

Hear What The Spirit Says: Ephesus

We are continuing our series, Hear What the Spirit Says. We spent the past two Sundays looking at the opening chapter of the book of Revelation. Recall, this is the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Jesus is and should rightfully be the center of attention when we study Revelation. We saw that clearly last Sunday as we examined John's vision of the exalted Christ.

Remember, John is exiled on the island of Patmos. The seven churches he is writing to on the mainland of Turkey are experiencing suffering and persecution and they need a word from the Lord. They need to be reminded He is still with them, still loves them and cares for them, even enough to correct them if necessary. Jesus pulls back the curtain and allows John and the churches and us, to catch a glimpse of heaven and Jesus in His glory, in His power and dominion, Jesus ruling and reigning and offering assurance and hope to a persecuted, suffering church. N. T. Wright suggests the Jesus we meet is "mind-blowing, dramatically powerful but also gentle and caring...a Jesus who has spoken, and still speaks." He is the one who was dead and is now alive for ever. "Like someone whispering to us that they know the secret way out of the dungeon where we have been imprisoned, he says, 'I've got the keys! The keys of death and Hades – I have them right here! There's nothing more you need worry about.'"

Jesus reveals himself standing among the lampstands and the lampstands represent his churches. He is among us and he has something to say to us. I want to drill down on this for just a moment because the church is taking a hit in our culture today. The changing culture of the church has caused more and more followers of Jesus to distance themselves from the church. We hear it all the time. "I love Jesus, I just don't like church. I don't want to deal with people, risk conflict, make casual conversation with anyone. I don't want to have to put on a face for people." "I'm saved, I just don't go to church. I prefer a quiet, personal, individual faith." I get that, but listen to Eugene Peterson: "In St. John's day it was politically dangerous to assemble together; a private faith would have been safer and more convenient. Sometimes it is a bore to be with others; faith in Christ does not in itself make a person an interesting conversationalist or stimulating companion. A secret, individualized faith does not have to endure tedious relationship with unimaginative pilgrims. But the biblical witness consistently challenges our privatism and individualism: 'It is not good for a man to be alone...forsake not the assembling of ourselves together...when you pray, say *Our Father*...The life of faith is developed under the image of the Trinity in the context of community.'" He goes on to say that when John turned to

see this image of the exalted Christ, he saw him among the lampstands. He saw him with his church. **“Christ is not seen apart from the gathered, listening, praying, believing, worshipping people to whom he is Lord and Savior. It is not possible to have Christ apart from the church...We would prefer to go directly from the awesome vision of Christ (Rev. 1) to the glorious ecstasies of heaven (Rev. 4,5) and then on to the grand, victorious battles against dragon wickedness (Rev. 12-14). But we can’t do it. The church has to be negotiated first. The only way from Christ to heaven and the battles against sin is through the church.” ...Eugene Peterson**

Notice too that the only way this bunch of folks in these seven cities have an identity is through their connection with Jesus Christ. What makes them the church is their relationship with the one who “Holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.” Peterson says apart from Jesus these seven churches would have location, but no identity. I want to be more than just people gathering in a building on 51st in Southwest Tulsa. I want to be the people whose Savior and Lord walks among us and gives us light and life! We have to stay connected to Jesus.

Look at the letters to the churches. Each of the letters begin with a reminder of some aspect of the description of Jesus from chapter 1. They begin with words of praise and affirmation for things done well (with one exception, Laodicea), and then include words of warning and correction. He doesn’t mention strategies, vision statements, style, nothing about trying to accommodate the culture or being relevant. Bryan Davenport writes, **“What seems most important to Christ is His own presence, their love for him, their attitude toward sin and their faithfulness and their finishing well!”...Bryan Davenport** The letters end with a warning and a promise to those who will overcome and remain faithful to the end.

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.” Revelation 2:1-3

Ephesus was the local capital, the most important city in the whole of western Turkey. At that time the population was estimated to be around a quarter of a million people. It was a

place of pre-eminence in the Christian faith. Notice how the Lord begins His message. “I know.” This is how he begins each message to each church. “I know. I know you. I know your condition, what you are going through. I know your heart, your motives, your sacrifice.” He knows us and that is the good news and the bad news isn’t it? He knows.

Specifically, he says he knows their deeds, their hard work and their perseverance. Ephesus was an active church, busy in the service of the Lord. Everyone was involved, not just a few. Good deeds and hard work. What was true religion according to James? To look after orphans and widows, to clothe and feed the naked and hungry, to help the poor and the needy and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. Ephesus was hard at work, doing good deeds, practicing true religion.

