

Serving God Without Your First Love!

Our study is the first one in a series about the messages that were sent to the seven churches that are recorded in Revelation 2-3. These seven churches were on the west side of Asia Minor which is now known as the nation of Turkey. These churches were planted and watered by the apostle Paul during his first and second missionary trips which occurred about A.D. 53-57. Since the book of Revelation was written about A.D. 95, this means that about forty years have elapsed since their founding when these messages were written. At the time these messages were written, all of the apostles except John had died. Revelation 1:19-20 tells us that John wrote the messages to these seven churches.

SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION 2-3. These seven churches form a “V” pattern that starts on the coast of the Aegean Sea and progressively moves further inland. The first message was written to the church in the city of Ephesus. It was the largest of the seven churches. The last message was written to the church in Laodicea. The messages reveal that there were problems in every church, except for two. These two churches were highly praised, but the other five churches had serious problems.

I believe that these seven churches were selected because God knew the characteristics of every church today would correspond to the characteristics of one or more of these churches. And as soon as I say that, we must remember that the characteristics of any church are actually the characteristics of those

who are attending the church. A church is not a building and its property. It is the pastor, the leadership, the ministry leaders and everyone else who attends. They reflect the church!

CITY OF EPHEBUS. Our study starts with Revelation 2:1. It says,

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write . . . Revelation 2:1 (NASB)

Here we are told that the first message was written to the church in the city of Ephesus. As we have already said, this was written about A.D. 95. Forty years had elapsed since the apostle Paul planted and watered the church. You can read about his early ministry to the church in Ephesus in Acts 19:1-41; 20:13-38.

Before we go further, it is important to know that the city

of Ephesus was not a rural town lacking sophistication. It was not a small, poor, backward city. The city was the capital of the province of Asia Minor in the Roman Empire. It was called the “Vanity of the Ancient World.” and “The Light of Asia.”¹ It was on a major trade



route and was a very wealthy city. Ephesus was a harbor city at the mouth of the Cayster River, which emptied into the Aegean Sea. The city had an estimated population ranging

1. J. Vernon McGee. 1 Corinthians through Revelation. Thru the Bible. Thomas Nelson Publishing. 1983. p. 900.

from 250,000 to 500,000 people. In comparison, the population inside the city limits of Tucson is about 500,000 as of 2019.

Photographs of the ancient ruins of Ephesus reveal a very impressive city. The business center or Agora was once lined with marble columns. The city had a famous library called the Celsus Library that rivaled the library in Alexandria, Egypt. It is believed the two-story library contained from 12,000 to 15,000 scrolls, or we would say books. The city had an amphitheater that could seat 25,000 people. That is the size of a modern football stadium. The city featured marble temples to the Roman Caesars, Hadrian and Domitian. It also had temples to gods and goddesses.

The most famous temple was to the fertility goddess called Artemis by the Greeks or Diana by the Romans. The temple of Artemis was known as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. You can read about her

in Acts 19:23-34. That passage refers to the idols of Artemis. Some of the wealthier citizens of the city had homes with running water and a sewage system; but they were not as sophisticated as our modern systems. In short, the city of Ephesus was wealthy and one of the most sophisticated cities in Asia Minor. This is the city in which the church in Ephesus existed. Revelation 2:1-7 was written to the church in this city.

CHRIST IS SPEAKING TO THE PASTOR IN EPHESUS. Now notice that Revelation 2:1 refers to someone called “One” and two symbols called “seven stars” and “seven lampstands.” The verse says,

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds

the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this . . . Revelation 2:1 (NASB)

Now who is the “One” in this verse? The answer is found in Revelation 1:12-18. The One refers to Christ. Revelation 1:20 defines the two symbols. It says,

. . . the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. Revelation 1:20 (NASB)

In this verse we are told the “seven stars” symbolize “seven angels” and the “seven lampstands” symbolize “seven churches.” Christ is sending messages through the apostle John to the

angels of the seven churches. But who are the “seven angels”? The answer is found in the meaning of the Greek word *angelos* that is transliterated as angel. It simply means “messenger” or “someone who tells.” In this context this word refers to a

pastor. Christ is sending a message to the pastor of the church in Ephesus about the condition of the church. The message can be divided into four sections: [Slide -Map] commendation (v. 2-3, 6), crisis (v. 4), cure (v. 5) and conclusion (v. 7).

