



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

The Letter to the Ephesians

Revelation 2:1-7

I believe most would agree that the Revelation given to John is a mysterious book. It is a book shrouded in strange apocalyptic language. Its symbols have fascinated the human race for the past two thousand years. Forecasters have used the book to predict the end of time, and it is an intriguing study to demonstrate how many times the world has been predicted to end using John's vision. In my sixty-three years, I would guess that these forecasters have predicted the end of the world as we know it some fifty times. It is nothing new, for the church has been predicting the Judgement Day from the very beginning. Even the Apostle Paul thought Christ believed that Jesus would return in his lifetime.

Thirty years ago someone published a booklet with the title, "Eighty-eight Reasons the Lord is coming in Eighty-eight." Someone went to the expense of mass mailing the book at no charge. There an orthopedic surgeon in Abilene who read the book and was convinced and was ready to give up his practice and go enjoy the mountains waiting for Christ's return. This doctor went to visit my mentor in ministry, Dr. Zuefeldt, and Roy being Roy, offered to bet him \$10,000 that the Lord would not return in 1988. Dr. Zuefeldt could not lose that bet. If the Lord did not return he would have \$10,000 for mission and if the Lord returned it would be meaningless to pay the off the bet. The doctor remained in Abilene and kept his office open.

To use Revelation, or for that matter other apocalyptic books in the Bible, to predict a date for Judgment Day is an irresponsible use of Scripture. It is to use Scripture in a way the Biblical writers never intended.

Most of the New Testament was written during a time before Roman persecution. There were followers of Jesus who died for their faith in Christ before Revelation was written, but most of those horrors were at the hands of the Jews. Now let me be careful here, for in no way is this to be an anti-Semitic statement. It is simply that the religious leaders, corrupted by their power, took offense at people like Stephen, and had him stoned. There were other Jewish leaders who loved God, and when it came to the Christian faith, folks like Gamaiel said, **“If this movement is from man it will die out on its own. If it is from God there is nothing we can do to stop it.”**

However, Revelation was written during a time when Christians were persecuted by Rome, though most of these persecutions were local and sporadic.

Over the next few weeks, I will be preaching from Revelation 2 and 3. These two chapters contain seven letters written to seven different churches in Asia Minor. Today’s text is Revelation 2:1-7. Hear the word:

¹“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands:

²“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. ³I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember then from what 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. ⁶Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

This first letter in Revelation is written to the church in Ephesus. Years earlier Paul also wrote a letter to this church. That letter is recorded in the Bible as the book of Ephesians. Now John was taking dictation, if you will, and writing to seven churches with the letter to Ephesus being the first. All seven letters begin with the same formula: **“To the angel of the church.”** I will say more about this angel next week, but for now I find it interesting that each church has its own angel. It could be that since the word “angel” means “messenger,” the angel or messenger is the one who will read the letter to the church when they gather for worship. I like to think of an angel as a heavenly being watching out over the church. And who knows? Our church, Westminster Presbyterian Church, may have its own angel. That is what my New Testament professor in seminary believed.

I used to sing with the children the song, “This Little Light of Mine, I’m going to let it shine.” Well, this would be the theme song of the Ephesian church. They are one of the **seven golden lamp stands**. They carried the light of Christ in a very dark and pagan world, a world filled with mythological worship and human sacrifice. It was a world that did not recognize the glory of God, but offered its worship to the emperor, as though the emperor caused the wheat to grow and the rain to fall.

This verse proclaims the value of the church in God’s eyes, for we are not simply a lampstand, but a golden lamp stand that carries a beacon of hope, of grace, of the love of God to a sinful world. That’s who we are. Westminster Presbyterian Church is a golden lamp stand. The question is, are we letting our little light shine?

The church at Ephesus was a faithful lamp stand. It was through the work of the Ephesian Church that many people saw the light of Christ. In the book of Acts we read that while Paul was in Ephesus, the church grew so rapidly that the silversmiths who made small shrines to the goddess Artemis were having a hard time selling their products. People were turning to Jesus and away from pagan shrines.

