

The First Love of the Redeemed!

Years ago the filmmakers of Hollywood produced many Western movies. One of the singers in the background music of these Westerns was a talented cowboy singer/songwriter named Stuart. Stuart even appeared in a few of the movies, but he was probably more notoriously known for his hard living.

One day God changed all of that. Stuart learned about God's salvation through His Son Jesus Christ. Stuart accepted Jesus, and soon others began to notice the difference in his life. In fact, one up and coming young actor noticed the change in Stuart's life, and asked him, "Stuart, what is your secret?"

In a while I'll tell you who that actor was, and how Stuart answered his question!

Now as we come to these seven letters, we should expect to see that some things these churches dealt with were because of where they were located.

For instance, a church in Salt Lake City today is going to have ex-Mormons in it, and struggle to keep the false teachings of that cult from influencing its people.

A church in Las Vegas is going to have recovering gamblers in it. A church in San Francisco will have many families touched somehow by the sin of homosexuality, as a church in Amsterdam will have lives affected by prostitution.

A church in Taichung, Taiwan will have ex idol worshippers in it, and be surrounded by those who worship idols!

Things we know about Ephesus:

- It's name means "desired one," and it was home to 300,000 people
- The Temple of Diana was there, one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world
- The temple was bigger than a football field, 425 feet long, 220 feet wide
- The temple had 126 pillars of marble 60 feet high, 36 overlaid with gold and jewels
- It was four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens!
- Thousands of priests and priestesses worked there, many as cult prostitutes
- The temple was easily visible from the west in the harbor as ships arrived
- A commercial center with warehouses lined the banks of the Cayster River
- Many people were employed making idols of Diana, also called Artemis
- 3 great highways came in and out of Ephesus to the North, South, and East
- It was the capital of the western part of Asia Minor
- It also held a stadium as big as two football fields that held 50,000 people
- The Pan-Ionian games were held there each May
- It regularly held fights, sometimes beasts against beasts, sometimes men against beasts
- But Ephesus primarily prided itself for being the "guardian of Diana."
- So intertwined was the Temple with the economy it became a great bank
- Merchants and political figures mixed business, religion, and pleasure there
- One commentator has aptly called it "the Vanity Fair of the Ancient World"

The inhabitants of the city were "fit only to be drowned and that the reason he could never laugh or smile was because he lived among such terrible uncleanness." -What Heraclitus said of his city

Now of these seven churches in Revelation 2 & 3, the only ones described in the Bible before Revelation are Ephesus and Laodicea.

Things we know about the church in Ephesus:

- Paul visited Ephesus on his 2nd missionary journey and spoke in the synagogue
- Many that were interested asked him to stay, but he had to set sail
- But he did leave Priscilla and her husband Aquila there to encourage them
- Soon after that, Apollos came through and spoke in the synagogue
- Priscilla and Aquila invited him to their home, and taught him what he didn't know
- Apollos travelled on and had a mighty preaching ministry
- It's fair to say the church of Ephesus sent out its first missionary before it was organized!
- When Paul came back through on his third journey, he won twelve men to the Lord
- He also spoke for 3 months in the synagogue until he and his new converts got the boot
- They rented the Hall of Tyrannus, where Paul spoke every day for the next two years!
- During this time the gospel spread from there to the entire province of Asia Minor
- It is probable that the seven other churches were planted during this time!
- During this time many converts coming out of idol worship destroyed their idols
- What they got rid of was worth a year's wages for over 138 workers!
- The economy suffered because these converts were no longer buying idols of Diana
- That led to a riot instigated by a man named Demetrius that caused two disciples harm
- After three years in Ephesus, his longest time at any church he planted, Paul moved on
- Later Paul was passing within 30 minutes of Ephesus and had the elders come meet him
- He reminded them to guard the people from the evil influence of false teachers
- From prison Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians to them
- The first three chapters told them who they were in Christ; The last three told them what to do as Christians
- Later Paul sent Timothy to lead the church and its leaders
- Paul wrote I Timothy to encourage Timothy to remain in Ephesus and deal with false teachers
- These guys were having fruitless, speculative discussions and making legalistic demands
- Paul told Tim the real goal is love from a pure heart, a sincere faith, & a good conscience

What a rich history the church at Ephesus had! In the last few years John had also ministered there! Now they were hearing from Jesus Himself!