GOD PRAISES THEM FOR THEIR GREAT SERVICE. The commendation or the positive part of this message begins in verse 2.

I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false . . . Revelation 2:2 (NASB)



**Library Celsus
In Ephesus**

Notice that Jesus said, “I know your deeds.” The Greek grammar reveals that Jesus had been watching this church for a while. The truth is that Jesus is always watching. He is watching every individual and every church in the world that claims to be Christian including this church. The question is, what does He see?

Now I want to look closely at Jesus’ five commendations about this church so that we can start thinking about the people who attended the Ephesian church. The first two commendations of this great church are their “deeds” and “toil.” At first, it might seem these words are identical, but they are not. The Greek word for “deeds” is *ergon* and it refers to their “accomplishments.”

That is, they had great accomplishments. Maybe they had trained very good Bible teachers. Maybe they had organized a “helper” team to render assistance to those in need.

Maybe they had established a wonderful children’s ministry,

because a children’s ministry is often considered the most important ministry in the church. This is because childhood is when most people decide to believe in Jesus. It is the future of any church, and from these young ones come the future pastors, church leaders, and those who help with the various ministries of a church. Maybe the church had organized ministry teams to share the gospel and follow-up with visitors or visit the jails. The message is they had great accomplishments.

The second commendation Jesus had for them is that they toiled. The Greek word for “toil” is *kopos*. It refers “to laboring to the point of exhaustion,” even to the point of sweating. That means these believers were so dedicated that they were sweating in the process. Maybe they burned the midnight

oil in preparation to teach or in taking care of the financial records. Maybe they were so committed to teaching the children or youth that they actually spent more than 30 minutes getting ready to teach the Bible lesson. Maybe they spent an afternoon preparing so they could find new treasure in Scripture about God, rather than rushing to teach the kiddos. This word paints a picture of individuals serving the Lord to the point of exhaustion.

The third commendation given is that these believers “persevered.” The meaning of this Greek word has the idea of “continuing under difficult circumstances.” So the people in this church accomplished great deeds, worked to the point of

exhaustion and continued working even when the task became more difficult.

The fourth commendation the church was given was that they did not “tolerate evil men.” This reveals there were at some point in time evil men and women in the church.



Titus 3:10 warns churches to not tolerate factious men after the first and second warnings. Factious individuals are those who create factions or divisions in the church. They know what they want and they seek support from others. They want certain things to be done their way! I knew a woman who was so upset with her pastor’s message that she talked with a television news team after a morning church service about the errors in the pastor’s sermon. She was on the local news that day and caused problems for the church. That is an extreme example, but it makes the point. Maybe the evil men were men given to anger, greed, drunkenness, or any one of the sins listed in Galatians 5:18-20. Since verse 6 refers to the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which we believe were about sexual freedom, that

would suggest these evil men were committing other types of sins. It appears from the commendation that the church practiced church discipline as outlined in Matthew 18:15-18 and 1 Timothy 5:19-22. The last passage is about the discipline of elders. In summary, the church did not tolerate sin in the congregation.

The fifth commendation is that they “put to the test those who called themselves apostles.” It appears that they took the apostle Paul’s warning in Acts 20:29-30 seriously.

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.
Acts 20:29-30 (NASB)

Most likely the individuals were false teachers. Whatever the

correct answer is, the church did not tolerate false men.

In verse 3 the church is praised again and given two more commendations.

... and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake and have not grown weary. Revelation 2:3 (NASB)

The sixth one is that the church “persevered” and “endured” for “My name’s sake.” The seventh commendation is that they did not grow weary! The message is that they did everything for Jesus, and they were like the EverReady bunny. They just kept beating that drum and beating that drum, going and

going! They were like a four-year old child running around everywhere even at 9:00 o’clock at night! They did it all in the name of Jesus!

