

January 15, 2017
Sunday Morning Service
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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HAVE YOU LEFT YOUR FIRST LOVE? Revelation 2:1-7

The new year began two weeks ago. In fact, the first day of the new year was on Sunday. Many of our people were traveling or sick and not able to meet with us during that one meeting on New Year's day. The same was true regarding Christmas day when we met for only one service. Then last week we endured what was hopefully our one annual snow fall. The inclement weather put a damper on our people's ability to meet together, to enjoy corporate worship, to praise the Lord together, and to help each other come to a greater knowledge of Christ.

Today things should be back to a normal, ordinary schedule for the most part. That is a good thing. It is actually good for us as individuals and as an assembly of Christ-lovers to go about our lives and ministries according to a repetitive schedule. Purposeful, intentional schedules do much to help productivity, whether we are talking about businesses, schools, individual lives or churches. Repetition instills good, useful habits.

To that end, it is beneficial for us, now that we are back on schedule, to stop for one service and review our condition as an assembly of Christ-lovers. The text chosen for the sermon today presents that very question: "Are we really lovers of Christ?" Or have we wandered away from our first love, our most important love, our love that has eternal ramifications. Wandering is easy to do. Wandering away might be easy, and even common, but the consequences can be disastrous.

We will work our way through this little letter (more like a note) that Jesus sent to some of His very special people in the ancient city of Ephesus.

Christ Knows the Church's Good Work (vv.1-3, 6).

The One who knows communicates with the Church. The opening verse in this chapter reads: "*To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands' "*" (v.1). From the first chapter we learned that these seven letters are letters from Jesus Christ to seven actual churches (1:11). He sent this one to the church that was in Ephesus.

The letter was penned for an angel or a messenger. Jesus instructed John to write this particular letter, with these particular statements to a messenger who represented the whole Church in Ephesus. Surely there were multiple house meetings that made up the "called out assembly." Some kind of representative received this letter and read it to the various meeting groups.

That assembly, like every assembly of Christ's people, was a special group of people. They were, for the most part, people whom God had drawn to the Savior Jesus Christ. For the most part, they were people who had experienced the miracle of the new birth through the gift of faith. It is also likely that there were some religious people involved who had not been born again, but who knew the language and understood what is expected of born again people. As in most local churches, there were probably some folks who liked feeling part, but whom God never drew to the Savior for salvation.

The people of the assembly would have stood out obviously against the backdrop of paganism in Ephesus. Ephesus had been a chief city in the ancient Greek dynasty. It was even more important in the Roman empire. The citizens of that city proudly considered themselves to be the home of and protector of the religion of Artemis, also known as Diana in Roman culture. Worship of this false goddess involved temple prostitution. Not only was the wickedness exalted but the temple prostitutes were viewed with honor as priestesses. Obviously, Christians are not going to fit in that kind of culture.

In the same way, Christians do not fit in the culture of violence, drunkenness, drugged up debauchery of every kind that pours out unceasingly from the cesspools of Hollywood, Broadway, and the internet. People who love Jesus will not be identified with such

brazen sinfulness. When the fashions, attitudes, music, and lifestyle of the Globe Awards or Grammy Awards show up in an assembly of God's people, there is a problem. It shouldn't take a theologian to figure that out— just people who are honest.

This letter, like the other six, are not just old, antiquated letters written for the sake of local assemblies that are long gone. These are undying, relevant letters still. They are *The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands (v.1)*. What does it mean that the one who spoke these words holds the seven stars in His right hand? The seven stars were mentioned in 1:16, being identified as held by the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. They are the particular leaders of the seven various churches. We would probably call them the pastors or the one individual most responsible for leading the Church in the particular city.

The words teach us that Christ is in control of the leaders of His Church. He is even now walking among the Churches (pictured by the seven golden lampstands). We are called lampstands because our purpose is to send forth the light of truth. This is in contrast to the false teachers or apostles who send out error that they intend to look like truth. We must always be sensitive to the fact that Jesus Christ who bought Community Baptist Church with His blood is always walking in our midst, whether or not we are gathered in this building.

What does He who walks among the churches know? He knows how diligent and faithful we are. He wrote, *"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance"(v.2a)*. Diligence and faithfulness can be a struggle. It is difficult to live for Christ in this flesh and in this world. Our natural desires seek to make us Lord and Master of our lives. If we live according to natural inclination and according to what is acceptable in our culture, we will be Master, not Jesus.

