

## First Love – Revelation 2:1-5

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. What Is A Church?

1. Let me start with a question this morning – What is a church?
2. We know that THE Church is comprised of *all true believers*, those who've been born again by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ.
3. But what about the local church – what makes a local congregation, a *church*?
4. According to the Internal Revenue Service, a church is a religious non-profit organization that's been certified by a State government.
5. According to the State of California, a church is a non-profit group whose primary activity is religious instruction and service.
6. Those are the *legal* definitions of what a church is; but what about a more practical definition – what does the average person think a church is?
7. Well, if we were to poll the average man or woman on the street we'd probably get a whole range of answers about what people expect a church to be –
  - a. some would say it's boring pipe organ music followed by an even more boring lecture.
  - b. others would say it's a place people go to learn about God.
  - c. not a few would describe it as the local community meeting of the town hypocrites.
  - d. others would say it's people who want to be more religious.
8. *Opinions* of what a church is would be about as numerous as the people asked.

#### B. What Jesus Says A Church Is

1. But all of *that* is just the opinions of men and women – what does God say?
2. What constitutes a local church in *His* eyes?
3. The answer to that is very different from what we might expect, as we see in our study this morning.

### II. TEXT

#### A. Setting The Scene

1. When most people think of the Book of Revelation, they think of the fantastic visions the Apostle John had of the Last Days.
2. What many are surprised to find when they read the book for themselves is that it begins with short letters to seven local churches in Asia Minor – modern day Turkey.
3. In our study on Wednesday evening we'll see why John writes to these specific churches as a preface to his vision of the last days.
4. This morning, we're going to be looking at the *first* letter – written to the Church at Ephesus.

#### B. V.1

**To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:**

1. Each of the 7 letters begins this way.
  - a. Jesus dictates to John and tells him to write
  - b. the message is to be sent to the *angel* of each church.
  - c. but don't let that word "angel" throw you
    - 1) the word means "messenger" and really, that's the way it ought to be translated here
    - 2) Jesus certainly wouldn't have needed John to pen a physical letter to a heavenly angel

- 3) it's better to understand the word as *messenger*, meaning the *pastor* of the church at Ephesus.
  - 4) the pastor was the church's *messenger* – he was the one responsible for declaring God's Word to the congregation.
  - 5) he was the one who gave the public reading of Scripture and would read the letters of the Apostles to the church.
2. Following the address of each letter, Jesus gives a brief description of Himself drawn from the vision John had of Him in chapter 1
  3. We're going to be taking an in depth look at that vision in our study this Wednesday
  4. But what's notable about it is that in the descriptions Jesus gives of Himself at the beginning of each letter, they all have something to do with what He goes on to say about *that* church.
  5. So here He says that He is the one who holds the 7 stars in His right hand and walks in the midst of the 7 golden lampstands.
    - a. in chapter 1 we learn that the 7 stars are the pastors of the 7 churches
    - b. and the 7 lampstands represent the 7 churches themselves
  6. What Jesus is saying is that He is present in the midst of His church, where ever it may be.
  7. He's the one who guides the leaders of the various churches.
  8. In Matthew 18:20, Jesus said –

**Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.**

- a. Jesus is *active* in His church; He knows what's going on.
- b. He attends the board meetings and watches while the pastor studies and counsels.
- c. He walks in our homes & sits with us at the dinner table.
- d. He's walking these aisles & sitting with us this morning.
- e. in Leviticus 26:12 God said –

**I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.**

### C. Vs. 2-3

- 2 **I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars;**
  - 3 **and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.**
1. Jesus says, **"I know your works"** - to all seven churches.
    - a. He knows what's going on & WHY
    - b. in Heb. 4: 13 we read

**There is no creature hidden from [God's] sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we *must* give account.**

- c. we can react to what Jesus says here one of two ways
  - 1) either this is deeply *troubling*
  - 2) of eminently *comforting*
- d. if we're living a *double life*, then this is *troubling* because we realize that what may be *secret sin* on earth is *open scandal* in heaven.
- e. and one day, the secrets of man will be revealed before all creation.
- f. but what Jesus says here can also be eminently *comforting* if, like so many of the original readers there in Ephesus – we're being persecuted in some way for our faith.
  - 1) there are all kinds of persecution, and the cost of discipleship is paid in many coins
  - 2) we don't face torture and martyrdom as many were in that day,
  - 3) or as is even being experienced by our brothers and sisters in Christ in places like the

Sudan, today.

