

The Grace of Wrath

Studies in the Revelation of Jesus Christ

Text

Chapter 2:1-7

Topic

Jesus tells the church at Ephesus that, despite all their good works, they have left their first love

Title

"You've Left that First Love Feelin' "

Introduction

30 years.

Congratulations, church at Ephesus. At the time of the writing of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, they had been a vibrant, evangelical church for thirty years.

Do you suppose they might have been having a special anniversary service, with the reading of the personal letter from Jesus Christ as the centerpiece of the celebration?

If so, it all started to go wrong four verses in at "Nevertheless."

Rev 2:4 **Nevertheless** I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

That'll bring you down.

30 years.

Congratulations, Calvary Hanford. This year **we** have been a vibrant, evangelical church for thirty years.

Want to celebrate? I do. But we might want to be sure that there is no "Nevertheless" for us on our Lord's lips.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Good Works Can Conceal Your Left-Love, and #2 First Works Always Affirm Your First Love.

#1 Good Works Can Conceal Your Left-Love

(v1-4)

This is the first of the letters Jesus dictated to the seven churches mentioned in chapter one. We should say a few things about these letters in general before we get into the situation unique to Ephesus.

These seven churches were all in modern Turkey. If you started at Ephesus, and visited all the rest, they'd be in the geographical order we encounter them in these two chapters, about thirty to fifty miles apart.

There is a similarity in the structure of the letters. Each opens with a greeting to the individual church; each presents the Lord Jesus in a description borrowed from chapter one that is peculiarly fitting for that particular church; and each describes His knowledge of the church's works, introduced by the words "I know."

Words of commendation are addressed to all churches except Laodicea; words of reproof are addressed to all except Smyrna and Philadelphia. To each a special exhortation is given to hear what the Spirit is saying, and in each a special promise is included for the overcomer.

One commentator has assigned the following titles, expressing the dominant features addressed in each church:

1. Ephesus, the loveless church.
2. Smyrna, the persecuted church.
3. Pergamos, the over-tolerant church.
4. Thyatira, the compromising church.
5. Sardis, the sleeping church.
6. Philadelphia, the church with opportunity.
7. Laodicea, the complacent church.

The letters have at least four levels of application:

1. They had a *provincial* application. These seven were actual churches existing in John's day which Jesus wrote to for correction and/or commendation.
2. The letters always have a *present* application. At the end of each letter is the exhortation to "hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Although each letter is written to **a** church, each is also written to **all** the churches throughout the church age. These seven were representative of characteristics and conditions that might exist in any local church or churches in any century.
3. The letters always have *personal* application to every Christian. They each say, "**he** that hath an ear to hear," talking to individual believers in any church, in any era.

4. The letters have a *prophetic* application. These seven, taken in the order Jesus put them, describe successive periods of church history. With hindsight we can see that they lay out the entire history of the church from the apostolic church of the first century right through the apostate church of the last days.

Which brings us to the first century church at Ephesus.

Rev 2:1 "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:

We established that the "angel," or *messenger*, of each church was the person who read the letter aloud to the congregation. It was most likely the pastor of the church.

The church at Ephesus had been founded by the apostle Paul on his third missionary journey. He pastored in Ephesus for three years.

Probably during this period the other six churches of the Revelation were founded, both by missionaries who were sent out from Ephesus, and by the influence of converts returning to their homes.

After Paul left, we know that Timothy pastored in Ephesus for a time. And church history says that the apostle John did, too.

In chapter one John saw Jesus in the midst of seven golden lampstands, holding the seven stars in His right hand.

This was interpreted for us at the end of chapter one. The lampstands were the seven churches; and the stars were the angels - the pastors - of the seven churches.

In each of the seven letters, Jesus borrows a different attribute from His description in chapter one in His opening comments. The particular attribute Jesus chooses has a direct bearing on His correction or His commendation for each church.

In the case of Ephesus, Jesus described Himself as tending the lampstands of the churches because He was going to warn them that, if they did not repent, He would remove their lampstand.

In our mythical 30-year Anniversary celebration, Jesus began by commending them for their many good works.

Rev 2:2 "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars;

The Ephesian believers had good "works" in over-abundance. Their good works were characterized by "labor" and "patience."

- "Labor" describes strenuous, exhausting work. Not in a negative way - but in that way you feel when, although exhausted, it was totally worth it, because you enjoyed it.
- They also had "patience" as they worked. Read about the church at Ephesus in Acts nineteen and you'll see that the believers faced fierce local opposition from nonbelievers. They labored on for the Lord.

Jesus noted that "you cannot bear those who are evil." He might be referring to their willingness to confront sin in their midst, and to discipline professing believers, for their own good, but also to maintain the witness of the church.

In one of the most emotional moments of the Book of Acts, Paul met with the elders from Ephesus to warn them that false teachers would try to infiltrate the church, to destroy it with their false teachings. The Ephesians took this seriously, and would not tolerate these false "apostles," calling them "liars."

Rev 2:3 and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.

They "persevered" leading to even greater "patience" as troubles mounted-up. They continued to labor, not getting "weary" in well-doing.

