

Christ's Last Words to His Church Series:

Ephesus: First Love

Then and Now

Revelation 2:1-7

As we open to Rev. 2:1-7 we are reading the personal message in Christ's last words to His Church. These verses are part of a warning about what tripped up the earliest generations of believers. Jesus wanted them, and us, to stay on the right path.

These churches were real gatherings of people 2,000 years ago. That means that Jesus saw seven different types of believers gathering at that moment in the history of His church. Have you ever thought about that?

Every believer back then was like one of these seven types of believers addressed by these seven letters we are studying. In some part of the end of the First Century AD there were Ephesian types of believers (2:1-7); Smyrna types of believers (2:8-11); Pergamos types of believers (2:12-17); Thyatira types of believers (2:18-29); Sardis types of believers (3:1-6); Philadelphia types of believers (3:7-13); and Laodicea types of believers (3:14-22).

But even more than just back then, these letters were written in God's Word to instruct all of us down through the ages that even to our time, more than likely, the Son of God has walked among us and has found here:

Believers Had Spiritual Heart Problems

The believers in Ephesus: had declined from that first love we had for Jesus.

Their hearts had experienced a gradual buildup of other things so that no longer was Jesus holding the position of first place in their hearts, in their schedules, in their concentration; and all that signaled that He was no longer the supreme ruler of their hearts.

Christ's message for them and to us today is: *Love Me most; Come back to Me.* The saints in Ephesus had a serious heart conditions—listen as we stand to hear what Christ said:

Revelation 2:1-7 (NKJV) "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst

of the seven golden lampstands: 2 "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; 3 and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. 4 Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. 6 But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."

Pray

POINT #1: JESUS ADDRESSES THEM PERSONALLY (2:1a)

Rev. 2:1 "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write,

Although these seven churches were actual, historical churches in Asia Minor, they represent the types of churches that perennially exist throughout the church age. What Christ says to these churches is relevant in all times.

Jesus address Ephesus first, possibly for several reasons:

- Ephesus was the number two city in the entire Roman Empire.
- Ephesus was first in the list of churches Christ addresses.
- Ephesus had Paul longest ministry of 3 years.
- Ephesus was the largest of the ancient churches according to Eusebius.

POINT #2: JESUS ADDRESSES THEM WITH AUTHORITY (2:1b)

Rev. 2:1b "these things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:

These seven stars are the messengers who represent the seven churches. Christ holds them in his hand, which means that he controls the church and its leaders.

So the church in Ephesus is addressed first of the seven (Rev. 2:1-7), as being the most important church in the *de facto* capital, and as being the landing-place for a messenger from Patmos and standing at the head of a circular road joining the seven cities in order.

POINT #3: JESUS ADDRESSES EPHESUS WITH AN APPROVAL (2:2-3, 6)

Rev. 2:2-3, 6 "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars;3 "and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. 6 "But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate

There are 10 specific commendations from Christ in v. 2-3, more than for any other church.

Last time we studied the founding of this church recorded in Acts 19. We saw that they also had the simple power that characterized the early church which flowed from genuine holiness. Energized by grace they magnified Christ, God's Word prevailed in them, and they lived consecrated lives. The Spirit of God moved unhindered, flowed unquenched and God got all the glory. No one competed for the credit, no one sought to be in control. God reigned, the Spirit moved, and Christ was magnified.

Turn with me to Ephesians 4:22-24, and remember again that we are called to--

Three Powerful Habits

The heart of the message Paul taught in Ephesus, that prompted Acts 18, is captured in the words of Ephesians 4:22-24. That same message of Christ's Lordship must fill our lives, leading to the removal of any part of our lives that displeases God. There are three clear choices we must make!

Look again with me at Ephesians 4:22-24:

*that you **put off**, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, 23 and **be renewed** in the spirit of your mind, 24 and that you **put on** the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.*

Start the Habit of Grace-prompted Shedding Ephesians 4:22

First, Paul is asking believers **to start a habit of grace-prompted shedding**. This is "putting off" old habits like old clothes are so comfortable and fit us so well, that we often forget that we even have them on again—until the Spirit of God convicts us. Paul is reminding us that those who will live a life holy to the Lord must repeatedly put off the old ways.