In our Scripture reading the church at Ephesus was congratulated for its work, its toil and its patient endurance. The Ephesians were committed to the pure teaching of the Christ. In Presbyterian terms, they were diligent in preserving the truth. They are honored for their reputation of testing anyone who claimed to be an apostle. Like Jennifer, who last year was examined by our Presbytery's Examinations Committee, the Ephesians were diligent in testing the theology of anyone who claimed to be a teacher.

It appears that the church was going through hard times, yet they were commended for remaining faithful to the Lord. They were facing hard times, not because the stock market was down. The times were not hard because its members were facing difficult financial decisions. Times were hard because the church was persecuted. It was dangerous to be a Christian. People were being tortured and killed, yet the church remained faithful.

The Ephesian Church was a great church, but though it was commended for its faithfulness something was not right. Maybe the Ephesian church was the most Presbyterian of the group, for they did things right, decently, and in order, but something was amiss. We read in verse 4: **"But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first."** They were doing the right things but for the wrong reasons, and this is deadly in the church. John wrote in verse 5: **"Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place."**

The attitude of the Ephesian Church was like that of the elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son. This brother did everything right. He remained faithful to his father. He continued to do his duty even when his little brother took off with his share of the inheritance. We commend the elder brother, for when others are acting with such immaturity and selfishness someone has to stay home to keep the family farm in order. But the problem with the elder brother, as with the Ephesian Church, the most Presbyterian of them all, was though he knew the will of his father, and he carried out the will of his father, he did not understand what was most important to his father.

The Ephesians knew the will of God. They endured persecution because of their determination to remain faithful to their father, but they had forgotten what was most important to their father, for they had abandoned the love they had at first. Their motivation for their faithfulness was wrong and so they are judged.

It sounds harsh, but consider how vital it is that we serve God out of love rather than out of a sense of duty. I mean, consider the man who sends his wife a dozen roses. Enclosed is a note, "Honey, I bought these roses out of my deep sense of duty to you." Now that is going to cause her to have goose bumps. No, you sent the roses because you love your wife. Any other reason simply does not work.

In 1982, during my summer internship as a seminary student at Alabama Presbyterian Church in Choudrant, Louisiana, Dr. Pete Hendricks, the director of the intern program came for a visit. He spent some time with me and my supervisor, who told Dr. Hendricks how diligently I was working on Sunday's sermon. Hearing this, I quickly responded saying, "Being well prepared keeps me from embarrassing myself."

With that comment things got real serious as Dr. Hendricks looked me in the eye and asked, "Steve is that why you are working so hard on your sermon?" WOW, a slam dunk on my motivation for preaching. It was not because I wanted to proclaim the gospel, it was not because I felt called to preach, it was not because I loved God and the people of the Alabama Church that I made my preparations. I made diligent preparations to keep from being embarrassed.

What is the motivation behind your work for Christ in the church? Why do you participate in our Christian Education program, or help with our children or youth? Why do you spend time doing work for the church on a committee? Why do you serve as an officer? What is your reason for attending worship? Why do you give up your time and money to God's service? Is it a deep sense of duty, or love for God and God's people? If it is

out of duty then we are in a whole heap of trouble, for this will only lead to frustration, burn-out, and a slow decline. If it is out of love, then we have a wonderful future together as the family of God.

As you know I am the father of three children. They are all grown now, but over the years they have provided me and Sally with times of great joy and times of great frustration. They cost me and Sally a whole lot of money. I have worried about them, and tried to guide them. I have paid to repair cars, and stayed up late at night to chauffeur them to various school and church related activities. In all the good times and through the bad times, I can say with all truthfulness that it is my greatest joy to be their father. Why do you suppose that is? Why do I put up with them? The reason is simple. Its what I told them when they were children as I tucked them into bed, and now I tell them whenever they call home from wherever they happen to be, I've told them all their lives and I joyfully tell them whenever I can, I tell them, "I love you."