They did it all with pure motives, because Jesus, Who alone knows men's hearts, said it was "for My Name's sake." The Ephesians weren't looking to make a name for themselves, but only to lift-up the Name of Jesus.

They must have been feeling pretty good.

Then **it** happened:

Rev 2:4 Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

Did they gasp? Did someone say, "What?" Did some begin to weep?

Were there those who disagreed? Or who immediately thought of others that were guilty of this - but certainly not them?

Commentators struggle trying to define "first love." I've struggled over the years trying to define it.

Is it a feeling? Is it more than a feeling? Is it our love for Jesus? Or for other believers? Or is it both?

First love is usually, and not inaccurately, related to the passionate, zealous love of the engagement between ourselves, as the bride, and Jesus, as the bridegroom.

The Ephesians would relate to this seeing as Paul had used the bride metaphor in his letter to them.

Indeed, the Revelation, also, makes much of "the bride," and of our wedding feast, in the last chapters.

Similar to our human relationships between husband and wife, the initial love of our engagement can cool and need rekindling.

One problem, however, with that definition of first love is that we sort of expect it to cool. Our zeal to constantly be with our spouse gives way to the occasional date night when the kids aren't sick and we can afford it.

Thus, if Jesus were to say to us, "you have left your first love," we'd shake our heads and say, "We know," but we'd secretly think it was normal, almost inevitable. Our solution is to get back to our regular devotions - which is the spiritual equivalent of date night.

Is there some other clue as to what first love might be referring to?

I see a clue in the letter itself. It's in Jesus' prescription for overcoming having left your first love. In the very next verse, Jesus will mention a return to "first works."

Whatever "first love" is, it produces "first works." These must be somehow different from the good "works" Jesus had commended them for, because they were doing good works but no longer doing first works.

Do we know what these "first works" were in Ephesus? We do. I can summarize them from the story of the founding of the church in the Book of Acts.

On his approach to Ephesus, before the church was founded by him, the apostle Paul encountered twelve disciples of John the Baptist (Acts 19).

As Paul spoke to them, he realized they had never received the promise of the Holy Spirit coming upon them, to empower them for service. Today we would say they were not Spirit-filled.

Paul baptized them in water, signifying that they were saved, and that God the Holy Spirit was in them. Then, subsequent to their water baptism, "Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came **upon** them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied" (Acts 19:6).

Later, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul would exhort them to go on being continually filled with the Holy Spirit as a renewable experience.

The other notable event in Ephesus was sparked by a failed exorcism by a group of Jews, called the sons of Sceva. They had seen Paul do many miracles - including exorcising demons. When they tried, the demon spoke from inside the person, saying, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?"

Act 19:16 Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

Act 19:17 This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified.

Act 19:18 And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds.

Act 19:19 Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totaled fifty thousand pieces of silver.

Act 19:20 So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.

The "many who had believed" were Christians who had nevertheless continued in their practice of "magic" until this episode, quite literally, put the fear of God in them and they quit compromising with the world.

Knowing these things about the believers in Ephesus, we can say that their "first works" were (1) to receive and to go on receiving the fullness of God the Holy Spirit; and (2) to turn *to* God *from* idols they allowed to *remain* or *return* in their lives.

Good works, from right motives, can continue without the power of God the Holy Spirit. In fact, good works can conceal the fact we have left our first love.

Christians can certainly be laboring patiently, persevering and not growing weary, while simultaneously harboring an idol or idols in their lives.

But receiving the Holy Spirit, and being filled by Him, and keeping yourself from idols - those are first works that affirm your first love.

Did you receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit when you believed? Have you received fresh fillings of the Holy Spirit since you believed? Are your good works really being done in total dependance upon God - or do you think your talents and abilities have anything to do with ministry? Because they don't.

What about idols? The Ephesians harbored idols, but then repented, and burned them at great financial loss.

Are there idols you've never let go of? Or, more probable, are there idols you've added to your life over time? Maybe things you burned, or would have burned, in a bonfire years ago, which now hold sway over you.

First love is total *dependance* on Jesus, and it is total *independence* from the love of the world, manifesting itself in first works.

I don't just want good works. I want first works.

#2 First Works Always Affirm Your First Love

(v5-7)

Do you like performance reviews? I hate them; and I hate giving them.

But that's only because they are so subjective, and because they come from the human heart, which can be wicked and deceitful.

The performance reviews Jesus gives are pure; holy; loving; merciful. But we need to let Him speak to us. We need to invite His searching of our hearts.

Jesus had something "against" the believers in Ephesus, but the situation was not beyond remedy.

Rev 2:5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place - unless you repent.

"Remember" invites you to look back. We looked back at Ephesus, and we saw those things which once characterized them.

They had "fallen," but they could (and should) get up.

If a greater dependance on God, and a greater independence from the world, used to be true of you - then you've "fallen."

Thank God - the fix is easy. "Repent," which means to turn around and walk the other way. Do what the Beatles said, and "get back to where you once belonged."

Jesus warned them that, if they did not get on board and "repent," He'd "remove [their] lampstand."

