

For those who pay attention to the projected images that accompany the sermons, you will have noticed that the title of this sermon is A Message to the Churches, but the scripture read only referred to the church at Ephesus. This is not a mistake because I want us to focus on the church at Ephesus this morning, but I recommend that you read the rest of the chapter in your own time. Let's recap on the message to the Ephesians that came from John's vision or Revelation. *'I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, 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. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.'* This message starts in such a complimentary way and then comes the criticism, and the threat.

So, what's going on here? If the Ephesians have been persevering and working hard, with an intolerance for wicked people and a constant discernment for false prophets, then what was the first love they have forsaken? Surely if we as a church are a persevering, hard-working and discerning people with no time for the wicked, then we are to be praised? Well, there is the problem that's been overlooked in the church, and this problem is addressed in this scripture.

The Revelation that John received was from Jesus and it speaks of end times before Christ returns with the day of judgement following. Here we have Jesus appraising His church and trying give the church time to correct their ways before judgement comes upon it. Jesus is fair and He commends the Ephesians His church first, if He can. Jesus commends the church in Ephesus for their *hard work and perseverance and discernment*. Jesus knows that the Ephesians *have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary*.

We learn that the Ephesian church was an extremely orthodox church. They were strong in both doctrine and the work of the ministry. Jesus says, *you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false.* The church at Ephesus refused to compromise their moral or doctrinal purity which is as it should be. And then after praising their strengths, Jesus told the Ephesians *but I have this against you!* What is a frightening statement. It's not good to know that someone has something against us, and it makes us uncomfortable. But this isn't just *someone*, it's Jesus who has something against you? The thought of this made me stop and ask: ***Jesus, do you have something against me? Have I grieved you?*** Perhaps you are thinking the same?

What was Jesus so upset about? The church had left their *first love* and it appears that while Ephesians still loved Jesus, the quality of their love for Him had weakened. The Ephesians distanced themselves from their first love and they no longer loved Jesus as they did when they first came to faith. They not only took their eyes off the Lord but they lost fellowship with Him.

The principle is that regardless of how much of the Bible we may know, and how much we serve Him, or how many past victories we have, we cannot walk with the Lord without loving Him. Scripture tells us God is a jealous God, and remember Jesus' commandment that we Love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The sin that grieves Jesus most is a loss of love for Him.

Jesus wants a relationship with us, not just a performance. If we fail to love Jesus, we disobey the greatest commandment. If our love for Christ is cold, it doesn't matter how faithfully we serve Him or how rightly we believe, if we fail in our love for God we have failed in faithfulness. Service and orthodoxy are important but Jesus Christ wants our love too. If the Ephesians once loved the Lord with all their hearts, souls and minds then what happened, and what can we learn from them?

As I read Revelation 2 and started to think about this sermon I became very uncomfortable because I realised that I have fallen into the same trap as the Ephesians. I still love the Lord and I try to be faithful to His word, but loving God has not been my priority over the past few years. Instead of growing in faithfulness, I have grown in religiousness, and they are far from being the same thing. I'm reading a book called Centre Church (show book) and it lays out in simple terms the difference between being religious and being faithful.

I suspect I am not alone in this respect of growing in religion. Over the past few years I have found myself getting critical of those who believe in a different interpretation of the scripture than me, and I have voiced my criticism as if I was the keeper of absolute truth. I held to my point of view and criticised others and my behaviour has been more suited to that of a Pharisee, rather than an imitator of Jesus Christ, which is what His disciples are called to be. My view of scripture has not changed, but my smug self-righteous attitude has been seriously challenged, and I'm grateful for that.

The Church at Ephesus had fallen into the same error. They held to their doctrines and they had established religious practices that were commendable, but they had lost their first love for Jesus. But note that after Jesus had criticised their religion, He returns with another word of praise: *Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.* (2:6). Though the Ephesians had left their first love they had not left their hatred for evil. Jesus concludes by telling them to remain in the battle against sin.

They are to remain true to the faith and resist false teaching. Note how sensitive Jesus' heart is toward His church. He guards against deflating them by concluding with a note of praise. But it's a poor consolation for the Ephesians because all Jesus is able to commend them for is their loveless religion and their hate for the Nicolaitans. We don't know much about the Nicolaitans, but it's clear that they don't believe the same gospel as the Ephesians, which is why they are hated.

Now why does this sound familiar to me? Oh yes, because I have found myself getting extremely angry with those who take different interpretations of the Bible than me. I can't say I've hated those who differ with me, but I can honestly say I have disliked them intensely and I've missed what Jesus is really saying in this passage. Jesus says He hates *the deeds* of the Nicolaitans and it's important to note this. ***Jesus doesn't hate them individually, he hates their behaviour. Jesus hates that which hurts.*** If we love people then we appreciate principles that help people. We must distinguish between hating a concept and hating a person. The Nicolaitans were involved in behaviour that was not good for them, and Jesus hated their practices because He knew that they would be hurt through their actions.

It's strange to consider that true love for Jesus involves hate. Our society continues to lower its standards and it has no sense of shame or rebuke of sin. Christians move in this society. If we buy into the values of our society then we compromise Christ and our faith. Christians must differentiate themselves from this society and its values. It is not enough to dislike the sins of society for dislike is not a strong enough word. We are to hate those sins which distort the Gospel truth.

But the caveat is that our hatred of sin is always a reaction to our love for God. We must rediscover or perhaps discover our deep love for the Lord. If like the Ephesians, we've allowed our faith to fall from heart felt love to a dry head knowledge, then let us discover the first love we initially had for God's Word, prayer, fellowship and witnessing.

We must repent that we've allowed our faith to become a loveless religion. Think about the depth of love we have for God and change our apathetic love to an appreciating love for Him. ***Jesus urges the Ephesians and us to get back to their first love for Him, the love they had when they first became Christians. 'Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.'*** James 4:8

If the church and its people fails to remember, repent, and love, Jesus gives an 'or else' warning: *Or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent.* Jesus promises that He will come in judgment to discipline His church for having a cold heart toward Him. Jesus always disciplines those He loves. He would not love His church if He did not discipline it. To discipline is to care about the people you discipline. In this case this is a collective discipline of the entire church.

Jesus' threat to remove the lampstand is figurative language, for a lampstand gives light and takes us out of darkness. If the church did not repent then God would remove the church's ability to bear witness for Him. When this occurs, the light of the church goes out and the church no longer has an impact its community or world. This eventually happened to the church in Ephesus when Islam invaded Turkey and wiped out Christianity in Ephesus. There is no church at Ephesus today and Turkey where all seven of the churches names in Revelation were located, is more than 98% Muslim today.

What is true in Turkey is also true through the western world. ***Christ has removed many lampstands***, just walk around Glasgow and see the number of closed churches that are now nightclubs, or climbing centres or lying derelict. Revelation 2 holds serious threat: ***No love, no light, no church!*** A church that loses its love will soon lose its light, no matter how doctrinally sound it may be.

So, let us heed Jesus' words: *He, or she, who has an ear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* The Holy Spirit is calling us to evaluate our openness to God's love and to respond to the things that need to be learned and applied. We are to rediscover our first love; our love of Christ and our love of one another. We are to distinguish from hating individuals to hating the sin that will ultimately hurt them. We are to lose our cold religion and rediscover our lively faith.

Jesus said to the Ephesians: *You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.* Let us heed their warning, and Christ's commandment: ***Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*** And ***Love your neighbour as yourself.*** And may our love for God increase as you we journey in faith. **Amen**

(1973 words)