Now would you like to have attended that church, if you did not know about the next two verses? Frankly, most pastors would love to have been the senior pastor of this church. The church at Ephesus was a dream church. The people in this church were faithful, dependable, and motivated, and they did it all for Jesus. We can almost hear the joyful “Amens,” the out-standing choir singing and their musicians playing. Wow, were they professional! The leaders enjoyed being together. I can

imagine there were so many people who wanted to be involved in children’s ministry because it was a mission field right there in the church. People had to put their names on a waiting list in order to have the opportunity to lead a child to Christ. Now obviously I just



made up those examples. But the point of verses 2-3 is that this church was biblically sound and they did it all for Jesus. What a glorious church! God praised the church for their great service.

BUT THEY LOST THEIR FIRST LOVE. After reading verses 2-3, it is difficult to think that there could be a single problem with this church. Yet in the next verse, Jesus tells the church that they have a very serious problem. Verse 4 says,

But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Revelation 2:4 (NASB)

Jesus' words must have been shocking to this faithful, hard-working, and dedicated church since it came directly from Him! We have already discovered in Revelation 2:2 that Jesus said, "I know." When He said that, He revealed that this problem was not new. He had waited for the church to change. Psalm 44:21 reminds us that God knows our hearts. It says,

For He knows the secrets of the heart. Psalm 44:21 (NASB)

The point is that we can fool the person sitting next to us in the church, the leaders in the church, and the pastor, but not the Lord Jesus. I am sure that some were wondering if the person sitting next to them in the church had left their first love. But the only real question that I have is were they considering their own condition?

"Left Their First Love" Means Abandoned The First

Love. But what did Jesus mean by "left your first love"? In order to understand the meaning we will need to understand a few words. The first word is "left." It is translated from the Greek word *aphiemi*, and the root meaning of the word means "to stop doing something" or "to abandon." That is, they abandoned their first love. That is a very strong statement.

What Does "First Love" Mean - View #1? Next, we need to ask what does "first love" mean? There are two views. The first view says "first love" means these Ephesian Christians were not loving each other as they once did in the past. This view says the apostle Paul had earlier urged the Ephesians to forgive one another and to love each other in his letter to the

Ephesians, but they ignored his encouragement. He wrote Ephesians about thirty-five years ago in A.D. 60-62. A good example would be Ephesians 4:31-32.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. Ephesians 4:31-32 (NASB)

This view says that "leaving your first love" refers to an unloving heart attitude toward each other. But the major problem with this view is that 1 John 4:20 says,

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. 1 John 4:20



(NASB)

The point is: one symptom that you or I do not love Jesus is that we not love other believers! The Holy Spirit is saying if there is someone you do not love or like in the church; your real problem is not with them; the problem exists in your heart. You do not love Jesus enough! The root problem is your lack of love for Jesus!

What Does "First Love" Mean - View #2? The second common view about the meaning of "first love" is that it refers to our lack of love for Jesus. This is the correct view. We just learned that from 1 John 4:20. Another proof is that the word

for “love” in the Greek text is literally “the love.” Now what is “the love”? The answer will become obvious in two passages. The first passage is Deuteronomy 6:4-6. It says,

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. Deuteronomy 6:4-6 (NASB)

I love the Hebrew word that is translated as “might” in this passage. The actual meaning of this word is “abundance” or “muchness.” I like the word “muchness.” “Muchness” refers to giving everything you have! We are to love the Lord with all the “muchness” we have! We are to love the Lord with everything and anything within us! I know that this verse is familiar, but did you know that this command to “love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” occurs seventeen times in the Old and in the New Testament? Let me repeat. The point is simple—God wants this from you!

The second passage is Mark 12:28-30. It will clinch the meaning of “first love.” In this passage a scribe asked Jesus a question. Now listen! Here is the passage.

One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, “What commandment is the foremost of all?” Jesus answered, “The foremost is, ‘HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.’” Mark 12:28-30 (NASB)

Notice the word “foremost.” The Greek word that is translated as “foremost” in the NASB and as “most important” in the ESV comes from the same Greek word, *protos*, which means “first.” It is the same Greek word that occurs in Revelation 2:4. That is, the foremost commandment is to the “first love.” Or, we could say the first love is the “foremost love.” Therefore, to abandon “your first love” or “your foremost love” means that

Jesus was not foremost in their hearts. This means this great church was serving Jesus, but He was not their first love! Now the message is simple! Other things were more important to these believers! Jesus was somewhere down the ladder of importance. This church was about doing and not about loving Jesus! A church cannot fix this problem! This is a heart problem! It was a good, orthodox church at one time; but the hearts of the people in this church were not filled up with Jesus!