If we struggle with anger, anger must be shed daily; and if we struggle with pride, pride must daily be shed. This is also the choice we must make for lust, greed,

fear and any other byproducts of our flesh. Often believers fail to grow in their spiritual lives because they don't understand the life-long need to shed or "put off" our old sins on a daily basis.

Start the Habit of Grace-prompted Thinking Ephesians 4:23

Second, in v. 23 Paul is asking them ***to start a habit of grace-prompted thinking.*** Choices to put off old ways flow from our renewed minds. Just as Romans 12:2 says we are "transformed by the renewing of our minds". When we think godly, we behave godly; or when we believe right, we behave right.

God's plan for our minds always starts with us personally reading and studying His Word. Then from that flows our personal request to God's Spirit, asking Him to renew our minds. As we prayerfully read we have in our minds God's thoughts. As we submit to God's desires through His Word—He infuses His mind into ours. Paul said that we can have the mind of Christ by this constant renewal process. A grace-energized mind comes as believers regularly, hopefully daily get God's Word into their hearts and minds.

A simple goal would be to listen to God's voice all the way through His Word once each year. This is an imperative for us, reading the Bible expectantly and asking God to speak to us by His Spirit each day in His Word.

Start the Habit of Grace-prompted Wearing Ephesians 4:24

Lastly, in v. 24 Paul is asking them ***to start a habit of grace-prompted wearing.*** This is the putting on: "... and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (v. 24).

God makes it clear that it is not enough to merely put off old fleshly habits, they must be replaced with the newness of Christ in wearing His love, wearing His peace, etc. (Galatians 5:22). If I lose my temper with my wife or children, and repent and put it off—that is not enough unless I also put on Christ's love and patience also!¹

God is at work in us His children, and energized by His grace we must work at living out this new life (Phil. 2:12-13). Our daily task is getting dressed in our divine clothes—spiritually speaking clothes do make the man, and the woman.

POINT #4 : JESUS GIVES THEM

¹ All of this is through God's grace. Works have no place in obtaining salvation or in gaining merit in the Christian life. The Christian life is sola gratia, grace alone. Nevertheless, the Apostle Paul said, "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12b, 13). Hughes, R. Kent, Preaching the Word: Ephesians—The Mystery of the Body of Christ, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books) 1997.
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AN ADMONITION (2:4)

Rev. 2:4 "Nevertheless I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love

The saints in Ephesus were not being obedient to the central truth of the Scriptures Old and New Testament: Love the Lord Your God MOST. That is what had been taught them from God's Word by their faithful pastors over the years—listen to what Christ said:

*Revelation 2:4-5 (NKJV) **Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.***

Jesus States His Desire

In one word Jesus describes what He wanted, what they had, and what they had allowed to drift away from their lives. The requirement of the Lord is that we love Him FIRST.

The word in verse 4 translated into English as "first" is the Greek word **protos** (4413) **Protos** is a contracted superlative from the Greek preposition pros (4253) which has the meaning 'in front of, above, before'.

So this word that God's Spirit chooses to record in Christ's message is a word that means that something is to always be "foremost". Thus we can read foremost into the words of the dictionary definition of this word:

1. "Foremost in" time,
2. "Foremost in" place,
3. "Foremost in" order of importance, and is before others things,
4. "Foremost is being" at the beginning of any list,
5. "Foremost is being" the best and chiefest;
6. "Foremost is being" simply first of all.

What had Jesus already asked for them to do, and taught them through Paul, Timothy, and John's ministry of the Word to them?

Matthew 6:33 (NKJV) But **seek first** the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

Matthew 22:37 (NKJV) Jesus said to him, "You **shall love the LORD your God** with **all your heart**, with **all your soul**, and with **all your mind.**'

This morning, pause and hear this letter with the same ears as they had in the First Century. Jesus uses a word they all understood. It is a word He wants us to understand. Jesus says to them and us, I DESIRE to be:

1. "Foremost in" time,
2. "Foremost in" place,
3. "Foremost in" order of importance, and is before others things,
4. "Foremost is being" at the beginning of any list,
5. "Foremost is being" the best and chiefest;
6. "Foremost is being" simply first of all.