In this and the rest of the seven letters the Lord addresses Himself in a way appropriate to what that church was going through, but also with information that is useful for all the churches then and now.

So the beginning of each letter has a specific addressee and the end of the letter than says ANYONE with his spiritual ears on should listen to what the Spirit says to all of us in the churches (plural)!

The formula of these seven letters:

- A word about Jesus Christ – something to fill in the portrait of Jesus!
- A word of commendation – something they were doing right!
- A word of condemnation – something that they needed to change!
- A word of warning – what will happen if they don't change!
- A word of promise – what victors will receive after Jesus comes!

V. 1 Jesus is with His church!

Verse one tells us Jesus walks among His churches, and holds the leaders of the churches in His hands! That's such an important point it closes chapter one and starts chapter two!

Jesus loves us, He has freed us from our sins, He has made us royal priests to help others get right with Him, and He is with us no matter what we are facing!

Despite the troubles they faced from without and within, Jesus was with them! They had not been forgotten! Far from it, He was with them in a special way!

V. 2-3, 6 Jesus commends the Ephesian church for 4 things!

Jesus starts by saying to them, "I know..."

I Know – the Greek word there is "Oida" not "Ginosko."

Ginosko is intellectual knowledge: "I know 2 + 2 is 4."

Oida is a deep, intimate, experiential knowledge. "I know you personally, dear!"

First, Jesus commends them for the deeds they had done for Him!

"We recall, in the presence of our God and Father, your work of faith, labor of love, and endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." -I Thessalonians 1:3

These Ephesians were serious Christians! They would have told you that everything they did was done for Jesus! And Jesus commended them for all the hard work they did for others in His name because they loved Jesus!

If you work hard to minister to others in the name of Jesus, He comes to you and says, "Thank you for all that you do to advance My kingdom on earth!"

Second, Jesus commends them for staying away from evil influences.

These Christians were in Ephesus, but they were not of Ephesus. They stayed away from the Temple of Diana. They did everything they could to keep its sensual influence out of their homes and out of their church. Like the generation before them, they had gotten rid of things in their homes that didn't go with their faith!

If you have walked out of a movie, turned off a smutty tv show, or returned a d.v.d. to Blockbuster because the content was cruddy; if you have gotten rid of a book or

c.d. that was just garbage, if you have stayed away from a party or bar because you knew that alcohol and sexual pressure was flowing; if you have broken up with someone or ended a friendship because you were not on the same page spiritually, Jesus comes to you and says, “you did the right thing!”

Third, Jesus commends them for recognizing and shunning false teachers.

The Ephesian Christians knew their Bible scrolls. They knew what Jesus and Paul and John had really taught, and when someone came around claiming to represent Christ but started spouting things that were either half the gospel or another gospel completely, they didn’t fall for it!

They understood that false teachers like Julius Osteen and Bennahim Hinnus were not presenting the correct gospel to them, and they told them to get lost! They even hated the practices of the Nicolaitans, which we’ll talk about in two weeks.

Fourth, Jesus commends them for enduring despite all they had faced

The Ephesian Christians had suffered for their allegiance to Christ. They had been mocked and scorned for no longer embracing the ways of the “vanity fair” world they lived in. Friends and even family members did not understand their commitments. Roman authorities branded them as outlaws. They had suffered much for their commitment to Christ. But they had kept serving Him!

Jesus came to them and said, “Thank you for serving me in spite of the persecution you have faced.” And Jesus comes to you and says, “Thanks for not quitting!”

But the church at Ephesus did have a flaw – and it is a flaw doctrinally sound churches often fall into...

V. 4 Jesus rebukes the church for losing her first love

On the outside, they were doing all the things they were supposed to do for Jesus. But on the inside they were not energized as they had been by love for Jesus!

They were going through the motions, doing the things good Christians are supposed to do...but they didn’t have the burning love inside they had once had!

Too often Bible believing, conservative Christians have defined themselves by a checklist of the things we do rather than by our love relationship with Jesus Christ.

I come to church! I read my Bible! I serve in four church ministries! I tithe! I vote the way a conservative would! I don't smoke or chew, or run with girls who do!

Do you see the problem with that? They were defining themselves based on what they did, rather than who they were in Christ!

