

Abandoned Love: The Church at Ephesus

Revelation 2:1-7

MPS Jesus calls His church to our first love as the power and sustaining strength for all of life and ministry.

OBJ Jesus calls every Christian to live in God's love by four remembrances.

READ Revelation 2:1-7

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.

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. ³I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember 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. ⁶Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

Revelation 2:1-7

Introduction to the Seven Churches

The next two chapters of Revelation address seven churches of Asia Minor. These seven churches are intended to represent all churches. Each address follows a basic pattern of introduction with a name for the Lord Jesus Christ, that likely is intended to address the church's situation, a praise for their faithfulness or recognition of their situation, a warning of fault from sinfulness, except for two churches which do not include this, an inevitable fate if they do not address their fault, and a call to faith by repentance that will result in a reward from God. Of the seven addresses, two churches are in grave danger, two are healthy, though it may not seem this way, and three are warned for the danger that is overtaking them. The issue for us is not to identify which church we are most like, though there may be one or more that seems most familiar. Rather, the issue is how we learn from all seven, recognizing their situations as potential realities for any church, and remembering the One who is our help for any situation. *As we walk through the seven churches, I want us to understand that the faithfulness of our witness will not be determined by the greatness or extent of our strengths and strongest points, but how humble, ready, and willing we remain to repent of our sin and focus on Jesus to walk in obedience.*

TRANS We begin with the Church at Ephesus.¹

Ephesus was the kind of place for which cities receive great notoriety! The official capital of the province of Asia, a major port city for much of the trade from the East, and where the great trade route from the Euphrates terminated. And alongside government, business, and trade, Ephesus was a center of religion. The goddess Roma was worshiped there, and even the Roman Emperor was worshiped there too, who was Domitian at this time. But most notably, Ephesus had been the home of the Mother Goddess Artemis (Acts 19:35), whose temple roof stood more than sixty-feet high, encompassed a span more than double a football field, and was known as one of the wonders of the ancient world. Ephesus was the most significant city of all John's letters. *Cultures where religion thrives is always the best place to find religious confusion and craziness, and Ephesus was no exception.*

The church at Ephesus was founded by Priscilla and Aquila, who came with Paul from Corinth and remained there. Paul would later return and spend a couple of years ministering in the city, becoming known as the center of his work in Asia. His letter to the Ephesians is known as one of the most prolific letters intended for circulation to guide all churches. Later, Timothy would spend time here, and tradition even has John ministering here for a time. Ephesus was an important church with great influence for many other churches. One might even say, the kind of church every church should aspire to be, in most ways. *But today we learn, great strength and accomplishment in gospel ministry is no excuse for ignored sin, nor a substitute for a Christian's one priority.*

¹ Ladd, George Eldon. A Commentary on the Revelation of John. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972. Ladd's work, along with others, is very helpful in this overview.



Jesus calls His church to our first love as the power and sustaining strength for all of life and ministry.

The church at Ephesus was known for its gospel work, especially its strength at guarding against false teachers. Their commitment to pure doctrine and faithful orthodoxy by testing and discerning was strong, and much needed because their culture was replete with every false doctrine that became the next fad. We are not unfamiliar with this pattern; what starts as cliché morphs into a meme shared from “what harm is there”, which advances to a personal mantra justified by “It helped me.”, that becomes a pervasive ideology to consume one’s life when rationalized as “how could it be wrong if it’s been so helpful.”, or worse still, “this is the gospel.” Highly religious cultures are notorious for propagating false teachings in number and degree, and typically justified by its benefit for personal or self-care, or universal good. Even in our own day the number of issues is mind-boggling; organic and naturopathic philosophies for everything from eating to healing, workout regimens, trends, and movements, even competitive sports, all the way to healthcare; racism, critical theory, feminism, political activism, communism, Marxism, socialism, capitalism, and Christian Nationalism, along with any number of other social issues; abortion, sexism and misogyny, abuse, sexual orientation and gender dysphoria; the myriad of mental health issues and symptoms, viruses, masks, vaccines, in-person or online services, the list is endless. And within the church these are all accompanied by competing demands of “you didn’t say that right, enough, or strong enough.”, or “You’re trying to scare us by talking about this.” And I haven’t even gotten to preferences within the church that we love to debate and argue over. It should surprise no one that pastors are walking away at an all-time high rate because the stress of the job, loneliness and isolation, and political divisions.² But this is where we are, and what we are called to confront. **A church like Ephesus, highly committed to doctrinal diligence, was not only necessary to guard against, but one could argue, produced by the demand that arises from the false teachings and teachers that came so prolifically from a hyper-religious culture.**