So that is Christ's desire. Next:

Jesus States Their Problem

Their lives were clogged with so many other things, so Jesus was no longer first in their hearts, in their schedules, or their concentration; and all that signaled that He was no longer the supreme ruler of their lives. They were not being obedient to the clear commands Christ had already given them, thus they were not pleasing Him.

The word just before first love is fascination, it is the word "left". This word is the huge New Testament word for forgiveness which is the word aphiami (863) and describes forgiveness as an action that means: to lay aside, send away or release (as in scapegoat); omit, put away or yield. [This word we know well from the pages of the Scriptures, and it is most often translated "forgive". But the same word is also in I Corinthians 7:11, 12, 13 for a marriage partner being "put away" or "departing" from the marriage.]

Basically forgiveness is when an offense that has been committed and is lodged in a person's life gets released or sent away.

Action Needed: Jesus said: stop everything else from pushing me out, Go back to your original settings; and Love the Lord Your God with all you are.

In Luke 15:22 this word is translated the "best robe"; and in Mark 10:44 it describes the chiefest of swats.

First love means loving Christ so much that you are willing to sacrifice whatever it takes to have Christ foremost in your life.

BEWARE OF DRIFTING AWAY FROM FOREMOST LOVE

At the end of an incredible life, John the Apostle wrote some arresting words. He had met and followed Jesus as a very young man. After those climactic days of the Crucifixion, resurrection and birth of the church -- John had outlived them all. As the final Apostle he closes his message with this warning:

In First John, the last words of John to believers are a warning against idols. The Spirit of God moved John to write a stern warning at the end of the Apostolic Age to the

vibrant New Testament Church that they needed to be very careful to guard against idols.

1 John 5:21 Dear children, keep [aorist middle imperative] yourselves from idols. (NIV)

What some modern day idols? Look at some old ones the Lord condemns, and we can see the new.

- **BEWARE OF THE IDOL OF MONEY: Job 31:24-28** "If I have put my trust in gold or said to pure gold, 'You are my security,' if I have rejoiced over my great wealth, the fortune my hands had gained, if I have regarded the sun in its radiance or the moon moving in splendor, so that my heart was secretly enticed and my hand offered them a kiss of homage, then these also would be sins to be judged, for I would have been unfaithful to God on high. (NIV)
- **BEWARE OF THE IDOL OF CAREER OR TECHNOLOGY: Habakkuk 1:15-16** The wicked foe pulls all of them up with hooks, he catches them in his net, he gathers them up in his dragnet; and so he rejoices and is glad. Therefore he sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his dragnet, for by his net he lives in luxury and enjoys the choicest food. (NIV)
- **BEWARE OF THE IDOL OF APPETITES OR DESIRES: Philippians 3:19** Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. (NIV)
- **BEWARE OF THE IDOL OF DISTRACTIONS: James 4:1-6** Jesus is so jealous He doesn't even want you to have friendship with the world. What is this? worldliness is forgetting God, friendship/idol is on mind all time, willing to sacrifice for, blocks out other things;

Jesus says to them and us, I DESIRE to be:

1. "*Foremost in*" time,
2. "*Foremost in*" place,
3. "*Foremost in*" order of importance, and is before others things,
4. "*Foremost is being*" at the beginning of any list,
5. "*Foremost is being*" the best and chiefest;
6. "*Foremost is being*" simply first of all.

Their lives were clogged with so many other things, so Jesus was no longer first in their hearts, in their schedules, or their concentration; and all that signaled that He was no longer the supreme ruler of their lives. They were not being obedient to the clear commands Christ had already given them, thus they were not pleasing Him.

APPENDIX

What is worship? Think of a stone-age savage in a rain forest jungle valley of Irian Jaya. With his feather headdress and a bone accented nose heading to worship his god of the hills.

The pagan devotee has a location that he resorts to alone or with others that is devoted to his god. He arrives focused his mind prepared. He often acts very distracted from other events in life because of the intense attraction his god has upon him.

