

“Yet I hold this against you...”

This week we will continue our study of the Letter to the Church of Ephesus. From our homework last week about this church’s dedication to clinging to and preserving Christ’s teachings in an era that was rife with false teachers, false doctrine and severe persecution. Yet this church worked tirelessly to help the unfortunate in their community and to maintain a lifestyle worthy of being called followers of Christ. This church strived to and succeeded in living up to the exhortations of the Apostle Paul to guard against the false teachers that would come among them. They took to heart his command, *“Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of opportunity, because the days are evil”* (Ephesians 5:15). Despite this fierce dedication, Christ found this church wanting in a basic tenant of the faith.



Read Revelation 2:1-7

As you read this passage remind yourself of the positive commendations the church received before we discuss what Christ has to say against it. From these commendations we see a picture of the Ephesian church emerge. It appears to be a church that takes seriously its calling to minister to the needs of its community. It takes seriously the teachings of Christ and strictly living by them, abstaining from the immorality which pervades the culture in which they live. They carefully test the teachings of those who would try to pervert the teachings they first received from the apostles. And it is a church that despite the hardships and persecutions that assail it, they never bend or break under the pressure. But Christ has one charge against this church, and it is a serious charge that threatens the future of the Ephesian church.

What was Christ’s charge against the church in Ephesus? *“You have forsaken your _____.”* (Rev 2:4)

What does this mean? We just got to a point of seeing a very active congregation diligently focused on the work of the church. How is it possible that they have forsaken their first love? Read the way the Amplified Bible translates verse 4:

“But I have this [one charge to make] against you, that you have left (abandoned) the love that you had at first – you have deserted [Me], your first love.”

Somewhere in the 35-40 years since the church was founded, their love for Jesus began to wane. Paul had commended them for their love in Ephesians 6:23-24. It was one of their better characteristics.

What do these verses tell us about love?

- Matthew 22:37-39
- John 13:34-35.
- 1 Corinthians 13:13

Daily battle against the onslaughts of persecution, doing good works to help the suffering in a society that rejects them, and a constant fight to keep themselves and their doctrine pure against those who would corrupt it could cause the Ephesian church to lose a charitable spirit. Prolonged conflict can weaken and destroy patience and affection. The church was still going through the motions of what it knew it ought to be doing; they forgot *why* they were doing it. From the outside it appeared that this church was doing everything and doing everything well, with great care, concern, and hard work. But hard work in all the right things is not what Jesus wants most. He wants hearts that seek him and serve him out of love and adoration. Love is the primary and ultimate indicator of faith in Jesus. According to Charles Swindoll,¹ “1 Corinthians 13:13 tells us the golden virtue is love – beating out the silver and bronze winners, faith and hope every time. “The greatest of these is love.”” No amount of zealous adherence to doctrine or fervent Christian duty can make up for a loss of love of Jesus. They were lacking in a deep devotion to Jesus. Love for Christ should be the motivating factor in all aspects of the church’s activity. Without a strong foundation of love, all the good work the church has built up will come crashing down upon them. Without an abiding devotion to Jesus, they themselves will become incapable of showing Jesus’ love to others. Their first priority is to love God and to love one another. And by showing love they reveal to whom they belong, to Jesus. If they can’t show love to others, their church has failed in its mission to shine God’s love like a beacon of light. Their light will go out.

¹ Swindoll, Charles; *New Testament Insights on Revelation*; 2011.

Romans 11 has much to tell us about the consequences of losing the focus on loving Jesus first and foremost. Read Romans 11: 16-24 and answer the following questions. (If you have access to *The Message*, I recommend reading it first. Biblegateway.com is a great resource for this.)

Who are the olive shoots cut off and called deadwood?

Who is grafted in?

What attitude does Paul warn against? (Verses 20 and 23)

What can happen to the branches that are grafted in but then become deadwood? (v. 22)

Now keeping in mind what we've learned from the Romans passage, let's return to Revelation. Complete verse 5: "Remember the _____ from which you have _____!"

What are the heights Jesus is talking about?

