here's the tip for this week: whenever you read one of the Epistles (those books after Acts), make a note on the first page of the epistle that references the place in the book of Acts where we find out about the start of that church.

For instance, we are looking today at the church in Ephesus, so, you can write next to Revelation chapter 2, verse 1, "Acts 19." Acts chapter 19 tells us what happened in Ephesus when the Gospel was first brought to the city. The Epistle of Ephesus is a follow-up letter, if you will, to those same Christians which taught them (and still teaches us) how to live in light of the Gospel message.

So, back to context. All these letters in the first two chapters in are modern-day Turkey. Ephesus was a big and important city. It reminds me a little of Boston – it was a busy port city that really was the main place for commerce to come in that would be dispersed throughout Asia. Ephesus was the main place for the worship of the goddess Diana (or Artemis as she was called in Greek), as well as the main place for Emperor Worship for whatever Caesar was in power at the time. It has two titles given to it that are really telling about how people thought of Ephesus, and how the Ephesians thought of themselves. Ephesus was called "The Light of Asia" and the "Supreme Metropolis of Asia."

Paul started the church back in Acts 19, left Timothy in charge of the church, and wrote the letter the Holy Spirit gave him to write in the book of Ephesians *to* that church. Not only that, 1st and 2nd Timothy are letters to Pastor Timothy as he worked with the early church in Ephesus. (You

can make a note of that in your Bibles, too. See how it all just gels together into a cohesive whole?!)

So, what does Jesus have to say to this church that still applies to churches today? Let's clear up one thing right away that you can make a note of in your Bibles. All these letters start the same way, "To the *angel* of the church..." The word angel is from the Greek word "angelos", and it means angel, or messenger. These letters were written to the messengers in these churches... a.k.a: the Pastors to be read to, and applied by, the congregations!

As a quick aside, at this point in time, as best as can be figured Pastor Timothy had been martyred for the faith, so he was no longer the pastor in Ephesus when the letter was written. He was put to death around the year 80, some ten years before Revelation was written, by those in Ephesus who still worshiped Diana/Artemis and the Emperor.

So, given that context, let's look at this letter. Right off the bat, Jesus praises them for their hard work and perseverance through trials – like having your pastor killed and being under constant threat of being harassed and put to death too. He praises them for judging the teachings they hear from people who claim to be scholars (or in this case, apostles with a special word from God) and judged them to be guilty of falsehood. He tells them a few verses later in verse six, "*You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*"

Who were the Nicolaitans? They were people who called themselves Christians, but who said anything in the material world was evil, and there was no need for the Law which tells us about sin and so points us to the Savior. They lead Christians to abandon the Law and engage in any and all kinds of sinfulness, especially sexual sin. They said in order to master sensuality, one must know the whole range of it by experience; and that they should abandon themselves without reserve to the lusts of the body. The Ephesian church rejected them and threw them out, and Jesus praised them for that.

So far so good, right? What's the problem? It sounds like this church has it all together: they are a hard working church, they've lasted through one kind of trial after another, one kind of persecution after another, they are applying the word of God to every new idea and teaching that comes their way to see if it measures up to Scripture, and if it doesn't they reject it; and they were even praised by Jesus Himself for rejecting those who called themselves Christians but didn't want to talk about sin and instead had a policy of live and let live. What's the problem??

Enter verses 4 and 5 – "*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.*"

Even though they were doing the right things – things Jesus Himself said He agreed with, they were doing without their first love. You see, what we do for the Lord is important, *but so is why we do it!*

What is this “first love” that’s being talked about here? It’s the devotion to Christ that so often characterizes the new believer: fervent, personal, uninhibited, excited, and openly displayed. Have you ever seen two people just sick-ning-ly, sweet-ning-ly *in love*? That’s the kind of love that Jesus is talking about here – it’s the “honeymoon love” of the husband and wife.

This is the love that loses itself in the arms of its Savior. This is the love that looks into the eyes of Jesus, burning with passion, and knows at that moment there is nothing you wouldn’t do for Him. This is the love that we once felt wrapped around us when faith was new and exciting, before bills and headaches and worries got in the way. This is the love that the devil rejoices at squashing.

Maybe for some that seems like a lifetime ago. Maybe for some they can’t remember ever having those kinds of feelings for their savior. Maybe some wonder if it’s too far gone, or too late to ever have that kind of love. I have great news for you today: Jesus says no one is too far gone, and it’s never too late! There’s a three step process Jesus gives the church in Ephesus in this letter, and gives to us too, in order to restore our first love. It’s “Remember, Repent and Repeat.”

