

# Our First Love

**Scripture: Revelation 2:1-7**

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People of God: Every year our church receives a “church visit.” That’s when a pastor and an elder from another church visits a Council meeting and asks about the spiritual health of the church. In that visit, they inquire about what is happening in the life of this congregation. What are our blessings? What are our struggles? As they seek to encourage us in our ministry, they do so based upon the promise of Jesus that he will be with his church. Based of their church visit, these church visitors will report to Classis about the spiritual health of this congregation.

In a way, these seven letters can be seen as “church visitors’ reports.” Except that the church visitor is Jesus himself. In each case, the spiritual health of the church is examined. We hear words of encouragement, as well as words of challenge. And while they are addressed to specific churches at a very specific time in history, each letter comes with the refrain: *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*. Notice churches are plural, even though each letter is addressed to one specific church. All churches, in all times, can learn from these specific “church visit” reports.

The first one is addressed to the Church in Ephesus. Ephesus was already an ancient city when John made it his base of operations and from where he was exiled to the island of Patmos. Ephesus served as an important seaport, handling more merchant trade than any other city of Asia Minor.

It was also the home of the temple of Artemis, or as the Romans called her, the goddess Diana. This temple was 425 feet long, 220 feet wide, and 60 feet high. It was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

A statue of the many-breasted goddess dominated the interior of the temple. Worship of Diana was actually the worship of sex. Prostitution was part of the religious rituals practiced. As thousands came to visit, Ephesus gained the reputation as being the pleasure seeking capital of the Mediterranean—the Las Vegas or Amsterdam of its time.

Living in a sex-saturated society is nothing new for the church. We're not the first to have to deal with such blatant exposure to sexual images as we can find it all around us. We're not the first to go against the stream when it comes to sexual morality. The church has often found itself to be outside the mainstream. In Ephesus, the church faced the worship of sexuality head on.

In this context, Jesus addresses the church. These letters follow the same pattern. After identifying the church, they begin with one item taken from the vision of Jesus found in chapter 1, a vision that we considered last week. *These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.* As we discovered last week, the seven stars refer to the messengers of the church and the lampstands are the churches.

This identification reminds the church that Jesus is head of the church. He is in the midst of the church. He knows what is going on in the church. He is aware of their spiritual health. He is ultimately in control. I think this identification comes with the first church to set the stage for what follows. A reminder that Jesus stands in the midst of the church.

How do we judge the spiritual condition of a church? Imposing buildings may house dying congregations, while modest structures might belong to a thriving congregation. The church we might think has everything going for it, might be the one who is displeasing God, while the church that seems to be an organizational mess might be serving the Lord very faithfully.

It is Christ, who sees the internals and not the externals, who can truly inspect each church and offer his spiritual assessment of their condition. That's what he does with these seven churches. He offers his words of praise but also his words of warning. Words that also form a mirror to us. What words of praise would Christ have to us? What warning would we have to heed?

To the church of Ephesus, Christ has many words of praise. He says to them:

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.

From these words, we can tell that the church in Ephesus was strong in doctrine. They were able to discern what was right from what was wrong. Even though there were teachers in their midst claiming to be apostles, they did not let the use of that title fool them. They questioned what they were taught. They evaluated it from what Paul, Timothy, and John had taught them. All three of these men had spent time in Ephesus. Paul in fact spent nearly three years here. Before he left, we warned about wolves in sheep clothing. And so the church in Ephesus was on her guard. She kept true to her beliefs. This was an orthodox church. False teachings were not welcome.

It was also a church that was strong in her moral stand. Impurity and wickedness were not welcome there. In verse six, we are told they hated the practices of the Nicolaitians. This group of people compromised the Christian faith with the pagan society that surrounded them. As I mentioned earlier, Ephesus was the home of the worship of Artemis or Diana, the goddess of sex. The Nicolaitians argued you could be a good Christian and still be involved in the immoral acts related to the worship of Artemis. But the church in Ephesus would have nothing to do with this. She remained firm in her moral convictions. Because of that she is praised by Christ.