This church, upon its joy and love for the Lord in the early years, eagerly excelled in its pursuits of doctrinal truth and works of charity and compassion as a direct result of their joy and gratitude for Christ's saving work on the cross and their inclusion in the Kingdom of God. This original generation of the Ephesian church matured and gave way to the next generation. They passed on a heritage of being zealous for the Word of God and a passion for good works, but the love and gratitude modeled by that first generation seems to have waned in the second. God lifted these gentile Christians out of darkness and placed them in a position to shine the light of God's love effectively in a very worldly and pagan city. Their striving to meet the needs of the less fortunate in their community and their academic excellence gave their church a reputation for an enthusiastic love of God and a prominence in the greater Christian community of Asia. They earned and were blessed by God with this exalted position, unfortunately losing sight of their love for Jesus led to a false sense of being justified in their preeminence because of their achievements, not because of God's grace.

Their motivation changed from gratitude and love to an attitude of salvation by works. Earning grace, rather than receiving it as a gift of love. Losing sight of love of Jesus and gratitude for God's work in them leads to an attitude of judgmentalism, cynicism, criticism all of which lead to a self-exalted sense of pride. We all know that the heights of pride lead to a long fall! Misplaced faith in their accomplishments led to such pride. This pride led to many in the Ephesian church to take an attitude of superiority and condescension. Their good works served to exalt themselves and were not an expression of Christ's love abiding in them.

They increasingly viewed the needy around them from their exalted position. From that vantage they took pride in their accomplishments forgetting it was God who worked in their hearts and grafted them into his kingdom. They reached a height of self-righteous pride. Their good works became acts of self-righteous condescension to the less fortunate; and their doctrinal purity a source of academic pride. It was from this height that the church of Ephesus fell.



What do you think happened to cause them to abandon their love for Jesus? In what ways is this a cause for concern in the modern church? How is it manifested?

Now, what's a church to do?

Jesus doesn't just condemn this church for its failings and be done. He loves this church and wants to see it thrive. His charge against the church is followed by constructive advice to overcome their failing. If the church will listen and obey his instruction he promises they will overcome this failing.

Read Revelation 2:4-7 and answer the following questions.

What are the three actions the Ephesians must do in order to turn things around?

- "_____ the height from which you have fallen!
- _____ and
- _____ the things you did at first."

What is “*the height from which you have fallen*”?

What things do you think they did at first which they now neglect to do?

What do you think it means when Jesus says, “*I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place*”? (Rev. 2:5)

What does it mean to be victorious (in the context of Rev 2:7)? The NKJV translates victorious as “the one who overcomes”. For whom is this promise?

Gen 2: 9, 16-17 and 3:22-24 refers to the Tree of Life. Were Adam and Eve permitted to eat the fruit of this tree in Eden?

Why did God take away the privilege of eating the fruit of this tree after Adam and Eve sinned?

What is the promise that Jesus extends to the one who overcomes (or is victorious)? What is the significance of the Tree of Life as it appears in our Revelation passage?

Christ exhorts them first to *remember* the heights from which they have fallen – both the position in the Christian community they attained from faithful love and obedience, as well as the heights to which their own pride had exalted them. It was important for them to remember that they received their place of privilege from God who chose them, saved them and exalted them to be a light to a pagan community dwelling in darkness.

Next they needed to *repent* of their pride and self-love that permeated the activities they claimed to do in Christ’s name. Their activities had served to glorify themselves not

Christ. They needed to remember that just as they were saved and grafted into the kingdom of God, so others could be as well. And just as the dead wood had been pruned away to make room when they were grafted in, God could still lift those pruning shears again to eliminate the deadwood now attached to the vine.

Finally, they needed to *do* the things they did at the first – worship, praise, and exalt the name of Jesus. By praising and exalting Jesus and remembering all that Jesus had worked in their lives, then naturally good works would motivated by love, gratitude and compassion would follow.

Jesus ends his exhortation with *“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.”* He promises that all who remember, repent and do what they did at first will overcome this sin which grieves him deeply. Jesus always offers forgiveness and restoration to those who choose to repent. His promise is not directed to just the Ephesians but to all who respond in faithful repentance. He offers one last reward to those who hear and obey – that they will eat from the tree of life. We know that when Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden for eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil they were barred from the tree of life, the tree of eternal life. That tree of eternal life resides in heaven and those who enter the heavenly kingdom will have access to that tree and are promised eternal life.