He starts by placing himself in front of his god which has drawn him. Often he has invested in articles of worship, many of which were costly and involved personal sacrifice to obtain. They are devoted to the object of worship.

The actual worship experience is usually accompanied by great enthusiastic emotional and physical response. There is often great pleasure derived from this worship and even the important duties of life are neglected to give complete focus upon the god. In fact, if the elements of primitive worship were to be listed in brief they would be localized devotion to an event that superseded all other events, with total focus and involvement even to the point of distraction with a group of other worshipers...

As true worshipers of the True God we have the same elements of worship only they are to be directed toward the one true God. We come into His presence sometimes alone but other times as a group because God wants us to gather to magnify Him as His family. It costs us time, we invest our resources, He draws us so much that at times the things of earth can grow strangely dim. we are very involved, receive joy unspeakable and full of glory...

Where can we see this love in the Scriptures? Here are some first lovers from those sacred pages:

- Like the little daughter of Jairus Jesus raised from the dead First Love is LIFE GIVING LOVE [Mark 5:35-41] All she could remember is her mothers tears. She had been so sick, the headache and fever were like fire. Then one moment as she felt herself slipping away she stared up at that face and saw the tears of hopelessness streaming down her mother's cheeks. But now what? A loud cheer, radiant faces surrounding her as she is lifted from the bed in the arms of her father. No fever burning her, no head throbbing. Just such and amazingly clear sense of strength surging through her body. But wait. Who is that man over in the corner? He is so serene, His eyes are beaming and bright. As He gazes lovingly her way, father whispers "Its Jesus. You died. We despaired. He spoke to you. Instantly your cold, lifeless body burst into life. Your pale face glowed with health and you sat up. He told us just to believe. We do, oh we do!" This is Life Giving Love, the love that wells up in your heart when you realize you were dead and now are alive. Our Giver of life loved so deeply. This is first love

- First Love is LONGING LOVE [Psalm 42] Like the Sons of Korah perhaps capturing a moment from the life of David. A life that seeks God and loves Christ even in the desert times of life. It is like the caravan across trackless wastes of sand that run out of water so a captive passenger, the hart is untied and let go. Lifting its nose to the winds it zeros in on the desire of its heart and heads straight to the oasis only it can smell. Soon the following caravan enjoys the fresh, cool springs of water. Do you seek out the Lord Jesus Christ as this desert creature. Do you love to find cool refreshing springs from His presence? That is what kept David going through the oft reoccurring desert dry times of life. This is first love - LONGING LOVE.

- First Love is SURRENDERING LOVE [Daniel 4:1]. Like King Nebuchadnezzar when he walked for the first time instead of crawling. His seasons of roaming as a beast were past and now his mind could only say over and over, the most high reigns. As Nebuchadnezzar looked over the sprawling city glistening with gold, past the hanging garden that looked like the very Garden of Eden, around at the blue splendor of his tiled halls of Babylon -- this time he said it right. It is all God's not mine. When God takes it all away and then lets you have it back, you know He owns it all. He reigns and rules over all.

- First Love is LIBERATING LOVE Like the woman taken in adultery [John 8]. The woman at His feet looking up in wonder. The mob had dropped their stones one by one and slunk away. From the oldest and most revered to the youngest and most zealous, the eyes of Jesus looking into their hearts had pierced them through. As He wrote on the sand all the secret sins of their lives no one was left but her. And then He looked into her soul and said "Neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more." The joy of that moment was Liberating Love. He had set her free from the shackles of guilt and shame. When Jesus wipes you clean and you feel fresh as the new fallen snow you can know that first love that is LIBERATING LOVE. Have you come into contact with His liberating love?

- First Love is INVESTING LOVE Like the woman of the streets [Luke 7:36-50]. The alabaster flask lay shattered in her hands. The fragrance of the dripping ointment swiftly filling the room. There was no turning back now. Broken and poured out, her life's savings were now dripping on the feet of Jesus. Those dusty feet fresh from the bathing she had given them with her tears. Dried with the hairs of her very own head. Now drenched in the most costly, exquisite imported perfume money could buy. He was the one who had forgiven her. He was worth all that life could ever bring. This was the inexpressible surge of Forgiving Love.