MLH I want to state for the record: I speak generally of what the church broadly has experienced, not personal experience.

But in all their good work, Jesus issues a very strong warning of danger to the church at Ephesus. “*But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.*” In the midst of all their good work of doctrinal faithfulness and guarding of the church, they departed from that of first order; they abandoned love. The list alone that I mentioned above makes this understandable, and it’s not even comprehensive; but nothing makes this acceptable. Upon return from my sabbatical, I shared with you how one mentor stated to me in my sabbatical preparation, “There’s something about gospel ministry that works against one’s personal relationship with Christ.” (Georges Boujakly) You don’t have to be in vocational ministry, though, to know that faithfully following Jesus is a great challenge. **The Evil One aims every arrow of temptation and trial at the heart, to lead you to abandon God’s love.**

Someone may ask, “**What love did they abandon, love for Jesus, for one another, or for the people of the world?**” The right answer to this is, “Yes”. Without loving Jesus, and loving Him first, any other love is broken. God saves us by His love to abide in His love, every day, so others can experience and come to know His love in Jesus Christ. The love of God in Jesus Christ that calls you to faith in Him for salvation is the power and strength that holds you in that relationship. The love of God in Jesus Christ that calls you to faith in Him is the power and strength that holds you in the love of the saints through community and fellowship. Love for one another is the distinguishing mark of a Christ-follower.^{John13:35;1John4:7} The love of God in Jesus Christ that calls you to faith in Him is the power and strength that holds you in all your serving the gospel and ministering in His Name. When we live an all-consuming love for God, it multiplies and compounds love for other people, even our enemies, because God is love. **Jesus calls you to live in God’s love by abiding in Him, to continually engage the heart to grow an all-consuming love for Jesus.**

Abandoning their first love means they lost their zeal to witness, to share the gospel so others could come to faith in Jesus Christ. “Abandoning” means they didn’t come to disbelieve it, but walked away from it. They made the gospel about everything other than God’s love in Jesus Christ as the propitiation and salvation for all who believe in Him. And when

² Barna Research. “Pastors Share Top Reasons They’ve Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year.” April 27, 2022. <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/> Last Accessed October 12, 2022.



we think about the list from earlier, it's easy to see how "abandoning" becomes so common. With so many the argument that became most prevalent was this, "this is the gospel". And that's what became most deceiving, that in the good work the definition of the gospel got convoluted so the work became the priority and made the gospel something other than what God's Word says it is.

This is much more common than one might imagine. We begin by saying, "It is God's will...", or "God wants me to have..." or even, "God has commanded...", and so we build the justification on a solid foundation. But soon our pursuit is all about the target, and no more about the motivation. We believe God's will is for us to have a strong marriage or family. We fill our life with everything that we can think of to accomplish that end; self-care, marriage help, retreat, or counsel, kid's activities, because who doesn't love to see their kid smile or hear them laugh. A few improvements are noticed, so we push harder. Schedules, resources, or preferences begin to conflict, so we have to choose where to focus. And little by little, or large steps at a time, we have less God in life, and more of the things that we began to pursue for Him. Substitute any area or issue of life and the same path and progression can be followed. Surely crisis and trauma can begin a process such as this, but the "top" issues that I've witnessed in 18 plus years, without compare, that have produced abandonment include recreation, chasing a spouse or children to make them happy, but without addressing any heart issue, and more recently, championing an agenda or cause all in the name of "the gospel". **No one sets out to abandon God's love, but many wake up one day to realize they can no longer see the "shoreline" of God's love because they've drifted so far out in the "sea" of chasing other things.**

OBJ Jesus instructs the church at Ephesus to return to their first love. Jesus calls every Christian to live in God's love by four remembrances.