He affirms them, telling them he knows of their perseverance. They were bearing up under persecution and it had been an ongoing battle for them and things were getting worse. If you look back at Acts 19 you’ll get some of the history of the church. The church at Ephesus had been born in the shadow of the great temple of the goddess Diana. A riot had broken out when Paul preached there in protest over the Christians speaking against idol worship and disrupting the tradesmen that made their money from idol worship. The Christians lived under the duress of being hated and maligned. If you wanted to get ahead in business, in school, in life, worship Diana or worship the Emperor, but being a Christian was not the path to success. Yet the church in Ephesus had persevered, refusing to bow to the idolatry in the city. They remained faithful, standing against the prevailing culture. Jesus said I know you’ve endured hardship because of my name, refusing to call anyone Lord except Jesus!

Not only that, they remained committed to the true gospel, to the Orthodox faith. They refused to tolerate or entertain sinful men and sinful practice. Some 35 years earlier, when Paul left the leaders of the church in Ephesus, he had warned them, **“After I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!” Acts 20:29-30** Jesus commends them. They examined the word of God, exercised discernment, stood their ground and refused to follow false teachers. Jesus said the Ephesians tested those who claimed to be apostles but are not. They tested doctrine and preaching to see if it was consistent with the Scripture, with the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. Paul said, **“Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.” 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22.**

That's what the church at Ephesus did and that's why Jesus was commending them. Church, this is what we are still called to. We don't get to reshape the Scripture or the gospel to fit our culture. We still have to test everything. Is this biblical? Is this the true faith, the true gospel?

In verse 6 Jesus said, **“But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”** Bible scholars are unable to reach a consensus on who the Nicolaitans were or what their objectionable doctrine was. I won't speculate. What we can agree on is that whatever the doctrine and practice, it was immoral and displeasing to Jesus and the Ephesian church stood against it. Jesus expects his church to stand against sin and immorality.

Jesus said he hated the practices of the Nicolaitans. He hated immorality. That's a strong word. He expects us to hate sin and choose to live a holy life. He calls the church to stand in the light and stand for the light of his truth. We don't have to be hateful in our preaching of the truth, but we must stand with the truth. If the truth makes us uncomfortable, it's not the truth that needs to change, we do!

Bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the church at Ephesus at the beginning of the second century: “You all live according to truth, and no heresy has a home among you; indeed, you do not so much as listen to anyone if they speak of anything except concerning Jesus Christ in truth.” Lord, help us to live according to the truth!

Jesus has assured the church in Ephesus that he knew them. He was with them. He commends them for their good deeds, their hard work, their perseverance in spite of persecution and difficult circumstances. They had held fast to the truth of the gospel, had refused to be led astray by false teachers or false doctrines. They refused to compromise with immorality and sin. But Jesus knew them well enough and loved them enough to correct them. **“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.” Revelation 2:4-6**

Jesus commended them because they endured hardships and refused to give up. He said they had not grown weary. They may have been tired, but they refused to let it stop them or defeat them. But somewhere they had lost something of the utmost importance. They were so busy working for the Lord they stopped spending time with the Lord! “I have this against you: You have forsaken your first love.”

Does he mean love for Jesus, love for others, love for the lost? Remember Jesus said the first and greatest commandment was that we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves. Our love for the lost, our love for others flows out of our love for God. Our first love must be our love for the Lord and the folks at Ephesus had left their first love.

How could this be? I get that time has a way of cooling the intensity of love. Circumstances pull our attention away from what used to be the focus of our love. We get so busy with life and family and a thousand things. We don't have time to love. Husbands and wives stop talking to each other and the distance between them grows and love slowly diminishes and dies. Jesus said speaking of the last days, "the love of most will grow cold." Matthew 24:12. It's a warning that we have to be intentional about keeping the fire of love for Jesus burning in our hearts. We will have to fuel the intensity of our love for God.

Notice Jesus didn't say they lost their first love. It wasn't accidental. He says they have forsaken their first love. They made a choice to love other things, themselves perhaps, more than they loved Jesus. They preferred other things over Jesus. "You left your first love." It's interesting that in Paul's letter to this very church at Ephesus, his last words were, "**Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus with an undying love.**" **Ephesians 6:24** They started out with an undying love. Now, 30-35 years later and they have forgotten, they have forsaken that first love.