- 4) but the age and culture we live in is still hostile to a genuine faith in Christ.
  - 5) the persecution we face is more subtle, but no less real
  - 6) there's the *shunning* from relatives
  - 7) there's the *mocking and belittling* we get from work or schoolmates
  - 8) why, there's even the *criticism* we endure from Christians who live compromised lives and feel *convicted* by *our* pursuit of holiness.
  - 9) all of this may seem petty compared to torture, but it's no fun when you're going through it
  - 10) so it's a great comfort to know that Jesus sees what's in our hearts and knows that we do it all for Him!
- g. Jesus says, "**I know your works.**" - Does that *trouble* or *comfort* you?
2. In the case of the Ephesians, it sounds like a cause for comfort because He goes on to *commend* them for their *diligence in service* and *in defending the truth*.
  3. This was one, hard-working church!
    - a. the word "labor" in v. 2 means *exertion to the point of exhaustion*.
    - b. and this was no "flash in the pan" of activity
    - c. Jesus commended them for being *patient* in their labor, for persevering in the face of difficulty, and for not giving up when things got tough and they tired.
  4. Ephesus was a *busy church*; they had a lot going on.
    - a. this was the church of the 6 page bulletin
    - b. the people understood that church isn't meant to be a *spectator* activity.
    - c. it's a living organism—a body, in which each member plays a vital part in the health of the whole.
  5. Besides being a busy church, Ephesus was also a *faithful church*.
    - a. they had a *Kingdom* vision.
    - b. in other words, they didn't see ministry as *event-* or *program-*driven.
    - c. they knew the Kingdom of God does not advance by staging events and devising new programs.
    - d. it grows through daily faithfulness that simply seeks to live each moment by faith in Him.
    - e. so they patiently persevered in the face of any and all obstacles, knowing Jesus is Lord and works all things together for good.
  6. Jesus also commends the Ephesians for being a *pure church*
    - a. He says, "you cannot bear those who are evil."
    - b. they were careful about their moral standing .
    - c. they tolerated no sin in their midst.
    - d. we all sin; but as Christians, sin *grieves* us.
      - 1) we don't rationalize or excuse our sin
      - 2) we hate it and want it eradicated from our lives
    - e. the church has always had its share of those who *claim* to be born again but who are *living* in sin.
    - f. the early church fathers wrote much instruction on how to deal with the problem of sin in the church.
    - g. today, for the most part, we just look the other way.
      - 1) we say, "It's none of my business" – "I don't want to interfere."
      - 2) "Who am I to say anything anyway? I'm certainly not perfect."
    - h. and so sin goes on within the local church, sapping its strength and destroying its credibility. (scandal in RC church)
    - i. how should we deal with sin in the local church?
      - 1) first of all, we need to remember that we do sin!
      - 2) even the best and most mature Christian fail.
      - 3) when there's sin, it needs to be lovingly and tenderly confronted

- 4) when we see someone whose stumbling, we ought to go to them and gently seek to restore them.
- 5) if they are haughty and excuse their sin by redefining or rationalizing it, then quite frankly, we need to urge them to stop and consider if they are really even IN Christ!
- j. Christ commends the Ephesians for their moral purity.
- k. they did not bear, meaning *put up with* those who proved themselves to be false professors of Christ because they refused to repent of their sin.
  - 1) when they discovered sin they confronted it.
- 7. Finally, the Ephesian church was an *orthodox church*
  - a. Jesus commends them by saying,

**You have tested those who say they are apostles and are not and have found them liars.**

- a. in Acts 20, Paul had warned the Ephesian elders that the day would come when some from their own ranks would rise up teaching terrible heresies.
- b. he told them to be on the lookout for them and to send them packing when they finally surfaced.
- c. they did, and Jesus commends them.
- d. it was common in the early church for itinerant teachers to travel from place to place and speak in the churches; some of these claimed to be apostles, having unique authority to define the content of the faith.
- e. some of these teachers had come to Ephesus and the people had tested them to see if what they were saying was truth
- f. what test do you suppose they used?
- g. they compared what was being taught by these potential apostles to the Word of God.
- h. and when the two didn't match, instead of redefining their interpretations of scripture, they sent the liars packing!
- i. note that – Jesus called them “liars!”
  - 1) these false apostles weren't just deluded - they were bald-faced deceivers
  - 2) Paul describes them in 2 Cor. 11 :13-15

**There are false apostles, deceitful workers, who transform themselves into apostles of Christ, And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.**

- 8. We're called to test what we hear.
  - a. 1 John 4:1 says

**Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.**

- b. in 1 Thess. 5:21-22 Paul writes

**Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.**

- 9. Jesus commends the Ephesians for being busy, faithful, pure and true!
- 10. But it isn't all good news!
- 11. In fact, as good as Ephesus was – they had one flaw that threatened to overturn all the good.

