

Structure For: You've Lost Your First Love-Revelation 2:2-5

Mid-Week Lent #1

Wednesday, March 4th, 2020

The Text: Revelation 2:2-5

² "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Exegetical Statement (the text's context)

Written to the historical Church in Ephesus, but at the same time addressed to the Christian Church in all places and times by Jesus admonishment: "Let he who has an ear hear what the Spirit says to the Churches." It is a message directly from the mouth of the risen and glorified Christ. He tells this Church that He lives in their presence and knows the good things they do: working hard and enduring opposition without wavering, testing and refusing to tolerate false prophets, and standing against the heretical licentious sect of Nicolaitans. But they have let the "first love", the sacrificial love that Christ manifested in His death, and moves us to worship God with and serve others, slip away. They no longer love Him first and their neighbor second in such a way that they are willing to sacrifice their wants, needs, and even lives to love them. If they do not repent they will be removed from the presence of Christ as a part of His Body (the Holy Church) and will be lost forever. But those who come off victorious by claiming Christ's victory for themselves through repentant faith will join Him and the entirety of His Church in Paradise, where they will eat of the fruit of the tree of life forever.

Focus Statement:

Nothing was more important to our Savior than our eternal salvation. God the Son left His place in heaven to come down and live among us, becoming one of us, in order to give all that He had to save those who loved Him not. He reaches out in that unconditional love and calls to faith and back to faith. Unearned, undeserving, divine love that He pours out to us in Word and Sacrament.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

Christ says we show our love to Him by our obedience to His command which is to love Him and love our fellow man sacrificially. We let other things become more important than our expression of love through obedience. We love and serve Him when it's convenient, when it doesn't interrupt that which is more important in our lives, ourselves and our happiness.

What the hearer should do as a result:

We cannot create that first love in our hearts. He must give it to us. Through our regular participation in corporate worship, personal and group Bible Study the Spirit renews that love in our hearts. We look for ways to express it to first our Savior and then our fellow man, and through that expression the Spirit grows and strengthens that love

Subject Sentence: Christ renews that first love through means of grace

Tonight, we begin our Lenten Sermon Series where we will take a walk through the first couple chapters of the Book of Revelation. One of my ideas behind this is that it could be a precursor to a more extended study of the Book of Revelation that I may do as a weekday study during the summer. But I believe these chapters are also a good place to focus for the season of Lent. In Lent we pause and reflect upon the lives that we are to live as saved and redeemed children of the Heavenly Father. Through the gifts we receive from Christ, we are called to live in a love relationship with Him. These two chapters are letters dictated by Jesus Himself to His Apostle John, with the command to write what He says down and share it with 7 Churches that existed at the time of it's writing in what we now call the nation of Turkey. But these Churches would've copied and passed along these letters to surrounding churches, so these were never considered private letters to just one specific congregation.

These letters are full of symbolism appropriate for the style of writing used for the Book of Revelation, a style we call Apocalyptic Literature. We are used to literal writing where I relate an event to you by describing the facts in as plain an English as I can. But when I have to describe things that go beyond what the language can handle, then literal writing no longer works. Take for example if you were trying to describe the Grand Canyon to someone who had never been there, and you had to do so without the aid of pictures or drawings but use only words. You would be left with something like, "It's big! I mean it's huge! It's miles and miles across and so deep that you can't see the bottom. And there are different patterns and colors carved into the sides. And it just goes on as far as the eye can see." Doesn't really do the Grand Canyon justice, does it? You would have to call on word pictures of other things that you and your listener had in common. Being from Michigan I might tell you, "It's like the world's biggest pothole. It's so big that it could suck in every single car in the world and still not be filled up." The apocalyptic literature that is Revelation uses word pictures, illustrations, and metaphors that were readily understood at the time John wrote it to describe spiritual and heavenly realities that are far beyond our concept of earthly things.

One of the problems we have today in understanding what John is writing in Revelation is we are 2,000 plus years removed from the mindset and understanding of the original recipients of these letters and the entire book. The difference in their understanding versus our own today would be like the Apostle John coming across this sign {show a 'No Smoking' symbol} Can anyone tell me what this is saying? No smoking? Right! But how did you know that when the words "No Smoking" are not on the sign? In our culture we have a mutual understanding of what this symbol means that John and the people of his day could not and would not understand. The Apostle John is drawing on word pictures from that culture, and also from Scripture itself which for the Church then was the Old Testament. So, in order to understand we need to understand their culture and also the symbolism used in the Old Testament. Along with this we should realize John is describing things that are beyond the complete comprehension of mankind no matter what symbols you are using.

One additional point about the symbolism of Revelation is important for us. In Biblical apocalyptic literature of Revelation and in the Old Testament book of Daniel numbers had a symbolic significance to the audience these books were written to. Important for us is the numeral "7". We find the significance in that we reach the number 7 but adding 3 (the number of the Trinity) to the number 4 (representing the four corners of the earth or the four directions of the compass). 7 in apocalyptic literature identifies something relating to the Triune God's work across the face of the whole earth. Therefore, when John tells us he is to write to the 7 churches he means not only 7 existing churches of the Roman Empire but also to Christ's church as it exists and operates throughout the whole world: in all times and places. In other words, these 7 letters are written to us here and now too.