NOW BRING THE GUYS BACK UP: SHOW WHAT THIS LOOKED LIKE:

People don't ask busy Christians what their secret is! They ask people who love Jesus and glow because of time spent with Jesus what their secret is!

Remember me talking about Stuart? The forgiveness and love he had found in Jesus Christ changed His life! So much so, that one day, a young actor named John Wayne asked "Stuart, what is your secret?"

Stuart Hamblin's answer became a beloved hymn that has since been sung by thousands and translated into several languages. He said, "It is no secret what God can do."
The chorus says it all:

It is no secret, what God can do.
What He's done for others, He'll do for you.
With arms wide open, He'll pardon you.
It is no secret, what God can do.

If people aren't asking you what your secret is any more, you may have lost your first love! Well, how do you get it back?

V. 5a The 3 R's of getting your first love back!

1. Remember

Remember...what it was like when your love for Christ was new!

I remember the sense of forgiveness, love, joy and peace that permeated my being!
I remember reading the New Testament in 3 weeks: and the Bible in 3 months!
I remember getting power to forgive those who had hurt me!
I remember singing loud, and crying when I sang!
I remember telling everyone I came into contact with what Jesus meant to me!
I remember getting rid of things that didn't fit my new life!

2. Repent

Now what does repentance look like when it comes to your first love?

It means putting your Identity in Christ BEFORE your Roles for Christ!

Roles are what you do for Christ; Identity is who you are in Christ!

When your identity becomes what you do, it becomes dangerous ground to live on!

A role can be lost or taken away from you, but your relationship with Christ, once begun, can never be lost or taken away!

What you do for Christ always must follow who you are in Christ!

I am a husband, a father, a Pastor, a soccer coach, a board member of ETS and GCS. But all of those are roles that can be lost based on various circumstances! That one of being a soccer player already is pretty much lost!

If my identity is my ability to perform as a soccer player like I once did, I would be totally depressed! But my identity is not found in soccer, it's found in Jesus Christ! Who I really am is a child of God through my faith in Jesus Christ!

Some of you are trying to squeeze your identity out of what you do as a worker, as a spouse, as a parent, as a lover, as an athlete, and you are frustrating yourself and everyone around you!

Children demand a woman's role be that of "mother," but women are much more than one role. "Roles are necessary because they give structure to our lives...roles tell us what we may expect people to do, but they do not tell us who those people are...Women receive a cultural message that being a mother is the center of their identity. Motherhood is a role, it is not an identity." Motherhood is "not the entirety of a woman's life, nor is it the mark of her identity as a woman." A woman's true identity is in Christ.

-Denise George, What Women Wish Pastors Knew, page 120

To get back to first love, we have to repent in trying to squeeze purpose out of roles instead of our relationship with Christ!

3. Repeat!

First you remember, then you repent of putting doing before being, and then you repeat what you did when your faith was brand new!

You spend time with Jesus again! You say Jesus, I love you! Draw me close to you! Help me to enjoy the sunsets you have created again! Fill me with your Spirit, and bear the fruit of the Spirit through me!

"I am the vine, you are the branches. The one who abides in Me and I in Him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without Me." -John 15:5

“To love the Lord our God, is the heartbeat of our mission, the spring from which our service overflows!”

V. 5b What happens if we don't get first love back?

Visibly snuff the candle out!!

Some people take this to mean a Christian can lose salvation. No, the passage is written to the church!

How many churches have continuously been on fire for 2,000 years?
Virtually none!

What happens when a church loses it's first love?
God removes them, and raises up others to let His light shine!

There are beautiful but empty cathedrals around the world- beautiful lampstands without Christ's light!

V. 7 The victor will get to eat from the tree of life in Paradise!

Now as we go through these letters it's amazing how many things we will see we lost in Genesis 1-3 are promised to us in Rev. 1-3 and realized in Rev. 20-22!

After Adam and Eve sinned, access to the Garden of Eden and the tree of life in it was blocked. Here the victor is promised access to the tree of life in paradise!

There will be some eating on the New Earth, because Revelation 22 has this tree of life in a prominent place in the New Jerusalem, with fruit being born every month!
The point is that the Victor will have eternal life!

How do you become a victor?

“Whatever has been born of God conquers the world. This is the victory that has conquered the world: our faith. And who is the one who conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.”
-I John 5:4-5

Share gospel!

Sinner's Pray!