

### **Ephesus: “The Church that Lost Its First Love”**

Do you remember what it was like when you first started to court your spouse? All of the special things you did for one another?

If you are a man perhaps you remember opening the door for your wife, or writing her special notes, or taking her to special places. If you are a woman maybe you remember always trying to look your best for your husband or telling him how handsome he was and how you couldn't wait to smooch on him. But then you got married and before you know it your thirty years down the road and you don't do many of those special things for one another anymore. Life settles in, you have kids, you go through stressful times, and before you know it you've forsaken your first love. You didn't mean to. You still love your spouse very much but you've let a lot of little things get in the way of the relationship.

This is what was happening to the church in Ephesus. The bride of Christ, which is the church, was losing her love for her first love, the groom Jesus. Things were beginning to creep into the marriage that was affecting the love this church was to have for her Savior.

### **The Church Was Doing a Lot of Things Right**

For sure, she was doing a lot of things right. Jesus commended her for all of her hard work and perseverance in the faith. Following Jesus in Ephesus was not easy. It was a cosmopolitan city with lots of different temptations and distractions. It was home of one of the seven great wonders of the world, the Temple of Artemis. Artemis, also known as Diana, was the patron god of the city. She was a fertility goddess. We know from the book of Acts that the apostle Paul and his friends came under persecution because the people in Ephesus whom he had led to Christ quit buying the idol merchandise that was being sold in the temple. Anytime you cut into a man's business you're going to be in trouble. Yet these Christians were faithful. They were not going to worship this dead god anymore.

The Christians in Ephesus were also coming under increasing pressure from the Roman Empire who was demanding Caesar worship. For a long time Rome did not require its subjects to acknowledge Caesar as Lord but eventually under the Emperor Domitian it became a requirement and anyone who refused to do so came under persecution. All the Christians had to do was say Caesar is Lord. The Empire was not trying to prevent Christians from believing in Christ, all they wanted them to do was acknowledge Caesar to be Lord and then they would leave them alone to worship their God as they pleased but the early Christians refused to give in and it seems from this text that the Ephesians were probably pretty good at refusing to bow the knee to Caesar because Jesus commends them for having “endured hardships and persecutions.”

This church also had its ethics together. Jesus acknowledges that they had done well not to tolerate wicked men. This was not a church of loose moral standards. All indications are that she took her call to be holy seriously.

Even more importantly, this church had its doctrine right. Right doctrine is absolutely crucial. If you do not believe rightly about God, sin, and the gospel then your relationship with God will not be right. Wrong thinking about God and wrong doctrine about God will always lead to a wrong relationship with God. It can't do anything else but that.

The church in Ephesus was also good at testing those preachers who claimed to be apostles of Christ. If their teaching did not match up with the teaching of Scripture this church showed them the door, as they should. Apparently the Ephesians had heeded the Apostle Paul's advice given to them a few years earlier when he taught them to "not be blown around by every wind of teaching" (Eph. 4:14).

There were a lot of things this church was doing right, things which were absolutely critical, to being a faithful church of Jesus Christ but there was one thing the Ephesians were lacking that would make all of the things they were doing right null and void. She had forsaken her first love. Something or someone else had become number one for the Ephesians. Maybe she loved her doctrine more than Jesus. Maybe she loved her purity or her faithfulness in times of persecution more than she loved the Savior himself. We are not told what the Ephesians loved more, we are just told she had forsaken her first love.

### **First Things First**

The Bible, from beginning to end, calls us to keep first things first. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, you shall have no other gods before me." Jesus said, "The first and greatest commandment is this: You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart soul, mind, and strength." In other words, do not forsake your first love. Love God first and foremost above all things and all people.

Many people believe that so long as they don't have a statue of an idol sitting on their mantle and they go to church once a week they are keeping the first and greatest commandment but this is not so. We can be doing a lot of important things right in our lives but still be forsaking our first love.

The word from Jesus to the church in Ephesus is one that is fundamental to who he is as Lord and Savior of the world: repent. Jesus began his preaching ministry that way (repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand) and then in the last book of the Bible the risen and ascended Christ is still preaching the same message to the church.

Jesus will never stop calling his church to repent, not until the new heavens and new earth come and the powers of sin, death, and hell are destroyed once and for all. And the reason this is the case is because his bride sometimes plays the harlot and forsakes him for other lovers and when that happens Jesus is going to call her to repent of her infidelity and love him above all else.

To repent doesn't just mean to quit doing bad things, to repent means to turn toward Christ and love him. How could we not love him? He is the one who is our Mediator between us and God. As God he is able to mediate to us God's love and forgiveness through his work on the

cross and as the one who is fully human he is also able to take us sinful incomplete humans up into the presence of God.

There is no greater love than the love that the Father lavished upon us when He gave us His Son.

Some theologians say that if God sent his Son into the world to be crucified then that God is cruel but it is not so. When Father sent His Son to die on the cross He was sending the essence of Himself, not someone outside of Himself, in order to redeem us from sin.

The sending of His Son was not an act of cruelty but the greatest act of love ever given. God cannot not arbitrarily forgive sin. To do so would be to forfeit his holiness. Justice must be carried out on sin but the good news of the gospel is that God deals with our sin from within His Triune self through the giving of His Son.

- “For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son...” (Jn. 3:16)
- “But God demonstrates his love for us in this that while we were yet still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:8)
- “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.” (I Jn. 3:16)

How could we not love him who gave himself for us?

### **Application of the Text**

Like the church in Ephesus there are a lot of things our church does well; and like the church in Ephesus (because of changing denominational conditions) we too have found ourselves in a position where we have been compelled to test the apostles because the gospel was being compromised to the point where it has become justifiable, I think, to re-affiliate with a denomination that is committed to being “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone.” But this I know, if we as a church do not love Jesus Christ as our first love then our lampstands will be in danger of being removed. If our love for Christ fades our lights will grow dim and we will die, no matter how orthodox our doctrine.

So as important as right doctrine is, and it is hugely important, our salvation, though connected to it, is not found in it. Our salvation, our life, and our vitality as a church is rooted in our love for Jesus Christ as he has revealed himself to be in Holy Scripture. If our love for him burns hot then our church will be on fire and full of life, but if our love for him runs cold then we will be dying.

How then do we love him? How do we keep him first?

It starts with the little things like opening the doors of our lives and letting him come in. “Behold I stand at the door and knock, if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.” (Rev. 3:20)

If you want to recapture your first love then you must sup with him. All the other things that we do to love him flows out of our time spent with Jesus. It's not complicated. Reading His Word. Praying to Him. Meditating upon Him. Worshipping Him. Yet it's not easy. If you are not careful you will start neglecting the little things that made you fall in love with him in the first place, just like the church in Ephesus. So repent and do the things you did at first and you will find yourself falling in love with him all over again.

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