**D. V. 4**

**4 Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.**

- 1. “**Nevertheless,**” says Jesus – “in spite of all the good, I see something that's a fatal strike against you.”

2. And it is this = “You have left you first love.”
  - a. it wasn't that they had NO love.
  - b. only that they had forsaken their most *important* love - the first one!
3. What does Jesus mean by "first love?"
  - a. it's simple – the first love of the Christian is love for Christ!
  - b. our love of God is born of His love for us!
  - c. when we first came to faith, the Holy Spirit convicted us of our sin and our desperately lost state .
  - d. then He gave us a glimmer of hope in Christ.
  - e. that glimmer grew to a full and brilliant dawn of trust in Christ as the final and complete payment for our sin.
  - f. the love of God was pressed home to our aching hearts and kindled a love in response.
  - g. this is the essence of Christianity - a love relationship between God and us.
4. What all too often happens is that the first passionate love of the new believer *cools* with the passage of time.
  - a. the same thing happens in many marriages.
    - 1) as newlyweds, they're almost silly in their love for each other.
    - 2) but as time goes by, they begin to grow *accustomed* to one another.
    - 3) they start taking things for granted.
    - 4) there's the daily routine and the responsibilities of life to keep them busy.
    - 5) there's no thought of unfaithfulness but the passion has departed.
    - 6) in the beginning they loved to sit and talk and just be with each other.
    - 7) but now they're busy with life and have little time for that.
  - b. in v. 4, Jesus is the heavenly Bridegroom lamenting his bride's cooled affection.
  - c. the name Ephesus means “darling”
    - 1) and we could reduce the message of this letter down to this
    - 2) Jesus says, “My Darling – You have left your first love.”
    - 3) “I appreciate that you're so busy and do so much, but I would much rather have You than your works!”
    - 4) in Jer. 2:2, we find God telling the prophet

**Go and cry in the hearing of Jerusalem, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD: “I remember you, The kindness of your youth, The love of your betrothal, When you went after Me in the wilderness.”’**

- 5) can you hear the *ache* in God's words as He reminds them of the former days when they were so passionately in love with Him?
- 6) the Apostle Paul picks up this theme from Jeremiah in his 2 Letter to the Corinthians when he writes [11:2-3]

**I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present *you* as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.**

- 7) the simplicity Paul is referring to is that first love for Jesus.
5. Outwardly, the Ephesian church is a *model church*.
  - a. they're busy, they're consistent, they're pure, they're doctrinally right on
  - b. this is the kind of church we'd all like to be a part of.
  - c. this is the church that has a feature article written up on it in newspaper.
  - d. why, this is the kind of church that seems to always be in a building project because it just keeps growing!
6. But from God's perspective, from Jesus' angle – they were lacking the most important thing - love for Him.
7. Remember what Jesus said, “I know you works.”

- a. indeed He did – He knew them to be little more than the grinding of the wheels of religious habit
  - b. their commitment to moral purity was no longer motivated by a desire to not offend the holiness of God – it was crystallizing into a cold and stiff legalism.
  - c. and their doctrinal purity, originally motivated by a love for He who IS the Truth, had degenerated into a litmus test for fellowship.
8. They were *busy* but there was no *passion* in their labor.
- a. they had a *tradition* of busyness but they lacked a *heart of devotion*.
  - b. there was a lot of *light*, but no *heat*.

## E. V. 5

### 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place; unless you repent.

- 1. Don't miss the warning Jesus gives here –
  - a. the lampstand represents *the church*
  - b. He's saying that unless Ephesus returns to their first love, they will no longer be a church!
  - c. they may carry on their services, they can maintain their reputation as being a busy place, but from the perspective of heaven, they're not a church!
- 2. The loss of the first love is a serious and dangerous thing for Jesus will not stay around a loveless church.
- 3. Beloved - an abundance of work can never substitute for love.
- 4. In 1 Cor. 13 we read

**Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.**

- 5. It's easy to keep up appearances; we go to church and Bible study, we say grace before each meal.
- 6. But inwardly, the fire has died; there's no passion, no heat.
- 7. In some hearts here this morning, there is little left of that first love but some smoldering embers.
- 8. The Holy Spirit wants to fan those embers into life again and rekindle the flame of your first love.
- 9. Do you remember when your love for Christ was the *main thing*?
- 10. Maybe there never was a time like that:
  - a. maybe you were pressed into service and busyness soon after you came to Christ.
  - b. you need to go back to the beginning and start again.
  - c. in ancient Israel, a man who was newly married was exempt from military service for one year - he was to stay home and cultivate his relationship with his wife. [Deut. 24:5]
  - d. I fear that the modern American church equates spiritual growth with church busyness.
    - 1) so as soon as someone receives Christ, we press them into service with ushering or children's ministry or whatever.
    - 2) certainly service is a *part* of discipleship and new believers ought to get plugged in as soon as possible
    - 3) but what we ought to be encouraging, what we ought to make the kernel of discipleship is a passionate love for Jesus!
  - e. how I would love to ask the visitors here this morning and those who've only recently begun attending – is that what you see here at Calvary?
  - f. is passion for Jesus visible in what you see and hear?

11. It ought to be.
  - a. you can tell who the newlyweds are.
  - b. regardless of their age – they come in together, they hold hands, they sit next to one another, and lean on each other
  - c. they touch, they smile, they just love to be with each other and to *show* they love being with each other.
  - d. when we see older folk acting like that, we wonder, “Did they just get married?”
  - e. they’re enjoying their first love!
12. Our Love for Jesus ought to find expression, specially in the way we worship.
  - a. but also in the way we talk
  - b. the way we treat one another - how we live.
13. The Ephesians had lost their first love and Jesus tells them how to get it back
  - a. there are three steps on the road back to our first love
  - b. remember, repent, and return
14. **“Remember from where you have fallen”**
  - a. in v. 4, Jesus said they had **LEFT** their first love; not lost it
  - b. that’s an important distinction.
  - c. if they lost their first love, then they wouldn’t know where to recover it.
  - d. but they didn’t lose it, they had left it.
  - e. if I lose my keys, I have no idea where to start looking for them; but I always remember where I left my keys.
  - f. Jesus is telling them to think back and see where they got off the track.
  - g. they must recall the way it used to be in those first days.
    - 1) when they loved to go to church
    - 2) when they loved to fellowship
    - 3) when they loved to pray and read the Bible
    - 4) when they were careful about what they said and did
15. Then He says, **“repent”** which means to turn around and go the other direction.
  - a. they need to first think back and see where they got off track and traded in their passionate first love for Jesus for mere religious routine.
  - b. then they need to make a 180 and go right back to that place and pick it up where they had dropped it off.
16. Then finally He says, **“and do the first works”** meaning *love-filled* works.
  - a. Jesus is not telling them to cease their diligence,
  - b. only to center it on Him
  - c. it must be the *overflow* of a heart that is passionately loving Him.

### III. CONCLUSION

#### A. He Who Has An Ear

1. Please look at the first part of v. 7 –

#### He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

- a. this is repeated in each of the 7 letters.
- b. though each letter is addressed to a *specific* local church and deals with a specific situation, the lesson is to be heeded by *all* believers.
  - 1) “*He* who has an ear” – what we find here is for each of us individually!
  - 2) “let him *hear*” – we must give diligent attention to this
  - 3) “what the Spirit says *to the churches*” - what God says to one, He says to all.
2. So, let’s take a quick test - Do you have an ear?
  - a. even the deaf have an ear!
  - b. and the hearing God calls us to this morning isn’t a hearing of sound waves with this

- physical organ
  - c. it's a hearing of the heart
3. Are we listening to what the Spirit is saying to CCO this morning?

**B. Do You Need To Fall In Love With Christ Again?**

1. In Hot Springs, Arkansas, is the *Morris Antique Mall*.
  - a. nothing on the inside distinguishes this antique store from dozens like it in Hot Springs.
  - b. there's a musty smell and faded items from the past.
  - c. but if you look closely at the outside of the Morris Antique Mall, you'll see something that makes it distinct:
  - d. before it was an antique store, it was a church building.
  - e. that church began as someone's vision to passionately love and serve God.
  - f. but today it's nothing but a monument to the past, holding a collection of dusty relics.
2. CCO has a reputation for being a church that is busy, faithful, and devoted to the Truth of God's Word.
3. But what does Jesus see? Are we passionate about Him?
4. Do you need to have your first love rekindled today?
5. Then I'd like to invite you to remember and repent.
6. Go back to the place where your first love was first kindled – at the Cross of Christ!
7. The Cross is the blazing fire of God's love and passion for you!
8. It's at His fire that ours is kindled!
9. But we must get close enough for its flame to ignite us.