

**Revelation 2: 5, 6; "To him who Overcomes", Sermon # 15 in the series - "The Faithful and True Witness, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on May 30th, 2006 in the Afternoon Worship Service. And preached again on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011.**

What does it mean to have left your first love? That is the question that we looked at last week. In the context that I have read to you, we have seen how Christ has already commended the church at Ephesus for what His all penetrating eyes had seen. He saw their works, their labors on his behalf. He saw that even though persecuted and afflicted that this church had patiently endured for His Name's sake. They had persevered in holding fast the truth and in exposing the false message of those who had come to them claiming to be apostles and messengers of the truth, but they were not. And yet even though they were doing what they should have been doing they had lost the most important component of what it meant for them to be Christians, and what it meant for them to be a church. They had left their first love. It was not as though they did not have love for Christ, I said to you. It was that their love had lost that zeal, that earnestness, and that holy passion that it once had. They appear to have left the joy of the personal relationship with Christ behind; wondering what they would have to endure next. They had lost that holy sense of expectancy that God had done and would do great things for them, which would make them glad. You see, love to Christ is the greatest thing because so many others of the Christian graces being active and in exercise are dependent upon it. Yes they had patience, but did they have joy and peace? Yes they had worked for Christ, but did they have strong faith and steadfast hope to look to Him in love, for the way that He had led them? Was their personal and corporate prayer life enlivened by the Spirit's power to be truly thankful to the Lord even though there were many difficulties and trials at hand? This is what the Lord Jesus saw as He walked among them. And He saw their lack of first love as a sin that needed to be repented of. If they repented of leaving their first love, then they would begin to do the first works again.

I attempted to apply this to us here in this church today. These first works mean putting love back into our prayers and our Bible reading and our attempts to keep His commandments. We saw that in order to suffer anything for Christ's sake meant that we needed to love much. It is casting out the fear of punishment and torment that come when we dwell on what man might do or say or think about us, remembering what Christ has done for us and is doing for us. Then we begin to reach out and to truly act righteously. We are led to define our obedience by the commandments of God and we seek the power of the Holy Spirit to do works of love and service to Christ. We look around to see how we can love and serve the brethren and the church. This leads to the works of bearing one another's burdens and looking out with a charitable spirit for the welfare of others, both spiritual and physical. We learn to pray and think of how we can be of help to others, how we can serve Christ in this way, rather than to criticize and blame others for what is not happening in the church. What happens if we do not come to this? Once Christ sees that we mean to attempt to live the Christian life this way, without love to Him and others, then He will come to us quickly and He will remove our candlestick from its place. It means that Christ will come and remove our ability to be a witness to Him, in terms of the effectiveness of that witness, which is one of the main reasons that the church exists at all. Christ is not glorified if we leave our first love, and He will not allow us to continue to think that we are doing so if we will not repent of this. So, to bring the church of Ephesus to repentance the Lord Jesus here gives them certain encouragements and exhortations so that they will persevere and overcome all the obstacles to a closer walk with Him. There are 3 encouragements and exhortations which He gives to them.

1<sup>st</sup> - He tells them what they do have. 2<sup>nd</sup> - He tells them what they must have. And 3<sup>rd</sup> - He tells them what they can have if they succeed in overcoming.

**1st of all - The Lord Jesus tells them what they do have.**

He says in verse 6, "But this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. There are things which are to be positively hated by Christians, and those are the things which are hated by Christ Himself. One indication that we are growing in Christ likeness is that we hate the same things that our Savior and Lord hates. He loved righteousness and He hated lawlessness, it says in Hebrews 1: 9. He hates the works of those who think that they can call themselves by His Name and yet live in self-justified open sin. What did the Nicolaitans hold and teach? Well we are given a partial list at least in verse 14 of Chapter 2 of Revelation. "But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality." The Nicolaitans held to what the Lord Jesus called the doctrine of Balaam. It is to put a stumbling block before others of the people of God in terms of what you consider to be your personal liberty as a Christian. These people would evidently go to the feasts of some of the false gods of that day looking for a good meal. They knew that the best and choicest cuts of meat would be served there after the sacrifice to the idol was over and there must have been lavish banquets and sexual immorality that was taking place around or even in these big social events. It must have been the case that somehow this sect of the Nicolaitans had rationalized this sinful compromise and were decidedly teaching that a person could be a Christian and yet participate in the socially pleasing side of these events and yet not have to participate in the worship of the false god in any real sense. They are just hanging out with all the beautiful people and enjoying everything that God has created. But it is this kind of compromise with the world, the flesh, and the Devil that Christ Jesus hates. These are the kind of deeds that our Lord hates. The church at Ephesus had the discernment to see this. The question that we should ask ourselves is, do we?

Christians in our day are being tested in similar ways, although they may not understand it at first. It is very evident to me that many Christians in our own community are being drawn to the Casino and the gambling that takes place there. The Casino wants people to come and to spend big money, because they want to make big money. The community and our state have come to see this as a great source of revenue and promote it as such. But as God looks at it He sees covetousness and greed which are a form of idolatry. (Colossians 3: 5) He is not pleased with this way of making money or spending money. It violates the principles of what He has said that He will bless, which are hard work and sound investment. He knows that He is the giver of every good and perfect gift. He sees that when people go to the gambling casino that they become, if they are not already, lovers of money, lovers of self, and lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God. But when many people start going to the Casino and see it as a good investment of their time and money, it becomes a snare and an idol to the whole community. Even Christian people begin to go out to the Casino for a good meal and to watch the shows. And they may initially be determined not to gamble. And if they do, they will only use just a little money. What is all this saying? It is saying to God, "I want my pleasures more than God." "I want to make money by having fun, and without having to exert a lot of effort." But this is not at all pleasing to the Lord; indeed He hates it. Let us learn to distinguish the difference between our exercising our God given liberty and participation in what God has declared to be evil. The Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15: 20, "Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice (or evil) be babes, but in understanding be mature." In this regard the Ephesian church was mature and discerning. And the Lord Jesus was encouraging them in this.