These letters, as well as the entire book of Revelation exists as Christ letter of love to His body, the Church. When John wrote this book, he was exiled to an otherwise uninhabited island called Patmos. John was sent there as punishment for his refusal to stop teaching and worshipping Jesus as God, and his refusal to worship the current Emperor named Domitian as a god. With and even greater zeal than Nero before him Domitian sought to destroy the Church though Empire wide persecution. All people everywhere in the Roman Empire were to worship the Emperor as a god, along with the other Roman God's. Christian believers who held fast in faith to Christ alone were put to death through horrible and painful methods of torture. The Church at that time was scared and hurting. Christ commissioned John to write words of comfort, hope, and faith to His beloved Church. And the overall message for them and for us today is: 'No matter how bad it may look; I have won the victory over all your enemies including Satan. And I give that eternal victory to you!'

Another thing for us to look at is how Jesus appeared to John there on the Island. In these letters we will be looking at Jesus will refer to one aspect of another in each of the letters. So we should start with John's description of what our resurrected and ascended Lord looks like in all His glory in **Revelation 1:10-16** **"¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength."** John is seeing Jesus in all His glory as God the Son. It is a vision that he is struggling to communicate because the human language falls short. It is brightness upon brightness upon brightness. It is the glory of the LORD in which no sinful man can stand and live.

John continues in **Revelation 1:17-19** **"¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. ¹⁹ Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this."** This vision effectively overwhelmed John. It was more than he could take in and as a result he fell down dead. In the original language John says that he more than fell down as dead, he was like a corpse-a body with no life left in it whatsoever. But His loving Savior reaches down and restores him to the land of the living and empowers him to receive and record Jesus message to the Churches. And Christ Himself helps us understand the meaning of some of the important symbols John will use **Revelation 1: 20** **As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.** The seven stars are symbolic of the angels who watch over the Church's on behalf of Jesus. But because the Greek word for angel can and does mean messenger the stars also symbolize the earthly Pastors who care for these churches. Lampstands are symbolic of the Church in that it describes the reason Christ has planted this church and all others where they are in the world: to be the light of revelation of His love and His Gospel into a darkened world.

Jesus first letter is addressed to the Church in Ephesus. It is the mother congregation founded by the missionary work of the Apostle Paul. It went on to plant the other 6 churches that John will be writing to. When we say "Church" we should not think of a grand and established building such as we gather in today. These all were "house-churches" that met in people's homes.

Ephesus was a city that had a lot in common with America today. It was the principal commercial center of that region and was hub for the three important trade routes of the area. It was wealthy, prosperous, and magnificent to look at. A lot of wealth flowed into the city and into the pockets of those who lived and worked there. It appeared to the surrounding region much as our country appears to most of the rest of the world. It was home to the 7th Wonder of the Ancient World: The Temple of the Greek God Artemis, or as the Romans called her: Diana. To them she was the goddess of fertility and successful childbirth. Not only was the temple a place of worship but it was a very important tourist attraction for the city. It was filled and decorated with many treasures, was a museum, the center point for many festivals and parades, and a great source of income. Many local silversmiths made a living creating and selling miniature statues of Artemis.

To the Church in this city Jesus begins with a symbolic description of Himself drawn from His appearance to John in Chapter One. **Revelation 2:1** **"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.'** Jesus describes Himself as the one who holds in His hands the pastors of all the Churches and the Churches themselves. He holds them in His right hand: regarded as the hand of power and authority for the people of that

day. No matter what the Emperor may think he can do or has control over, the Church is being held firmly and securely in Jesus's loving and powerful hands. And He is truly present, His real presence standing among the lampstands which are His Church shining the Gospel out into the world.

He begins by praising them for the good things He sees them doing. **Revelation 2:2 "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false."** They are serving and enduring in the midst of temptation. The worship of Artemis included temple prostitution. And because of its economic importance a business man would either thrive or die depending on how much he supported Artemis worship in his own life. Those who refused to do so could be punished economically by others not wanting to do business with them, or even find themselves persecuted by the authorities.

But they are holding fast to their faith. And not only that they are standing fast to what they have been taught by the Apostles. When visiting preachers and teachers came, they checked what was spoken against what Paul had taught them and what the OT said. Any who taught differently were condemned as false teachers and not to be listened to. We do the same thing as we work and serve in a culture that obsesses with sex and pornography, and makes technology, cars, electronics, and other modern-day marvels to be its gods. We stand firmly on the teaching of the Apostles as given to us in Scripture and as expounded on in Luther's Small Catechism as well as the other Confessional Writings of the Lutheran Church. As your pastor, I have sworn to uphold and teach these Biblical doctrines. And we call out those groups and even denominations that teach what is contrary to God's Word.