Our culture and our nature truly find it difficult to accept a relationship with Jesus Christ characterized by labor, toil, and endurance. These are the kinds of words that describe a tiresome lifestyle, one that leads to exhaustion. People who live like this must in reality draw on a resource of strength beyond themselves—yea, Christ Himself. This description is as far as one can imagine from the practice of following Christ when it is convenient. Which forces us to ask, "Do people who profess to love Christ, but who do little for Him, and that only when it is convenient, really love Him?"

It was especially difficult for Christians to live in Ephesus. The city was not located in the Bible belt of the Roman empire (because there was none). While there were multiple believers in the city, they were a very small minority. We know that the church virtually began under a cloud of persecution when Demetrius the silversmith stirred up the whole city against Paul and the preachers (Acts 19). Having the whole city in an uproar against you would make loving Jesus' publicly a bit of a challenge.

Because that was true, Jesus pointed out that true believers learn patient endurance during times of suffering. He assured them, *"I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary" (v.3)*. We are aware that some followers of Christ experience suffering that requires endurance almost every day. They are learning great lessons about not growing weary.

However, almost no one in our spheres of influence is suffering because of their faith. Yes, there will be occasional insults. There will be cases of exclusion. There might be the rare case of losing a job or being sued out of business by wretched sinners. That kind of stuff is becoming more common in some parts of our culture. But in Greenville, we don't have many opportunities to learn how to endure for the name of Jesus.

Jesus knows how much we endure for Him and, at the same time, He knows how orthodox we are. He told the Christians in Ephesus that He knew *"how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false" (v.2b)*. That is simply a trait of not being willing to tolerate evil people. It does not simply mean that we are just adverse to evil people, but we are not able to bear with them. In real life, it means that the person who loves Christ finds it difficult to be around and impossible to endorse those who are evil.

Wow! What kind of evil do these people do that makes them so intolerable? Didn't Paul teach us that we need to have associations with sinful people in the world in order to impact them with the gospel? (1 Corinthians 5:10) What makes these evil people so intolerable to the Jesus-lover is that they are religious. That is why Jesus commended the people for being willing to test professing apostles. The evil people claim to be sent by Jesus Christ to do His

work. Therefore, they use the name Christian. They talk about Jesus and Bible kind of stuff. They take on all the outward trappings of “Christianity.” But they are evil which means they are harmful and injurious. They harm the cause of Christ because at some point they replace the work of Christ with human works, fleshliness.

We, like the Ephesian believers, should be commended because we know how to identify that kind of error. It means that the people who love Christ are able to put false apostles to the test and prove they are frauds. How do we do that? What is the test we apply? We uncover the truth about such teachers by weighing their claims, their lifestyles, their teaching and preaching against the truth of God’s Word.

Most of my adult life I have been puzzled at the response of professing Christians when I or someone else has pointed out to them that their favorite television preacher, or rock star preacher, or popular teaching is either teaching something clearly contrary to the Scripture or is living a lifestyle that Scripture forbids for the follower of Christ. If you point out these truths, without exception, the followers of the false teachers will want to argue with you, which if we are being honest and accurate, is to argue against the Word of God. In fact, the people who really love Jesus have learned how to measure all teaching and teachers by the commands and lessons in Christ’s Word.

The result is that we end up hating what Christ hates. Did Jesus say that? Yes. He commended the believers saying, *Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate (v.6)*. The Nicolaitans must have been pretty awful if hating them was a good thing according to Jesus. Who were the Nicolaitans? Early church fathers identified them as followers of Nicholas who was one of the first deacons chosen (Acts 6:5). He was a Gentile who had converted to Judaism. It is likely that he wandered into theological error and then his followers swerved even further from the path of truth to embrace and teach error.

In the letter Jesus sent to the church in Pergamum, He identified this error to some extent. *“But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also*

you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Revelation 2:14-15). Obvious from this description is the fact that the Nicolaitans promoted the error of Balaam who practiced proclaiming God’s Word for money. But that wasn’t the only thing Balaam was known for. They also encouraged God’s people to eat food offered to idols contrary to conscience, and worse, they encouraged sexual immorality.