Without love at the foundation of our motivations, we can miss out on the greatest joys in life. And without love, then service is simply a duty and that is deadly. Or, as John warned the Ephesians, unless they remember the love they had at first their lamp stand would be removed. It is true that unless we serve out of love we cannot hold the light of Christ up to the dark world, and the world really does not care to hear our witness unless we demonstrate in our own lives the love of Christ.

It appears that in their quest to be defenders of the faith, arming themselves with the heroic virtues of truth and courage, and maybe for the Presbyterians in the group holding up the Book of Order, only to discover that in the battle they had lost the one quality without which all others are worthless.

Paul began that wonderful chapter on love in First Corinthians 13, **"If I speak in tongues of men and of angels but have not love I am nothing. If I have the faith to move mountains but have not love, I have nothing. If I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love I gain nothing."** The

teaching is clear. Doing the right thing with the wrong motive is of no value in the Kingdom of God.

The Ephesians had allowed their orthodoxy to turn to legalism, and they allowed their legalism to take the place of their love. So where do they go from here? The Lord gives three instructions. First, remember from where they have fallen. How far have the Ephesians fallen? Years earlier Paul wrote the Ephesians, **“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.”** But now, years later the Lord wrote through John, **“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”**

Remember how things used to be when love abounded: the joy you had serving Christ together. The challenges seemed so clear, and the resources and power came from God to accomplish your goals. Working together, supporting one another, encouraging one another. No back biting. No grumbling. No complaining. Simply serving and loving one another and those God called into our lives. Maybe this could be applied to marriage counseling. A man and wife drift apart. Things are not as they used to be. There is tolerance for each other, but no depth of relationship anymore. Remember the love you had on your wedding day. Remember how you would walk on coals for your bride. Remember that gift of love that filled your thoughts almost every moment of every day.

Remember from where you have fallen and repent. The word “repent” has fallen upon hard times, for a preacher cannot use the word without sounding like a judgmental TV evangelist. But “repent” is a good word. Paul and John the Baptist used the word. Jesus used the word. Repentance is simply a conscious decision to change one’s course. It’s the decision to dedicate oneself to doing the right thing. It involves a time of soul searching, then going all the way, stretching the limits of doing right. There is nothing partial about repentance. It’s not a commitment to doing what is right when it’s convenient. It’s not like the man who sent the IRS a check for \$150 with a

note that read, “If I still can’t sleep, I’ll send you the rest.” Repentance is sending the entire amount owed.

Repentance involves the confession of past sins and the turning away from future sin. As one person said, “It is much easier to repent of what I have done than to repent of what I am going to do.”

I understand, as in the case of the Ephesians, one cannot simply make the decision to love as they did at first. Love is a gift from God. But we can make the decision to do the loving thing no matter how we feel, to consider what is best for other people over and above what feels good to us. The Ephesians judged those who claimed to be Apostles. Well, that’s great, unless in their judgment they felt better by putting others down.

Jesus commands the church to remember from where you have fallen, repent, and then finally, **“do the works you did at first.”** It is only when we do the loving things that we can regain the love we had at first.

There is a great dialectic, for how we feel affects what we do. If you don’t love someone, that will affect how you relate to them. But it is also true that what we do affects how we feel. Is it any wonder that a husband and wife feel a distance when they stop spending time together, when the husband comes home from work exhausted, and only has the energy to eat supper then turn into a couch potato? What he does begins to affect how he feels toward his wife, and he should not be surprised to wake up one day and say to himself, “I don’t love her anymore.”

Love grows cold if we let it. To love someone you have to be with them, you have to serve them, you have to do the loving things, and love will be restored and remain the driving force.

So, my brothers and sisters, if you have lost that loving feeling, if you find that your motivation to serve comes from a sense of duty over and above the love you have for God and others, remember the way things used to be,

repent, then do what you know to be right, and God will fill you with his love.
Amen.