First, *remember* (literally “keep on remembering”) the passion we once had for Jesus. Pray to remember when faith was new, or when faith became a thing that ‘clicked’ and gave a joy and sense of security like we’d never known before. Note: this is the passion for *Jesus*, not the works that came about from the passion. That’s what the Christians at Ephesus were doing wrong. They were not passionate about Jesus, but about the things they did and claimed the name of Jesus in doing them.

You can make a note in your Bibles next to these verses of Hosea 6: verses 4 and 6, where God says, “*Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears*{in other words, it’s not constant, it comes and goes}*...I desire steadfast love, not sacrifices, and acknowledgement of God, rather than burnt offerings.*” This is the love that is spoken of in the meaning of the commandments when we say, “We should fear and *love* God, so that...” This is the first love the Ephesians lost. This is the first love that many in the Christian church today have lost.

Remember, Jesus tells this group of Christians and us. Remember who I am for you and the love I have for you, and the love you used to have for Me. Remember the passion for Me that drove you to test and judge false teachings and condemn them. “Remember” in the Bible never means simply recalling something to mind. It means to call to mind AND be moved to action. Remember my love, Jesus says, and *do* something about it.

That thing to do is the second thing, *repent* –change our minds through the power of the Holy Spirit. Confess – get real about our sins. The church at Ephesus drove out the Nicolaitans who called themselves Christians but didn’t want to talk about sin, and said, “Anything goes as long as no one gets hurt!” The church did the right things, but their passion was for the things they

were doing, not for Jesus. They made their actions their god; what they *did* was what they worshipped.

What about the Christian church today? Are we worshipping Jesus, or are we worshipping the way we worship Jesus, or the way we *think* we should worship Jesus in our actions, words, outlooks and attitudes?

What is the big deal about confession and repentance anyway? The big deal is that if we are not confessing and repenting, we are holding on to our sins and blocking our first love from getting through to our hearts. It erects a wall that keeps our hearts safely inside, but keeps the love of Jesus out.

Third, *repeat the first works*, which begins restoring the original fellowship that was broken by our sin and neglect. For the believer, the first works means prayer, Bible reading, fellowship, and worship.

Prayer – you can't have a relationship with someone you don't talk to. It just doesn't work.

Bible reading – remember when you met your first love? They wrote you little love notes that you read, re-read and wore thin. You underlined portions of the letter... wrote his or her name in the margins ... drew little hearts... with the little arrows going through the heart... your initials and their initials with TLF – True Love Forever...

God has given us a love letter; a real love letter from the depths of His heart. We don't have to try and figure out what God says and how He feels, He tells us. He tells us how much He loves us; He tells us how much He wants us to be with Him. He lays out the boundaries for us – not because He's some sort of cosmic kill-joy, but because He knows what's best for us and wants to keep us safe. Detonate “The Davinci Code” and sack “The Shack”, God's love letter outshines everything else, holds the only truth there is, and He places it right in our hands.

Fellowship – being with mature Christians who know their Bibles, who are in love with their Savior, and who love us and will hold us accountable.

Worship – ascribing great worth to Jesus and Jesus alone. Jesus, not what we do because of Jesus. Jesus, the real Jesus, not the Jesus of tradition or our own making. Jesus, the one who comes to us and tells us He loves us up to heaven, down to hell and back again.

This is the message to the church at Ephesus. The church that did the right things, commendable things approved of by Jesus, but did them for the wrong reasons.

This is the message to the church today. This is the first instruction for a highly effective church – love Jesus. Love Him for who He is – our Savior, and for what He calls us to – a life lived in repentance, confession, prayer, Bible reading, fellowship and worship. There is no love like our first love, and Jesus is the one who loves us first with a love that will not let us go.

Will you pray with me, please?

Lord Jesus, thank You for Your words of instruction to the church at Ephesus and to us today. Thank You for Your love for us – a love that will never be fully understood by us in this life; a love that left Heaven behind and came to earth to save us.

Your Word to the church in this first letter rings just as true today as it did then. Help us to fall in love with You. Help us to be completely devoted to You. Lord Jesus, I pray for myself. You have appointed me as the pastor of this church – help me to love You more and more, to be changed by You, and to experience the reckless, raging fury of Your love.

I pray for everyone here today as well. Touch each of us with Your Holy Spirit and ignite a love for You unlike any we have ever experienced before. Bring us closer and closer to You, our first love.

We pray it in Your name, Jesus. Amen