He wasn't saying anything about individual salvation, because He was addressing the church corporately.

The churches on the earth are lampstands; they are the only spiritual light in the darkness of a realm whose ruler is "the god of this world," Satan.

Jesus is our source of oil for our lampstand; and He is the one who trims the wick - keeping us burning brightly.

Unless we leave our first love. We are then actively quenching His light.

He was warning that the church at Ephesus would cease to have a testimony about the Lord.

"Quickly" is the Greek word from which we get *tachometer*. It doesn't mean soon; it meant that once He decided to remove their lampstand it would happen suddenly.

A church can go on for a long time, doing good works, but quenching the light. Don't underestimate the energy of the flesh.

Rev 2:6 But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

There are two theories on why they were called Nicolaitans:

1. Some early church fathers believed they were disciples of Nicolaus, who is mentioned in Acts 6:5 as one of the original seven deacons. If true, this is a sad commentary on his defection from the faith.
2. Others think it is a description of their basic beliefs. The compound word means something like *over the people*. One possible rendering of the Greek word literally means, *laity conqueror*.

What was their false doctrine? Because they are mentioned again in the letter to the church at Pergamos in connection with the Old Testament character Balaam some commentators say they were among those who were casting a stumbling block before the church of God by upholding the liberty of eating things sacrificed to idols as well as committing fornication.

Hippolytus, writing in the third century, said the Nicolaitans followed the Gnostic heresy. They believed that the only thing that mattered was your spirit, not your body. The result was that you could live any way you wanted – using your body in all sort of perverse ways.

Others charge the Nicolaitans with establishing a priesthood over believers, ‘conquering the laity’ – the people - by lording over them.

We don’t know for sure. Unless some ancient document is discovered, we will never know, not for sure.

The point Jesus was emphasizing is that the believers at Ephesus would not put up with any false or aberrant teaching.

Why this commendation after His correction? It certainly wasn't just so they wouldn't feel so bad; or to lessen the heaviness of what He had just said.

It serves as a reminder that reminding first love will only lead to a return to first works that are biblical.

Too often a believer will begin to feel the Lord's correction about leaving their first love.

But instead of simply remembering, they go searching for something a little more edgy, a little more 'out-there,' as if the experience they'd had was wrong, rather than the problem being in their own heart.

"Stay biblical," Jesus was saying. It's an exhortation we need today more than ever.

If my oldest grandson is listening to the webcast, he undoubtedly turned to his dad or mom and asked, "Did papa just use a bad word?" It's the word, "hate."

Did Jesus use a bad word? Proverbs 6:16-19 outlines seven things the Lord hates: pride, lying, murder, evil plots, those who love evil, false witness, and troublemakers.

There are other things God is said to hate, like certain types of divorce, for example (Malachi 2:16).

There are things God hates; we should hate them, too.

Rev 2:7 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." '

Churches are comprised of people who are all over the spiritual map. There are believers as well as nonbelievers. There are those believers who are spiritual, and others who are carnal. There are agitators - those taken captive by Satan, coming to do his will by seeking to harm the church and its testimony.

Everyone is invited to "hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Jesus ministers His grace by His Spirit, seeking to penetrate the hearts of the hearers with the truth of their relationship to Him.

The word "overcomes" could be translated *victorious*. It is a military word. It reminds us that we are in a war - a fierce spiritual war, being waged on this earth by malevolent forces for the souls of men.

It makes our return to first love, and its first works, all the more crucial. Eternal life is at stake.

In the immediate context of this letter, overcoming would mean being continually filled with the Holy Spirit, and constantly on guard against the love of the world.

I don't know if you're ready for this, but I'm pretty sure we will be fruitarians in eternity. There will be no more death - and that includes animals. But the fruit will be delicious!

At the very end of the Revelation, once we are in the new creation, all believers will, in fact, partake of the tree of life in the midst of the Paradise of God.

At Woodstock, Crosby, Stills & Nash, sang, "we've got to get ourselves back to the Garden." We're not going back to the Garden of Eden, where God came and visited with our first parents merely once a day in the afternoon.

We're looking for the New Jerusalem, where we will be in constant, sinless, intimate fellowship with God the Father, with God the Son, and with God the Holy Spirit.

It's not inevitable that a church leave its first love; but if it could happen to Ephesus, it can happen anywhere - even here.

The Lord says to us, "I know." Let's invite Him to search our hearts, and to tell us - individually, then corporately - what He already knows.

A whole group of Ephesians turned to God from their idols. We can, too.

Let Him reveal any idol or idols you are holding on to, or that have been reintroduced.

And ask Him to be filled afresh with His Spirit. Gordon Fee writes,

[The apostle] Paul does not see life in the Spirit as a result of a single experience of the Spirit at conversion... frequently Paul implies there are further, ongoing appropriations of the Spirit's empowering... For Paul, life in the Spirit begins at conversion; at the same time that experience is both dynamic and renewable.

In Ephesus, twelve believers let Paul lay his hands on them to be filled with the Holy Spirit. We can, too - have hands laid on us with prayer for the filling of the Spirit.