**But then 2ndly- The Lord Jesus encourages them and exhorts them to what they must have if they are to overcome all obstacles to a closer walk with Him.**

He says what He so often said when he was ministering during the time when He walked upon the earth, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," He says here. He is no longer walking upon the earth, but seated at the right hand of the Father. And so He says that he who is able to hear spiritually, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Notice that He expects this letter to be read and heard and listened to by far more churches than the Ephesian church. But it is the Spirit of Jesus that now speaks through His written word of the prophetic vision given to John. He "speaks" as the Person of the Deity sent by the Father and the Son to strive with us and to accomplish all things related to the furtherance of the work of grace begun in our hearts. This is what the believer must have in order to believe and to repent and to retrieve the first love and to do the first works. He must have greater measures of the Spirit to do what Christ would have him to do in order to overcome all the obstacles to a closer walk with Him. But you say to me, "I thought that when I received the Holy Spirit, that I received of the fullness of Christ, and that whatever measure of the Spirit that I was given, that is what I work with." Yes, that may be true in the sense of His initial indwelling and the gift or gifts that you have been given to serve Him with. Listen to Romans 12: 3. "For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.

But this is not all of His working with you. His working is not limited to your conception of what you think that you can do, or to what you think that He can do. He expects you to pray and to ask Him to give you more of the Holy Spirit's power and enablement. You know the verse; Luke 11: 13, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" This verse is set in the context of one of Jesus' disciples observing Jesus praying in a certain place, saying to Him when He ceased, "Lord teach us to pray..." And He gave them what is known as the disciple's prayer. But He didn't just teach them the rote prayer to be prayed in churches on Sunday. He went on to give them the principle of perseverance in prayer in the parable that followed, and then went on to reinforce that truth with them by showing them that they needed to ask, and seek, and knock, and when they ask that they would ask believingly for the Holy Spirit. I believe that they were being instructed to ask for more of what they already had, and especially for power to do God's will in every given situation. Listen to 2 Thessalonians 1: 11 in this regard. "Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power, that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ." It is that little phrase, "the work of faith with power" that I am trying to bring out. This verse is set in the context of the persecution that the believers at Thessalonica were undergoing. They were troubled by it, but Paul says to them in verse 3 of that first chapter, "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one you all abounds toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure." But yet he is praying for them in the later verse for the "work of faith with power" to become more evident yet. This comes through the grace of God and Christ, which we know is communicated and applied to the heart of the believer by the Holy Spirit. This brethren, is what you and I must have. It is not enough that we simply stoically do our duty as Christians. It is imperative that we pray for each other that the Lord would fulfill all His good pleasure in us, all the "good pleasure of His goodness and give us the faith and the power to see things through to a conclusion which glorifies His Name, both as individuals and as a local church. And if we do, we shall see some very blessed results both in the short term and the long term.

**For 3rdly- The Lord Jesus tells the church at Ephesus what they can have if they persevere and overcome.**

He says, "To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life; which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." In the Greek it reads, "To the one conquering" I will give him this reward. It shows us that the Lord Jesus is in dead earnest about saving us from our sins. He did not forgive us, and give us His righteousness and His Spirit so that we might rest content in a measure of victory over our sins. He means to bring us out of them and away from them into a new way of thinking and living. And we know that even then we must do battle with, and struggle against, the sins of our heart and the remaining corruption that is there until the day that we die. But the Lord, the Spirit, says that He will give every overcoming believer to eat from the tree of life which is in the midst of the Paradise of God. This harkens back to the garden of Eden and Adam's fall into sin and the first pair being driven out of that earthly paradise. There were 2 trees among the trees of the garden of Eden that were of special significance to God and to them. God had told them that they could eat freely of any of the trees of the garden, except the tree at the center of the garden which was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree of life was there also which represented life, as John Gill says, "natural, spiritual, and eternal." Adam and Eve chose death and plunged our race into ruin and misery. They had to be driven from the garden and the tree of life was then guarded by the cherubim placed at the east of the garden, and a flaming sword to prevent them from eating from it in the fallen condition that they were in. But when God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, after He had accomplished our Redemption; our Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work on the wood of the cross became a tree of life to everyone who will believe. You, my dear friends, I invite this afternoon to come and sit down under this tree which is full of the fruits of the blessings of salvation which our Lord died to purchase. Listen to Song of Solomon 2: 3. "Like an apple tree among the trees of the woods, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down in his shade with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste." Surely this is the first love that we need to return to daily. Listen to Proverbs 3: 13 and following. "Happy is the man who finds wisdom." Put Christ's name in for wisdom in the passage. "Happy is the man who finds Christ." (For in Him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge and power.) Verse 15- "Christ is more precious than rubies, and all the things you may desire cannot compare with Him." Verse 17- "Christ's ways are ways of pleasantness, and all His paths are peace." "Christ is a tree of life to those who take hold of Him, and happy are all who retain Him." To "retain Him" literally means, "To hold Him fast." This is how we overcome and this is how we return to our first love. And when we have overcome, we overcome by His power and His blood and His righteousness, which all come to us by faith. Will you not believe in Christ this very hour, if you never have? And dear Christian, will you not see that faith and love, which are found in Christ Jesus can only increase and overcome your temptations to error, to sin, and to despair when you will believe that Christ in you is the most precious gift that you have been given by God. But what rewards there are for those who do believe. The greatest of these is Christ Himself, and the greater power and grace that we will need to overcome the world and our remaining corruption. Let us earnestly pray to the Lord for these; the best of blessings.