Doctrinal purity. Moral standards being upheld. That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Isn't that what we want in our church? Isn't that what we are sometimes concerned about in the life of the congregation? Some are worried that we're not holding true to Reformed teachings, watering down the distinctives that make us unique. Others are worried that we're getting soft on upholding moral standards—not that we reject these moral standards—it's just that we don't seem to enforce them as clearly and as publicly as we should.

These are legitimate concerns. Holding true to the teachings of the church, maintaining God's moral standards—those are good things. Christ praises the church for being faithful to him in terms of belief and practice. And yet, as the Ephesians discover, you can have these important qualities in place, and yet be lacking in the most important area in the life of the church: love for God.

It seems impossible to believe. But after these words of praise for doctrinal orthodoxy and moral uprightness, we hear a strong word of disapproval: *Yet I have 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.*

Despite all the good things that were happening in the church of

Ephesus, she was on the beginning of a decline. She was forgetting her first love. What would this first love be? It is the love of God. After all, we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. This was the Ephesians' first love. When they heard the good news of what God had done in Jesus Christ, they responded in faith. They had a zeal for the Lord. In other words, they loved the Lord. They had a passion for the Lord.

But this love began to wane. It was taken for granted. That is very dangerous indeed. It's like the marriage relationship. A husband and wife love each other. They are committed to each other. At first, this love is very intense. In time, it will mature and develop. But the danger is always there for that love to stagnate. They find themselves following the same routine. Communication becomes the standard fare. The words "I love you" are rarely heard. The expressions of love are taken for granted. In such a situation, a marriage can be in trouble. Where love is on the decline, a third party can easily come in and destroy the marriage.

The Ephesian church was facing this. We must remember that when this letter was written, the church in Ephesus was already into the second generation of believers. The first believers have gotten older and a new generation of believers had come into the church. They continued to uphold the teachings and moral standards of the first Christians, but for whatever reason the love for the Lord was not the same. They had begun to forsake their first love.

But maybe that is not surprising. It's hard in any organization to keep the enthusiasm of the original founders. The next generation rests upon the hard work of the first generation. And the danger becomes for the third generation to lose interest—unless, the passion returns. Is it possible for that to happen in the life of a church—even our own?

Jesus challenges the church in Ephesus to renew their love: Love for God. A love that will be revealed in love for one another. A church can have all the correct doctrines lined up in a row but if she does not have a love for the Lord, she is dead. A church can be morally pure, but if there is no love for God such moral purity gets her nowhere. Because love for God is at the heart of the covenant relationship between God and his people.

Are we in danger of losing our first love? Does our drive for doctrinal purity and moral uprightness come at the expense of loving God and his people? Do we still get excited when we see what the Lord is doing in this church or do we just take for granted? When you occupy the same pew for years, if not decades, it is hard to keep up your enthusiasm as when you first joined the church. But love for God and his people should never wane. We need to renew our passion for the Lord and his kingdom.

It is very dangerous to lose one's first love for the Lord. That's why the Ephesians are called to repent. They are to remember their first love. To instill in themselves a renewed devotion to their Lord. Otherwise, Christ threatens to remove their lampstand from its place. In other words, they will cease to be a church. What a horrible thing that is to contemplate. And yet that is a possibility. Because if there is no love for God, there can be no church.

As a result, Christ urges the church to repent. Remember your first love. With this command comes also a promise. All of these letters come with a promise: *To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.* The tree of life was in the Garden of Eden. It symbolized eternal life. But humanity forfeited the right to the tree of life when man fell into sin. But in Christ, the promise of eternal life is ours once again. That's the blessing, that's the promise for those who truly love the Lord their God.

That's a promise we can hold on to. We who love the Lord, a love that will indeed reveal itself in right teachings and right behavior, we who love the Lord will be rewarded for our devotion. We will be able to eat from the tree of life, in the renewed creation. And then our love for the Lord will never fade away but will always remain as pure and complete as God's love towards us.

And so this first letter comes with a great challenge: You can be the most orthodox church, a conservative church, upholding the doctrines of the church, as well as the biblical standards of morality and yet be lacking in the most important thing: A love for God.

Is that a challenge for us, as a church? What's our reputation in Classis, in our community? Is it merely being a conservative church, a traditional church? Or is it also for being a church that is passionate about her God and Savior, passionate about serving the Lord in word and deed? He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Amen.