

You Left Your First Love...

A sermon by Pr. David Johnson

Our Epistle lesson for today takes us to one of the most wondrous, but often, confusing books of the Bible. The book of Revelation can be exciting, scary, comforting, and marvelous all within several verses. It is a vision that God gave to the apostle John, as he was banished to the isle of Patmos. It was, and is, to be a message of both warning and comfort for the believers of his day, and for all generations.

In this vision, John is told (there is only a voice through v. 11) to write down everything he is about to experience. He is then to send copies of the vision to seven specific churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.” (v. 1:11)

Up to this point, John had only heard a voice. Now his curiosity got the better of him (one commentary said, “following a natural impulse”), he turned around to see the source of this awesome voice. But John wasn’t prepared for what he was about to witness. (v.12-16)

Try putting yourself in John’s place. Out of the blue he has a vision, and is told to write down everything he experiences. Then, an image appears that completely surpasses anything seen before. And he realizes, I have to describe this so that thousands of other believers will understand and experience it for themselves. Verses 13-16 are John’s best attempt (as directed by the Holy Spirit) at defining just how Christ appeared to Him. He (a) *Looked like a man*, (b) *Wore a long robe with a gold sash*, (c) *His head and hair were pure white*, (d) *His eyes was like fire*, (e) *His feet were like glowing bronze*, (f) *His voice was thunderous*, (g) *His right hand held 7 stars*, (h) *A two-edged sword came from His mouth*, and (i) *His face was as bright as a noontime sun*.

Sounds like your neighbor, right? Wrong! John’s dilemma was that there was no one who could, humanly speaking, fulfill that description. Absolutely, no one! But here John sits, at the feet of this amazingly intimidating figure. John could probably relate to Isaiah after His encounter with the Lord in Isaiah chapter 6. And John responds in like manner to Isaiah:

Rev 1:17a When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man.

What else can you do when you come face-to-face with the God of all creation? I mean, we talk about coming into the presence of God; but in reality, we really don’t know what we are talking about. The experience would be overwhelming, even petrifying. But yet, our souls long for the experience of being reunited with our heavenly Father like we were so long ago. The problem is that our hearts have become cold, indifferent; and our souls have long since lost their point of reference. But Jesus extends a comforting, understanding hand towards John and says:

Rev 1:17b ... “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18 and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.”

And with this brief introduction, Jesus begins to dictate his letters to the churches.

The Letter to the Church in Ephesus:

Rev. 2:1-7 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:

The letter begins by addressing the primary recipient, “To the angel of the church of Ephesus.” Much has been said about who this angel might be, and many suggestions have been offered. But I feel the strongest proposal, and the most likely recipient would be the pastor, or messenger (angelos) to that church. The term angelos is the Greek word for, *angel*. But it can also be translated, *messenger*, and is so several times in Scripture. The holder of that title, *messenger to the church*, is the pastor.

We understand the source of these letters to be Christ Himself as we read through the various letters, comparing each individual description with the general description given in Chapter 1. Here we see Jesus revealed as, “*The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands.*” (see also Rev. 1:13, 16, 20)

Again, the seven stars are the seven messengers (pastors, eldership) to the seven churches. Jesus holds them in his right hand, a symbol of power and authority. He uses them as instruments of his authority and instruction to His body. Here Jesus is described as walking amongst the seven golden lampstands (the seven churches representing all of Christendom). This is a picture of Jesus’ regal majesty. He walks throughout His kingdom with careful direction.

Rev. 2:2-3 ‘I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; 3and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary.

When I was in management, I was told repeatedly, if you have to correct an employee, it is always best to sandwich the correction in between two positive affirmations. Now, my bosses weren’t exactly Bible readers, but if they were, they would know that this is not only good administrative advice, it’s biblical. We see Jesus do this same thing as He begins this letter.