Illustration of Not Loving Jesus With A “First Love.” An example of a church that did not love Jesus with a “first love” was the church at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 1 we are told there were divisions in the church, because some followed Paul, others followed Apollos, and still others piously claimed to follow Jesus. In chapter three, Paul rebuked them for being fleshly. In chapter four Paul rebukes the Corinthian believers for being proud toward each other. In chapter five Paul rebuked them because they tolerated a son having sex with his stepmother and the church did not remove them. In chapter six, Paul rebuked them for their lawsuits against one another. In chapter seven, spouses were divorcing their unbelieving spouses. In chapters eight through ten, they had judgmental attitudes toward each other. In chapter eleven they were celebrating the Lord’s Supper with unconfessed sins and some were fighting over food that was served before the communion. In chapter twelve they were seeking what they thought were the greater spiritual gifts. Then in 1 Corinthians 13 Paul taught them about love. That is the great chapter on love. Then in 1 Corinthians 14:1 he urged them to love one another because they were not loving one another. Love was the root problem in this church. It was a symptom of a much greater problem. Finally, chapters 14 and 15 are about disorder in the church. Then in 1 Corinthians 16:14 we read,

Let all that you do be done in love. 1 Corinthians 16:14 (NASB)

Paul encouraged them to love each because the long list of sins revealed they did not love one another! Then in verse 22, Paul addressed the real problem! They did not love the Lord as they should.

If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed. Maranatha.

1 Corinthians 16:22 (NASB)

One symptom of the root problem of not loving Jesus with a first love is that they, you, or I do not love others. That was Paul's message to them! When he said that if anyone does not love the Lord, he is accursed, Paul was saying that some of them might not be Christians.

The Greek word that Paul used for love in this verse is not the normal Greek word for love in the New Testament. It is not *agape*, which is the highest form of love. Instead, Paul used the word *phileo*. This means "tender affection." Let me give you a sense of this word. In Matthew 10:37 *phileo* is used of the love we have for our father and mother. In John 5:20 *phileo* is used to refer to the love God the Father has for the Son of God. In John 11:3 *phileo* is used for the friendship that existed between Jesus and Lazarus, and it is used to refer to the kiss Judas gave Jesus. Paul's point is that they at least had to have tender affection for Jesus; and if that is missing, something is wrong!

Illustration of Loving Jesus With A "First Love." Now I want you to see the most outstanding illustration of this word *phileo*. It is found in John 21:15-22. In John 21:15, Jesus and Peter had finished eating breakfast. Here is the verse,

So, when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My lambs."

He [Jesus] said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep."

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep." John 21:15-17 (NASB)

Three times Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love Me?" Three times Peter replied with "You know that I love You." Unfortunately,

our Bibles do not tell us what they actually said. The first two times Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him, Jesus asked do you love Me with *agape* love? We have already discovered that *agape* love is the highest form of love in the Greek language. But Peter replied with, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." The word that he used for love was *phileo*. He said I have tender feelings for you! I like you a lot. It was the same word that Paul used when he wrote, "If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed."

The third time that Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him, Jesus changed *agape* to *phileo*. He asked, "Peter do you really love me with *phileo* love?" Peter was grieved and repeated his same answer, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." I *phileo* you. I like you a lot.

Now notice two things. First, Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him with *agape* love two times. Do you know what Jesus was doing? He knew Peter's heart. He knew that Peter loved Him with *phileo* love, but Jesus wanted Peter to love Him with the highest form of love - with the "first love"! You shall love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and mind—with "muchness"! This is what Revelation 2:4 is all about. That kind of love for Jesus was missing. The foremost love for Jesus was missing!