This description sounds an awful lot like many big-name ministers who dominate the media, who live fleshly lifestyles and encourage their followers to do the same. And with regularity, in time, they are eventually exposed as frauds and charlatans. So how do you feel about those folks? Does Christ know that we literally hate religionists who promote fleshliness in their ministries? This does not mean that we simply refrain from lending them any kind of support—actual or tacit. It does not even mean that we refrain from exposing their sinfulness. The question is, “Do we hate the actual ministries, the work they do, because it leads people into sin and error?” Christ our Master knows if we do and commends us for it.

Our Master knows if we struggle because we love Him. He knows if we are enduring. He knows if we are able to identify truth and if we stand opposed to error. Those are good things.

Christ Knows the Church’s Failure (vv.4-5a).

The Master knows if we don’t love Him. Jesus informed the Ephesians, *But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first (v.4)*. Did those words hit them like a brick on the head? There once was evidence of love for Him, but it was gone. How can we tell? What kind of evidence indicates we love Christ?

Well, let’s start with a very common love relationship, something most of us have experienced. If I love my wife, I will desire to know what pleases her, I will desire to do what pleases her, I will desire to talk to her, I will desire to know what she thinks and feels, and her joy will be very important to me. Here is a practical application of what love looks like. If I walk past the back door and see a bag of trash sitting on the floor, I don’t need to go ask my wife if she wants me to take out the trash. And I surely won’t rebuke her for putting trash by the door. If I love her, I understand that the bag

of trash beside the door is an unspoken command, and I do what pleases her, that is, take it out and put it in the trash can.

So, too, if I love Jesus I will desire to know what pleases Him. There is only one way to know what pleases the Master – read His instructions, commands, teaching. You cannot know what our Master desires if you don't read the Bible. That happens because people who love the Lord, love His Word. David wrote, *The rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb (Psalm 19:9-10)*. Jeremiah confessed, *Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts (Jeremiah 15:16)*. Paul taught: *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17)*. If we experience and believe these things we will read the Bible.

There is an old saying that claims we can find time to do what we want to do. Therefore, it is likely that if you just can't find time to read the Bible, it is because you have no desire to read the Bible. If you do not have a desire to read the Bible, it is because you don't love Jesus regardless of what you might claim.

If I love Jesus I will desire to do what pleases Him. Jesus taught, *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments"* (John 14:15). People who love Jesus have an abiding desire in their heart to do what they know He has said to them through His Word. Because that is true, when sin becomes evident in the lover's heart, he or she is agitated in spirit until confession and repentance is made. If the only thing that keeps you living "right" is the threat of parents, or teachers, or the preacher, or the fear of being discovered, it is likely that you don't love Jesus. When we love Jesus, we desire to know what He says to us, and we desire to do what He says.

If I love Jesus, I will desire to talk to Him. The Bible reveals that our Master desires for us to come to Him in prayer, talk to Him, and express our desires and needs to Him. The invitation is, *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16)*. We are confident that *the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and*

his ears are open to their prayer (1 Peter 3:12). If you have no desire to pray, that is certain evidence that you don't love Jesus.

If I love Jesus, I will desire to help others know Him and love Him. God's purpose for the local church is for us to meet together regularly to learn about Jesus and to help each other come to a more complete understanding of Jesus. God laid down His plan for the churches in simple terms in the letter Paul wrote to these same believers about thirty years before Jesus wrote through the messengers. *And he [Jesus Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13)*. They knew God's desire for them to be mutually helpful. Did they desire to do it?

Learning to love Jesus completely makes it imperative that we meet together regularly. The writer to the Hebrew Christians wrote, *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Hebrews 10:24-25)*.

That sounds like sacrifice. If you attend services at your assembly only when it is convenient, that is pretty clear evidence that you don't love Jesus. If visiting friends and family, or attending entertaining events, or watching TV, or satisfying pleasure, or pampering your flesh takes precedence over your attendance at the assembly where you will encourage others, it is because you don't love Jesus. People who attend services when it is convenient love themselves.

Jesus accused people who claimed to love Him of not loving Him. Listen to His accusation: *But I have this against you*. How can we say we love Christ, if we are not bothered by the fact that He has something against us? Remember that Jesus leveled this accusation against people who were quite zealous to keep their rules about orthodoxy. They could easily point out how others failed, but in Jesus' final analysis, they didn't love Him.

