

**Recovering First Love**  
**Revelation 2:1-7**  
**Bryn MacPhail / June 26, 2011**

The letters to the 7 churches in Asia, found in the Book of Revelation, are spoken by Jesus Christ, and are recorded by the apostle John.

These letters contain varying levels of praise and criticism for the 7 churches.

For example, criticism is altogether lacking in the letters to the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia. By contrast, the letter to the Church of Laodicea contains nothing but words of rebuke.

The letter to the Church of Ephesus is somewhere in between. With a mixture of praise and criticism, the letter addressed to the Ephesian congregation has a discernable outline.

The letter begins with *what Christ perceives* about them, continues with *what Christ prescribes* for them, and concludes with *what Christ persuades* them towards (Spurgeon).

Turning our attention to verse two, we identify first what Christ perceives. We are pleased to read that the Lord Jesus Christ perceives that many good things are happening at the Church in Ephesus.

The commendation given to them by Christ is quite an impressive one.

Jesus begins by recognizing their “**deeds**”—“**I know your deeds**”, He tells them (Rev. 2:2).

This appears to be a busy congregation. This is not an idle congregation; this is not a congregation that merely gathers for an hour on Sunday morning and then scatters—the Ephesian Christians are accomplishing things.

They are like a congregation in our day that has a vibrant Sunday School and a variety a mid-week programs. I suspect that the Ephesians are attentive to the needs of the poor and the disenfranchised. “**I know your deeds**”, Jesus tells them

Jesus goes on to commend them, “**I know . . . your toil**”. That is to say, ‘I recognize *the effort* required in your deeds.’ The Greek word employed here (*kopos*) implies a loss of strength; or a weariness that results from the work.

Apparently, the kind of deeds being carried out in the Church at Ephesus required significant energy. In other words, the work being done was not a nominal work; these folks were *exerting* themselves in their congregational duties.

These were the kind of people who could be counted on to roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty. “**I know . . . your toil**”, Jesus tells them.

Having recognized the value of the actual work done, and having recognized the effort involved in the execution of their work, Jesus commends them further, **“I know . . . your perseverance”**, He tells them.

The work of the church in Ephesus was not a short term venture. This congregation is seeing their work through to conclusion. There is no mention of any ‘quitters’ in the Church at Ephesus. It appears that the people who had signed up to do particular tasks were staying with their tasks.

This is how Jesus describes the work of the Church at Ephesus. These people were engaged in worthwhile projects, they were exerting themselves in those projects, and they were staying with the work until it was done.

If the commendation of the Church at Ephesus stopped here I would be sufficiently impressed, and yet, Jesus goes on,

**“I know . . . that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary”** (Rev. 2:2, 3).

There is much we can unpack in that compliment. Hearing that the congregation in Ephesus is unwilling to **“endure evil men”** (2:2) points to their *integrity*. This is a morally upright group of people.

We also learn that they are *a discerning group of people*. The Church at Ephesus had the ability to identify imposters—people who presented themselves as apostles, but were not. And, once again, the Christians in Ephesus are commended for persevering.

Jesus had already said they were persevering in their good deeds, and now He commends them for persevering in their discernment and their moral integrity.

And then, after all of that--after saying all of those positive things about the Christians in Ephesus, we read what no church ever wants to hear from our dear Lord:

**“BUT” . . . “But I have this against you, that you have left your first love” (2:4).**

The Lord Jesus Christ perceives many good things about the Church at Ephesus, but He also perceives that there is *something fundamentally lacking with them*—the people have forgotten the central element of the Christian faith, which is a loving relationship with Jesus Christ.

We can be sure that this is no little shortcoming based on the language employed by Christ. The element of loving Christ is so critical that the diminished expression of this love causes Christ to say that He has something **“against”** the congregation at Ephesus.

This is severe. If someone approaches you and says, ‘I have something against you’—that’s serious.

So when Christ tells the congregation in Ephesus that He has something “**against**” them, my attention is sufficiently arrested.

My attention is arrested, in part, because of the severity of the statement, but it is also arrested because I suspect these words apply to more congregations than we could probably number.

And I suspect there are, at least occasions, when these words of our Lord apply to you and me . . . “**I have this against you, that you have left your first love.**”

The notion that you have diminished your love for Christ need not cause you to altogether despair. It brings me great relief to see that Jesus follows His severe words with *an obtainable prescription*.