Notice the second lesson from this event. Jesus told Peter that He, Jesus, was going to use Peter! He said,

... Follow Me! John 21:19 (NASB)

You follow Me! John 21:22 (NASB)

Now stop and think about Revelation 2:4. In the next verse we are going to discover that Jesus told the church in Ephesus that because they had abandoned their first love, He would remove the church unless they repented. So now I have a question. Why was Jesus willing to use Peter with his *phileo* love (even though he did not have *agape* love), yet Jesus warned the people in the church in Ephesus that He would remove the church because they had left their first love? The obvious answer is that the love the church as a whole had for Jesus was less than the love Peter had for Jesus! The answer is that their love was farther down on the scale from 10 to 1. Their love was obviously less than Peter's *phileo* love. This also helps

us understand the warning to the church in Corinth. Paul warned them to at least have a *phileo* love for Jesus because he was concerned they did not have that kind of love. Some of them might not have even been Christians according to 2 Corinthians 13:5. So Jesus called the people in the church in Ephesus to have a first love! You see the goal is not to have *phileo* love for Jesus—some love—the goal is to have a “first love” for Jesus, for Jesus to have first place in our hearts.

You see, Jesus wants your heart more than anything else and if Jesus has your heart, then He has everything! He has you and your service too! The Ephesian church had slipped and as a whole they were not loving Jesus with all their heart, with all their soul and with all their might—with muchness!

REMEMBER, REPENT, & DO WHAT YOU DID BEFORE. So, what should we do if Jesus is not our first love? The answer is given in Revelation 2:5.

Therefore, remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place — unless you repent.
Revelation 2:5 (NASB)

Remember From Where You Have Fallen. The first step to returning to our “first love for Jesus” is to remember from where we have fallen. The common explanation is that Jesus was urging them and urging us to remember how we loved Jesus when we first became a Christian. But frankly, I have to admit my love for Jesus as a new Christian was poor. Love for God grows as a believer is walking in the Spirit, because the first part of the fruit of the Spirit is love. Agape grows over time as the fruit of the Spirit grows in our lives! But the implication here is that they once did love Jesus with all their heart, all their soul and all their might. But that was not true now! They had fallen from the high love that they once had, and Jesus is telling them that He wants them to love Him with all their heart, all their soul and all their might—as they once did. He was going to remove their church, if they did not repent.

Repent. The second step is to repent. Jesus is telling us that if you do not love Him with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might, then you are in sin! This means that if you do not love Jesus more than anything else, you have unconfessed

sin in your heart!

Do The Deeds You Did At First. Then Jesus tells them to do the deeds they did at first! This implies a choice. Loving God is a choice! If we took the time to read all of the verses that urge us to “love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all muchness,” we would discover that the command is repeated seventeen times in the Old and New Testaments. Seventeen times we are commanded to love the Lord. That is, you have to choose to love Jesus. It is a choice.

Do you remember that in Jeremiah 9:23-24 God says,

Thus says the LORD, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the LORD. Jeremiah 9:23-24 (NASB)

This great church at Ephesus had a great pastor. I am sure they used to seriously study Scripture. That would please God. I believe this is a call to do the deeds that cultivate a relationship with God. It is developed through serious Bible study, obedience and confession of sins when we do not obey, prayer, and evangelism. So turn off the television and become more serious about developing your relationship with God, your foremost love, your most important love, that “first love” for Jesus! Imagine at some point actually wanting God to have His will done in your life, and not your will. Imagine God actually having His will done and appealing to our heart’s desire. Imagine at some point a heated passion that causes you to strive to be holy because you want God to receive glory through your godly behavior! Now that would be a heart learning to love Jesus!

THE COMING FUTURE. Since we have already commented about verse 6, the last part of this message is verse 7. It says,

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God. Revelation 2:7 (NASB)

Jesus urges us to hear this message from the Holy Spirit. Then He tells us that overcomers will eat of the tree of life in Par-

adise. Since 1 John 5:4 says that overcomers are those who believe in Christ, then this is a promise to every true believer. Revelation 22:2 tells us that the tree of life will be in heaven. That means heaven is paradise! In our last study, we discovered that Jesus wants a relationship with us, before we serve Him. In this study we are called to not just have a relationship but to love Jesus with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind—with “muchness”—before we serve Him! He wants your relationship to be more than a casual one. He wants all of you!