Consider when these people first heard about Jesus and came to him, many of them were deep in the occult, in idolatry and sorcery. They repented and turned to Jesus with all of their heart. Luke recalls, "**Many of those who believed came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly.**" **Acts 19:18-19** The value of the scrolls was estimated at 50,000 drachmas and a drachma was a silver coin worth about a day's wages. These people were crazy in love with Jesus. No sacrifice was too great. But now they had forsaken their first love.

Make sure you get this. They were working hard, doing the right things, believing the right things. Doctrinally they were right on. They stood for the right things, but being against bad things isn't enough. If love for Jesus isn't at the top of our list, we won't get other things right. Our motives get messed up. Our priorities get messed up. If we aren't loving Jesus first and foremost, if he isn't utmost in our life, we'll just turn into a clanging cymbal Paul says. We will become critical, judgmental, defending the doctrines but unloving and unmerciful toward

others. We can't be bothered with God, we are too busy righting the world. We will say we love God but we will hate everyone who disagrees with us. We have to have love and that flows from loving Jesus first! Bryan Davenport wrote, **"Love is the fountain head, the catalyst, the cause. Love is the cause of heaven and love must be the cause of the church or we cease to be the beloved and just become employees."**...**Bryan Davenport** Do you hear me? If we aren't in love with Jesus, if he isn't first and foremost in our life, then we won't have life in us either. If we aren't loving Jesus we won't love each other and we won't love the lost. We will lose sight of our identity, of what it means to be his church, his people. It's beyond important and urgent, it's everything! Look at it again. This is where it begins and ends. Loving Jesus. Loving him above everything else.

"Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." Revelation 2:4-6

What does he tell them to do? **Remember!** "Remember the height from which you have fallen! Remember how it used to be! Remember my presence, remember your zeal for me and for my house, for my word." Remember how it used to be when you first came to Jesus and met him as Savior? Remember and compare. Don't you miss it? Don't you miss him and that sweet fellowship?

Repent! Repent for settling for something or someone less than Jesus. Repent for settling for less than loving Jesus and serving him with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength. Take this seriously. Jesus says not loving him as we should is something that must be repented of. It's something to turn away from. To repent means to stop and turn around and go another way. Repent and put Jesus back at the center of your life.

Return! Get back where you belong and "do the things you did at first." Love is a choice and love is a verb. Do the deeds you did at first. Put love in action. We can choose to love and Jesus insists that we do or he says he will remove their lampstand from its place. This is no minor issue. This is life or death because if the church doesn't love Jesus it will die! If they don't return to loving Jesus they will lose their influence, their place and eventually the church will cease to be.

Listen to me, no church can survive if it stops loving Jesus first and foremost. When we stop loving him we stop obeying him. When we stop loving him we stop loving those he loves

and when we do that, we wither and die. Love for Jesus motivates us, drives us, moves us to sacrifice. When we love him above all, we will lay down our lives for him. A church that loves Jesus first and foremost is unstoppable. A church that loves Jesus first and foremost will love the unlovable, the lost, the least, the last. A church that loves Jesus first and foremost won't stop, won't quit, won't give up on each other. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13 love believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. Quoting Bryan Davenport again, "No revival ever was characterized by strategy or program but by an awakening to love and a forsaking of all loves but one." It seems to be about one thing doesn't it? One thing. Do we love Jesus?

Jesus said "You've forsaken your first love, so repent and do the things you did at first!" He didn't say tell me you love me, he said show me you love me! Do the things. Put love in action. "I love Jesus so much" but you're still living in sin, in immorality, in disobedience. Repent and do the right things, the things you did at first. "I love Jesus." Yes, but are you sold out, are you serving him, doing what he asks you to do? Show him you love him by your deeds!

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

There is hope. All is not lost, not for the church in Ephesus and not for the church at Carbondale. If we hear and respond, if we repent and choose to love him with an undying love, if we prioritize our love for him above all else, all the way to the finish line, we will eat from the tree of life, we will feast on eternal life in the paradise of God. Jesus said eternal life is to know and love God and his Son Jesus Christ whom God sent. (John 17:3)

We are called to love. Called to return to Jesus and love him the way we did at the first. Love him with the devotion he deserves. Love him first and foremost. Love him above all others. Love him and prove it by how you live, by what you do, by how you love others.

Examine your heart. Remember how it used to be as you examine your heart. Are you loving him, obeying him, serving him, worshiping him like you used to? Is loving Jesus and pleasing him still first and foremost in your life? Do you need to repent? Return? He who has ears to hear. What is the Spirit saying to you?