These people once lived out the evidences of loving Jesus, but they had *abandoned* those practices. The Greek word (*afeemi*)

means to send away. The professing Christ-lovers sent away the practices that please Jesus because they sent away their love for Him. It is so easy for us to come to love the structure that once testified to Jesus' work in our lives, and yet not love Jesus. We are easily like the Pharisees who had built an amazing structure to buttress God's law and at the same time "sent away" God's law because it was too burdensome for them.

The Master commands us to remember, repent, and do. He wrote, *Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first (v.5a)*. If we abandon love for Jesus, the first thing we need to do is to remember the relationship from which we have fallen. Think back to the time when you fell in love with Jesus. Does that cause some trouble for you? Herein a possible problem lies. Maybe you never loved Jesus. Maybe you have been satisfied to try to do what Jesus-lovers do. Maybe you have always been satisfied to follow human leaders and mimic their practices. Hopefully, you can remember what it was like to desire the things Jesus desires for you.

Second, in light of the difference between how you once loved Jesus and how you don't do that anymore, change your thinking. The implication is that you have been thinking in line with your fleshly desires. You have been thinking about how to please yourself and make life comfortable for yourself. Change your thinking so that you are constantly considering what Jesus desires.

Third, get back to doing works of love. Works of love? "Oh no!" cries the modern religionist. "That's legalism!" Jesus never, ever commanded or recommended legalism. People who love themselves and want to do their own desires will often deride "good works" as legalism. Legalism is an attempt to keep rules and laws with the attempt to satisfy God's wrath against sin, which is impossible. To *do the works you did at first* is to do what Jesus desires for us to do.

Our Savior Knows the Consequences (vv.5b-7).

There are consequences for not changing our thinking if we have left our first love. Jesus warned, *If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent (v.5b)*. Jesus Christ Himself comes to the church who does not love Him. It is His

prerogative because He bought us with His sacrifice. He comes to the local church that is characterized by not loving Him. He removes the source of light. When this happens, the church might continue to be active. It might even become large and famous. But when all the noise is gone, the lights are dimmed, and the smoke has cleared away, no truth has been shed on the sinner's dark soul. The church lost its testimony to the truth.

That is why it is imperative for us to repent when our love for Christ wanes. Failure to love Christ is not just a bad practice. It is a sin that brings supernatural consequences. It appears that Jesus has removed most of the lampstands from Europe. That part of the world was the hotbed of the Reformation, the launching ground for modern missions, the center for learning how to love Jesus. But love waned, intellectualism became the focus, and now religionists worship the creature rather than the Creator. It is a sad, sad picture that will be repeated in our culture if we do not remember, confess, and repent of our sin of lovelessness.

There are blessings for yielding to Christ's rebuke. Jesus challenged us to listen to the Holy Spirit if we can. *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (v.7a)*. The Spirit of God is speaking to the churches through the Bible. But not everyone is able to hear Him. Many people reject Bible preaching and teaching as archaic, irrelevant, out of touch, or just plain mean. Those people do not have an ear for hearing the Holy Spirit.

One time a man told me that I should never mention the fear of the Lord while sharing the gospel. He said that the very mention of that idea would turn sinners away so that they would never listen to the good news of the gospel. Quite to the contrary the Holy Spirit says in Proverbs 9:10 that *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*. The Holy Spirit says, *"The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13)*. People who love Jesus are listening to the Holy Spirit rather than quenching Him or grieving Him.

Listening to the Holy Spirit, we are able to conquer the enemies. Jesus promised, *To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God (v.7b)*. Old timers identified our enemy as sin, flesh, and the devil. Love for Christ gives

us the strength and wisdom to gain and enjoy victory over those enemies. In eternity, we will know victory without end. That is where people who love Christ will eat from the tree of life forever.

Paul taught Christians that “*We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil*” (2 Corinthians 5:10). Christ our Master promised that if we will love Him, which is to live out that love for Him, He will reward us. He also warned that if we are truly Christians and yet allow our love for Him to wane, we will be judged for that. This future judgment is right in line with Jesus’ warning that He will take away the light-giving source if a church becomes characterized by not loving Jesus. It is good for us to start the new year with each of us doing a serious self-analysis about this matter.