Though Christ be against us when our love departs, He prescribes for us a course that will return us to a right relationship with Him.

Christ prescribes for the people of Ephesus, and He prescribes for all who have wandered from the love of Christ, “**Remember**” . . . “**Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first**” (2:5).

What is implied in this prescription is the notion that our love had a distinct character when we began with Christ.

I know mine did. I remember how I felt when I first comprehended that Christ died for me on the cross and that, in Him, I had found forgiveness for all my sins. I remember how inflamed my love for Christ was at the thought that He had become my Saviour, my Lord, and my friend.

Now, remember that each for yourselves. Did you have such a day? Was there a time when your love for Christ was such that you longed to pray to Him; a time when the prospect of gathering with His people on Sunday morning excited your very soul?

If there was such a time, *remember it*.

Bring to mind those thoughts that overflowed into loving devotion. If there was such a time, if there was such a time when loving Christ was your first priority, if there was a time when Christ was the most important thing about you, it will be helpful to ask yourself: "What has happened? Why is Christ less than that now?"

I agree with Charles Spurgeon, who asserts that our love grows cold when we neglect communion with Christ (not talking about the Lord's Supper). Spurgeon is referring specifically to our dealings with Christ in prayer and our dealings with Christ as we read the Scriptures. Spurgeon goes on to say, 'We shall never love Christ much (unless) we live near Him.'

Jesus' call to "**repent**" (a word which means "to turn around") then, is a call to us who are far off, to come near again. It is a call to us who have grown cold in our prayers, to return to fervent prayer.

The call to repent is to us who have regarded the words of Scripture as bitter, to once again reckon them to be **“sweeter than honey”** (Ps. 119:103).

This is the prescription of Jesus Christ to all those who have left their first love.

And lest anyone think that a return to Christ is unnecessary, He finishes His message to the Ephesians with *strong words of persuasion*,

**“I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent . . . (but) to him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God”** (2:5, 7).

In other words, this is a matter of life and death. The punishment threatened here is corporate—the removal of the **“lampstand”** signifies the removal of light and life from the local congregation.

Alternatively, the reward promised is **“the Paradise of God”** (2:7). Which are we going to choose? Which will the Kirk choose?

We regularly choose to do good deeds, we run excellent programs throughout the year--and yes--our people exert themselves for the Gospel—but of course, so did the congregation in Ephesus.

The heart of the matter is not how busy we are. The heart of the matter is not how much we are accomplishing.

The heart of the matter is whether or not Jesus Christ is our first love.

Remember Jesus' answer when asked which commandment was the greatest? He answered: **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength"** (Mk. 12:30).

I want to ask a question that quite likely is going to cause our heart to sink a bit. I know this because when I ask myself this question, my heart sinks.

Here we have before us a single command—what Jesus regards as the most important command—to love God with everything we've got—heart, soul, mind, and strength.

My question is this: *Does our life demonstrate to those around us that Jesus is our first love?*

I'm not asking: Does our life demonstrate that Jesus is important to us?

Probably a lot of us score well on that question.

Jesus doesn't simply want us to love Him a lot.

He wants us to love Him *first*.



There's a chance that many of us know what that looks like because, like the Ephesian Christians, there was a time when Christ was our first love. And so our challenge then is to remember and return to how we used to get on with Jesus.

Perhaps for others, the idea of loving Jesus first is new. Perhaps you have valued a relationship with Jesus for a long time, but making Him the centre of your existence is not something you've ever consciously pursued.

It is now summer time. For many of us, that means vacation (mine begins on Wednesday). For many of us, summer affords us a break from some of our heavy responsibilities.

We think of summer, and we often think of taking a break from certain things.

My plea and my pray for you is that you not take a break from pursuing Jesus Christ this summer.

I need to confess to you that sometimes in ministry I get so busy doing things in the name of Jesus that, somehow, loving him deeply gets set aside.

If you're feeling challenged by this call to love Jesus first, I want you to know that I'm challenged by this call too!

If you think about me over the next few weeks while I'm away in Canada, pray for me as I seek to recover my first love, Jesus Christ.

As I think about all of you, I will pray the same.

God has so marvelously arranged that He is most glorified, and we are most satisfied, when Jesus is loved first.

Let's begin that journey today.