

First Things First: Jesus Above All

Revelation 2:1-7

Several years ago a friend of my father was headed to China for a trip. As the day for his departure finally arrived he ran a few errands to pick up some things he needed, checked his watch and realized he was running dangerously close to missing his flight. So he hurried home, threw his bags into his car, kissed his wife and children goodbye and sped down the freeway to LAX. He hurriedly made it through all of the security checkpoints, put his bag into the overhead bin and sat down in his seat. He had made it, and yet it's here where he began to have the nagging thought that he forgot something really important- we've all been there, haven't we? But for the life of him he couldn't figure out what it was. Finally, at about 35k feet in the air somewhere over the Pacific he realized what it was, and the very thought of it made him nauseous. See in his hurry to make his flight he had pulled up curbside to LAX, hopped out the car and left his car running while he went to make his flight. On his way to do a good thing- go to China- he forgot to take care of the most essential thing- park his car. For while there were many flights to China, he only had one car. He had forgotten to take care of first things first.

We've all been there haven't we? I mean who doesn't know the pain of taking care of good things at the expense of the best things. As a dad I feel this tension all the time. I mean I can get so caught up in the good thing of providing for my kids, that I can neglect the essential thing of spending great time with them. In our marriages we can get caught up in the rat race of just life, doing good things, that we can become guilty of losing the romance and passion for one another. As a college student you can become so engaged in a good thing- connecting with others on campus- that you neglect the essential thing- the reason why you're at college, and that is your studies. And this is the story of the church of Ephesus. As we're going to see in just a few moments, they were doing a lot of good things, and yet Jesus says I've got one problem with you, you've left your first love. In other words, they fell into that age old trap of exchanging essential things for good things, they had neglected to take care of first things first.

Historical Context

As our passage unfolds we see that Jesus is sending a message to the church at Ephesus. Ephesus at this time was a major city, what some have called the NYC of its day. It was a highly influential city, so influential that one ancient historian called Ephesus the light of Asia. Given this, you can see why Paul would come here and plant a church. Ephesus was so strategic of a city that Paul stayed here the longest of any city he ministered in, some three years. A church is planted, and the early historian tells us that it took off, with the result being that Ephesus contained a sizeable Christian community, and became a hub of Christian missionary activity. Now some forty years after the church was planted Jesus sends a message to the church. We know that the church of Ephesus had to have been influential, because this is the first of the seven letters Jesus sends to the churches. The fact that Ephesus is first, speaks to her influence.

As our passage unfolds it begins with some curious language- the letter is addressed to an angel. I agree with many scholars here who suggest the angel is the leader of the church. Angels are messengers, they speak to the people on

behalf of God, and this is what pastors do. Jesus goes on to describe himself as the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. What does this mean? **Revelation 1:20 tells us. Look at it with me.** The stars are the angels or leaders of the churches, and the lampstands are the churches. Jesus is telling us two things about how he relates to his people that are extremely comforting. The first is that he's saying he's in control. He holds the leaders and therefore the churches in his right hand, the hand of power and blessing. He's in control. Yet he also walks among the churches. This is a sign of his care. No he's not walking as some security guard waiting to point out mistakes, but as a caring shepherd. What does this text teach us about Jesus? He is both in control and he cares.

But what exactly does this mean for us right now, Summit? When we really come to terms with the fact that Jesus Christ is in control and he is providing deep care for his church, this should eliminate worry. You do know what worry is, don't you? It's our emotional reaction to a perceived event, while fear is our reaction to an actual event. This is exactly Jesus' point in Matthew 6, where he says three times that his followers are not to worry. Don't get bent out of shape about what might happen! Why? Because he's in control and he cares. He calls us to look at the birds of the air and the lilies of the field- if God feeds and clothes them, showing his sovereign (heer control) care over them, how much more so will he do that with us who have been made in his image?

If ever there was a time in our lives where there has been the temptation to worry about the church, it's now. Our political climate can cause many of us to worry. The pandemic of COVID can cause us to worry about the church. The racial milieu we are in can cause many of us to worry. But I want you to know that we have Scriptures and church history on our side. God has never taken a day off when it comes to his sovereign care of his church. The church has survived bad political leaders like Nero, pandemics like the Black plague and such churches like the Black church survived and thrived against the backdrop of slavery and Jim Crow. All of this and more points to a Jesus who holds his church and cares for his church! If he did it then, he is doing it now!