Revelation 2:6 "Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." Jesus also commends them for standing opposed to a sect called the Nicolaitans. Evidently this was a religious sect that broke away from the Church led by a man named Nicolas. They held that since Christ obeyed the Law perfectly for us and His death forgives all trespass against the Law that obedience to the Law was no longer necessary. A believer could sin freely. And in a town that had temple prostitutes where engaging with them was not only allowed but encouraged they sinned very freely. We don't have to look to far in our world today to see those who call themselves Christian who no longer think the Law is important for Christians. Since Jesus loves all and fulfilled the Law they believe they can dismiss those Laws that offend our culture today. They see them as only binding for the culture of that day, not for the advanced and culturally mature people we have become. Like the Church in Ephesus we hold fast to Jesus words: **Matthew 5:17-18 ¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished."** We show Jesus our love for Him by keeping the law.

But Jesus has words of condemnation for Ephesus, and for us today too. **Revelation 2:4** **“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”** And what exactly is this love? Jesus often compared His relationship to the Church with the analogy of bride and groom, husband and wife. Think about that first love you shared when you met your spouse. Not the sexual attraction per se, but the attraction and desire you had to be with them whatever time of day or night. A love that moved you to give up some of the things you used to do before they came along because they no longer compare with spending time in the presence of your loved one. Think about how you sacrificed for them. How you were willing to spend a portion of your paycheck no longer on yourself but upon them. You willingly bought them gifts that were an outpouring and expression of a love that was beyond words to communicate. Think about how they became more important than yourself, your life, and your desires. You wanted nothing more than to make them happy.

Now be honest. How long did that love last? It may still be there somewhat, but not in the depth and intensity that it was when you first met. Love of self begins to creep into the relationship. We might still do things for our spouse but we expect something in return. We expect there to be some sacrificing on their part in proportion to what we are doing for them. Our wants and desires raise to equal importance as our spouses. We worked all day, we are tired, we deserve to sit and rest. The last thing you want to do is change and go out to dinner. Right now, a home cooked meal and a spot in front of the TV sounds great. Maybe we go out tomorrow or the weekend. But right now, I need my time. Our spouse has been home all day taking care of the kids. They want to get out and enjoy life in the world. Their spouse has been working all day but so have they. Why can't we go out? It will be fun. A lot more fun than you slaving over dinner and then planted in front of the idiot box. And what has happened to this couple? What happens to your relationship and mine? They've lost their first love.

What eventually happens to our relationship with Jesus? We lose that first love we were given in Him. Those who have been called to faith later in life will relate to the analogy better. When Jesus first changes our hearts and minds, or when we experience His grace and forgiveness anew during some traumatic spiritual episode, we respond to Him with a special kind of love. We desire to spend time with Him, even sacrifice things on our schedule to do so. We desire to worship Him, read His word during the week. Speak with Him in prayer. And we are moved to tell others about this great love and life we have in

And then that first love grows cold. Other things begin to crowd our schedule and spending time with Him takes a back seat. Other interests and desires vie for His attention in regards to our time, talents, and treasures. Jesus is always there. But right now it's just not convenient or comfortable to go worship Him, or to read His word, or serve as His Church. This weekend is for me. Maybe next weekend. We all suffer from this, you do at times, and so do I. Therefore, listen carefully to what Jesus is saying to you and to me. **Revelation 2:5** **“Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did**

at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.” Losing your first love for Jesus is the gateway sin upon which all the other sins we will look at during these 5 weeks spring from. And once you’ve lost it, there is nothing YOU can do to get it back. And your fate and my fate is that Jesus will remove you as one of His lampstands. He will cast you out.

You can’t bring that love back because it’s a love that is foreign to your sinful heart. It’s a love that can only come from Jesus. It’s His love. The love that caused God the Son to come down and join intimately and forever with His creation. It’s the reason God took humanity into Himself not just for a 30-year period, but forever. He gave up His place and cloaked His power, honor, and glory in human form and lived among His sinful creatures. He did that out of love for us. He allowed Himself to be tempted in the same way we are but refused to sin, all out of love for us. He allowed Himself to be charged and convicted of crimes He did not commit. Allowed Himself to be verbally and physically abused and tortured. And did it out of love for us. He hung on the cross and gave His life on it out of love for us; love for you, and love for me. He died and rose again to give you the most wonderful gifts that you could never earn nor ever repay Him for: forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life. He pours out those gifts freely and abundantly every day into your heart, mind and life. He gave His all out of love for you, because He loves you so very much.

And wherever this Gospel Message that describes Jesus’ love is told, His Spirit is there to give that love to you and renew it in your heart and mind through faith. He doesn’t wait for you to show Him love first. He loves you unconditionally. And rather than see you succumb to the fate of being cast out of His presence, He is always at work to call you back. He is at work right here and right now to do so, out of that special love for you.

Part of our lives as sinful broken people is we become lax in our participation in the means of grace by which the Holy Spirit gives and sustains in us that first love. But by the power and strength of that love Jesus writes this letter of love to you, to me, to Lamb of God, and the Church across the world. He shows us this sin and by His Spirit calls us to repentance, by which He renews that love in your life. As we journey through these 5 weeks of Lent, may he be actively doing this in your life and my life so that we live in that glorious love of His now and for eternity. Amen.