1. Remember where God's love found you, in Jesus.

Jesus words reveal a simple pattern of "remember – repent – return". If you are to live in God's love, you must stay close to where it found you. **Do you remember when Jesus saved you?** Our hearts burn "hot" with God's love when we are first saved, but this does not have to be the last or only time. Jesus came to earth and died that we might abide in Him daily. He fills and consumes our heart by His love to be the catalyst for all of life. When we fail to let our heart be filled, whatever we do will only lead to an abandonment of His love. Jesus calls us to abide in Him as our priority, to remember the gospel as of first importance.

APPL This is why we use the **Life Compass of a Christ-follower** in our Navigation series. Life with God begins by calibrating all of life to Him by the new heart He has put within us. This is not a one-time action, but the daily and continual practice of our life. **Setting our heart on Jesus every day is the priority for every Christ-follower.**

2. Remember: serve others out of the overflow from Jesus.

Be sure to take note: Jesus never said, "stop doing your work." He wants His church to work out of love. The good work of the gospel in guarding our doctrine and fellowship in no way stands in opposition to love. But our work for Jesus, in all our serving and ministry, can never be separated from our love for Him. This is why the Bible instructs that what we do for others is because of what He has done for us. And the reality is, that so often we are reminded of our overflow only when we are serving others. Serving reminds of what Jesus has done for us, especially when we see Him use us to bring others closer to Him. And serving reminds us of what Jesus is doing in us when we know our strength is gone and think we have nothing to offer, but He works through us to strengthen and encourage others.

3. Remember: when you fail or struggle to love others, return to Jesus before and more than you strengthen the effort of your work.

Love for other people only wanes for one reason, because real love for God has weakened, at least as our primary motivation and maybe in our full obedience. This can be such a challenging confession, especially when you are striving to serve faithfully. Confronting patterns of life that are completely foreign to us, or ideologies that are contrary to Biblical teaching, correcting patterns of behavior that are explicitly sinful, counseling in patterns of thinking that align with Biblical



truths, or even in confronting barriers or problems that are obtainable; in all these scenarios we can become so focused on defeating sin or helping others to conquer their sin that the battle overtakes our heart. [Love for others never means we tolerate or coddle sin, but it does mean that when love ceases to be our motivating strength, we return to the Lord first.](#)

4. Remember: there is no greater love than sharing the gospel that calls people to trust in Jesus for salvation.

Jesus warns that truth without love leads one to abandon His mission but love without truth is no love at all.³ Love for God is THE Priority of our life; it is our source and strength in all our believing and living, in all our community, and in all our witnessing. Without all things motivated by love for God, nothing matters, for we can do no good work apart from Him.^{John15:4-8} And God's love was demonstrated on the cross when Jesus laid down His life as the sacrificial payment for our sin. The substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ for our sins is always the heart of the gospel, and therefore God's love. Of all the good we can do in this world, it is at best temporary if we do not share God's eternal love. In all our good deeds, church, may the eternal love of God in Jesus Christ be the distinguishing mark of our message, or all our labor and serving, and of all our life.

CLOSE Jesus is not simply wanting us to feel something from Him, but to be filled by Him as the motivation for all of life. The good work of the gospel is not opposed to love but motivated by love. How we love others is only true to the gospel when it is done out of God's love filling our hearts first. Cultivating, and not abandoning, love is only done we walk closely with Jesus and abide in Him, remembering that He became like and lived among us for us.

[Jesus calls His church to our first love as the power and sustaining strength for all of life and ministry.](#)

³ G. K. Beale and David H. Campbell, [Revelation: A Shorter Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 57. Beale states, "The Nicolaitans probably taught that Christians could participate in the idolatrous culture of Ephesus."