Jesus begins by affirming the Ephesians for their godly deeds. He recognizes that this is not a lazy congregation. They have been involved in ministry and have shown a willingness to live out their faith. And many of these duties have been draining and toilsome. Their resolve and perseverance had been challenged. In

spite of their weariness and the temptation to let up, they have continued faithfully.

One of the “deeds” Jesus’ affirms is the Ephesian’s willingness to deal correctively with “evil” men. Though our English translations often use the term *evil* to describe the men not tolerated by the Ephesians, it is not the same Greek word used for vicious or brutal. The term here (**Kakos**) is better translated harmful, or wrong or bad ones as it relates to the people of God. Other words which fit would be bad-natured, troublesome, injurious, malicious, or destructive.

“He is kakos who is good-for-nothing in regard to the thing in which he ought to be good: a cowardly soldier is kakos, likewise a lazy student, and thus a disgraceful church member. ...The eldership of the Ephesian church cannot bear good-for-nothing members, those we call dead timber, who care little or nothing for Christ, the gospel, and the church; nominal members.” (Lanski)

In other words, the Christian community of Ephesus, and especially the leadership, seem to be doing a good job of identifying the harmful people in the Body and then addressing them or weeding them out. Those labeled as harmful can range from name-only Christians, lukewarm believers, or those who are outright deceptive, as we see in the next phrase, “you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false;...” The Ephesian leadership have been successful at following John’s previous injunction from 1 John 4, identifying and dealing with false apostles.

1 John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

And the Ephesians have done all this without drooping from the task. Jesus closes verse 3 by affirming them for their perseverance and their ability to stay on task without falling wearily from the task.

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

Now Jesus longingly, but very firmly, delivers His reprimand. He says, “You may have been faithful at knowing truth and error. You may have been diligent about guarding your little lambs from fraud and doctrinal deception. These are all important. But you forgot one basic thing. The Christian walk is not just about doing, it’s about relationship. You have allowed the passion of that first love to turn cold.” They had fallen into what some refer to as “dead orthodoxy.”

Can you sense the sadness mixed within this reproof. It’s that familiar yearning that you might hear from a wife towards her husband after he spends a few too many late nights at work. She appreciates the hard work. But she didn’t marry him for his ability to work hard. She wants to be loved. She wants him to spend

time nurturing the relationship by spending time sharing tenderness and communication.

Similarly, Jesus didn’t marry us as it were, or sacrifice His life, so that we can just be busy for Him. Even though gratitude drives us to serve Him, we must, “remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first...”

Jesus wants us to go back to the honeymoon. He wants us to repent of the creeping indifference that we allow to sneak into our spiritual relationship with Him. And then we are to go back to those things that occupied our early days with Christ: Bible reading, prayer, meditation, passionate worship. He wants us to go back to the days when faith was new and our hunger for relationship was high. Sure we were immature and inexperienced in our Christian walk, but our passion was high and Jesus was everything.

Jesus then drives home the point; this is not just a suggestion, a spouse’s endless pleading. We mustn’t forget that our relationship with Christ is more than a marriage, it’s also a relationship of master and servant.

Rev. 2:5a Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.

The injunction is to change your thinking and change your direction. It involves a revolution of heart, a mourning for sin, and a pursuing of Christ. The evidence of this transformation is to go back to the first works done at the beginning of our walk with Christ.

Luke 3:8 "Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance,

The mandate is so strong, that refusal to comply will be met with sharp judgment and removal. To say that “your lampstand will be removed from its place” is a simple admonition that any church and their leadership that doesn’t maintain a vibrant love for Christ, and a consistent heart of repentance, regardless of their active service, will one day be removed as a beacon of God’s presence.

However, all is not hopeless. Jesus comes back to acknowledge that He is still proud of the Ephesians’ love of the Word and their willingness to stand firm against those teachers of false doctrine like the Nicolaitans (form of Gnosticism).

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

Jesus ends this letter with a word of exhortation to everyone with ears, which is a challenge to us as well.

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