Comfort

Beginning in verse two Jesus takes the time to comfort the church by encouraging them on what they are doing well. He says, *I know your works*. This is a knowledge that comes by close observation. In other words, Jesus says I've been checking you out, and he points out nine things they do well. These nine things can be summarized in three statements. First, Jesus tells them that you are a hard-working church, this is what he means by *toil*. He says you ain't lazy. You're on mission. You've been getting after it. You're serving. You volunteer and sacrifice your time for the sake of the mission (clap). Second he tells them they're a faithful church, this is what he means by their endurance. The word *endurance* means the power to withstand hardship or stress. In other words, Jesus is saying you've been through some stuff and you didn't quit. Oh this is many of you. All we've been through, the ups and downs, the heartache, and you're still here serving (clap). You're faithful. Finally, he says you're a discerning church. This is what he means when he talks about them discerning evil apostles who tried to pass themselves off as

true, and them spotting false doctrine in verse 6 which was taught by the Nicolaitans. CLAP...A
HARDWORKING, FAITHFUL AND DISCERNING CHURCH! WOW!

Critique

But beginning in verse four, our text takes a turn. Jesus starts out with *BUT*. Ain't it just like Jesus to find something wrong? It's like taking your car to get a simple oil change and they tell you everything looks good, *BUT* you need a new radiator. Or going to the dentist for a simple cleaning and he says for the most part your teeth are in good shape, *BUT* you have one cavity. *BUT!* But you have abandoned your first love. The Greek word for *abandoned* is often times translated forgive. It means to send away, to get rid of, to let go. Now that's great for grudges, but horrible of Jesus. Jesus says at some point you got so busy doing things *for* me, that you did them *without* me, you sent me away. You let me go. We started out together, and I was first, but over time you drifted away. This is a common problem: **Jeremiah 2:2; Matthew 24:12; Matthew 10:37-38**. Hear me, what this text teaches is a fundamental lesson, and if you get nothing else I say, get this: This text teaches us that I can do good things like ministry and bible reading and studying the Scriptures a part from a first love relationship with Jesus; that good things become bad things when they become first things. When Jesus is not first in the equation, the whole equation is messed up.

I remember helping one of my sons with his math homework some time ago, and he was in that section of math called order of operations. You remember that? It's equations where you've got addition, multiplication, subtraction, parenthesis and so on. And here's the deal: You just can't jump in and start adding and multiplying and dividing, you've got to do it in the right sequence. This is important because you can get the math right, but if you get the sequence wrong, the whole thing is wrong. Jesus is saying I'm so glad you're praying and reading the Bible and serving in ministry, and being faithful, and giving, but the problem I have with you is you are doing those things detached from me first, and because of that the whole equation is screwed up.

The Ephesians had left their first love, but what exactly is first love? In a word, it's passion. Ever been in love? Think real hard now. If you've been in love, then you know first love. When I fell in love with sister Korie I was an introvert who became an extrovert. I called all the time. We talked for hours. When we hung up the phone I couldn't get her off my mind. We went out to eat, and then when I couldn't afford that we took long walks together. I wrote letters to her. That's first love. But then about a year into our marriage, Korie came to me and said we're off, we ain't connecting, something's wrong. *I don't feel as if you love me*. Dumb me responded, If you ever doubt my love for you, look at this house, feel this air conditioning and look inside the refrigerator. Didn't go well, because I had confused doing things for her, with being in intimate love with her.

And we do this with Jesus. You can tithe but have left your first love. You can articulate deep doctrines, but have left your first love. You can show up and serve, but have left your first love. You can love going on that missions

trip more than Jesus. You can engage in discipleship and have left your first love. Never confuse doing stuff for Jesus with the first love of Jesus!

(Well, what happens when we get off track? How do we restore Jesus back to first love?)

Correction- The Journey Back

Remember. Jesus says if you are going to have me as your first love you must do three things- remember, repent and redo. All three of these are imperatives or commands. And he first begins by telling them to remember. It was William Barclay who said the journey back to Jesus begins with memory, that there is a place for nostalgia in the Christian life. But remember what? Jesus says to remember from where we have fallen. In other words, we are to remember the time when Jesus was our everything!

Many of us have read through the OT, and as we've done so we've noticed that God has an uncanny habit: Whenever he moves in a major way in the life of his people he calls them to stop and build an altar of remembrance. He wants them to set up some spiritual mile markers, so that when they pass by in the future they remember the faithfulness of God in times past and it stirs them to greater passion for him in the present and future. Remembering is necessary!

I hope this is a safe place, but when my wife goes out of town and leaves me home I'm a wreck. Can I turn in my man card? I'm so messed up that I will sleep on her side of the bed so I can smell her scent. In fact, there have been times I've caught myself on her side of the closet smelling her clothes. Why? There's a direct correlation between the sense of smell and the sense of memory. Remembering my wife stirs within me deep feelings for her.

Oh friends, when you find yourself having lost your passion for Jesus, take a whiff of his fragrance of grace in your life! Remember when you first came into relationship with Jesus, remember when you first got saved and the joy that filled your soul? You didn't know much bible or theology, but you were sharing your faith with everyone you could, because Jesus meant that much to you. You didn't know all the "proper" ways to pray, but you poured out your heart to him. You had no idea about the latest Bible studies, but you couldn't put your Bible down. Yeh, get back to that- to that season where Jesus was everything.

Repent. Secondly, Jesus says to repent. Now the last time I checked, the only thing we repent of in the Bible is sin. You know what Jesus is saying here? No matter how good your works for me may be, if I'm not first it's sin. If you love biblical orthodoxy more than me it's sin. If you love the church more than me, it's sin. Bryan if you love preaching about me, more than walking with me, it's sin. If you love your family more than me, it's sin, and we need to repent. If Jesus ain't first, we're in sin.

Redo. Finally, Jesus says redo. Go back and do what you did when I was your first and everything. C.S. Lewis says that a thing becomes precious to you when you treat it as precious. This is so key, because what he's saying is that when you've lost your passion, do what you did when you had your passion. Don't wait until you feel like buying flowers, buy the flowers and the feelings will come. And don't wait until you feel like loving Jesus, do the things you did when you were passionate about him and the passion will come. This isn't original to Lewis, he had to have gotten this from Jesus, because Jesus says do what you did when all you had was me, and the passion will come.

Conclusion

But what happens when we restore Jesus back to first love status? Look at how our text ends. Jesus says to the one who conquers we will experience paradise. What does this mean? Paradise in the bible has one common theme- the presence of God! On the cross Jesus says to one of the two thieves today you will be with me in paradise. Did you get that- you will be with me in paradise, which means they will experience his presence. So what Jesus is saying here is clear, when we have him as our first love we will experience rich, intimate fellowship with him. That we don't have to wait until we die to experience it, we can experience it now, because he's first!

But finally, John says we will eat of the tree of life! The Greek word for life is zoe and it means abundance, exuberance, happiness. It conveys the idea of joy. When Jesus is the alpha and omega of our lives there's joy. That's why Psalm 16 says that when it comes to the presence of God there is fullness of joy! Oh dear friend there's no greater joy than when Jesus is first! When Jesus becomes everything there's joy!

Summit, of course God wants us to do things for him. Of course he wants us to be hard working and sacrificing. Of course he wants us to be engaging in ministry and serving. But these things can never take the place of whose at the center of this text, and of our faith- JESUS! If they do it will result in a lifeless legalism which will become destructive. But if these things flow out of a deep love for Jesus, if he becomes our starting point, now we're onto something. Imagine a young man is finishing up his doctorate degree, and right as he does he's told he has to learn German, take a test and he'll get his Ph.D. It's the middle of summer, so he goes out and hires a tutor who meets with him three hours a day five days a week to learn German. Now does he like this? No. Does he want to learn German? No. Is there joy here? No. But he has to, to get the degree. But now imagine another scenario where this same man falls in love with a girl from Germany who doesn't speak a lick of English. He realizes that if he has any hope of a close relationship he has to speak her language and learn German. So he hires a tutor who for three hours a day, five days a week tutors him. Think he wants to show up? Think he's really engaging and trying to retain as much as he can? Absolutely. You know the difference. He's motivated by relationship. GOSPEL!