- First Love is FOCUSED LOVE like Mary [Luke 10:38-42]. That sits at the feet of Christ and finds the good part of life. Leaving behind the swirl of life in the fast and busy lane. That is the love that welled up in Mary's heart because First Love is FOCUSED LOVE. Even when life is swirling and grinding and racing by us furiously, we focus on Him! We worship Him before we serve Him!

- First Love is GRATEFUL LOVE like the Tenth Leper [Luke 17:12-19]. He had been

with this gang every since he was cast out of his family. Leprosy does that you know. first they were so sympathetic with his bruise that wouldn't heal. then as it oozed and turned foul smelling he could see the fear in their eyes -- Leprosy Out! So here he was with fellow smelling, oozing lepers. Most people screamed and ran away when they saw us but that day He just stood there and waited as we approached. When He said go show yourself to the priest we thought why not. And then it happened. Like an old heavy coat I felt it slip from my frame. Looking down it was true, my fetid sores, oozing wounds and dying limbs were fresh as a newborns skin. Oh how my heart was filled with love and thanks and praise for Him. I fell at His feet and cried glory, glory, glory. I fell at His feet and worshiped and thanked Jesus! This is the GRATEFUL LOVE of First love. When is the last time you fell at His feet and cried glory, I am healed of my leprosy of sin. I am forgiven. I am cleansed! Oh don't wait, tell Him today, this moment that you are GRATEFUL!

So what can we do to rekindle our first love? Remember where we left the path and go back to:

1. First Love is LONGING LOVE [Psalm 42]
2. Like King Nebuchadnezzar First Love is SURRENDERING LOVE [Daniel 4:1]
3. Like the little daughter of Jairus Jesus raised from the dead First Love is RESURRECTING LOVE [Mark 5:35-41]
4. Like the woman taken in adultery First Love is LIBERATING LOVE [John 8]
5. Like the woman of the streets First Love is INVESTING LOVE [Luke 7:36-50]
6. Like Mary First Love is FOCUSED LOVE [Luke 10:38-42]
7. Like the Tenth Leper First Love is GRATEFUL LOVE. [Luke 17:12-19]

THERE WAS IN EPHESUS: STRONG IMMORALITY. **YOU CAN STAY PURE FOR CHRIST IN ANY CULTURE, ANY TIME, ANY SETTING.** All day long in the confines of this glittering structure, thousands of prostitutes, male and female, gave themselves in the sordid worship of the pagan fertility deities. At dusk, they would go into the city to earn a living in the bustling atmosphere of travelers from both land and sea. We can learn the secret of how to resist an impure world and stay pure and holy for Jesus. Here is what Paul taught them 40 years earlier. You can stay pure by –

- REPENTING OF YOUR PAST: Ephesians 2:3 Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.
- SEEING YOUR CALLING: Ephesians 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.
- LEARNING THE SPIRITUAL SECRET OF PUTTING OFF AND PUTTING ON: Ephesians 4:22 That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts
- SEEKING CHRIST TO DEEPLY PENETRATE YOUR LIFE: Ephesians 5:3-5 But

fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; 4 Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks. 5 For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

- RENOUNCING ALL TOUCH WITH YOUR OLD WAYS: Ephesians 5:12 For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret. (KJV)

THERE WAS IN EPHESUS: STRONG EVIL INFLUENCES. YOU CAN STAY TRUE TO CHRIST IN ANY CULTURE, ANY TIME, ANY SETTING.

Because this Temple was the most revered site in the ancient world to literally millions of worshipers, a custom had arisen that anyone was free within a 200-yard security zone. Thus, criminals came from far and wide to find a haven. And, their presence only permeated the city with evil. So how did Paul train them to stay good in that evil setting?

- COMMIT TO TRUTHFULNESS: Ephesians 4:25-32 wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another.
- FLEE ANYTHING THAT GRIEVES GOD: Ephesians 4:26 be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: 27 neither give place to the devil. 28 Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labor, working with [his] hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth. 29 Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. 30 And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: 32 And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. (KJV)

THERE WAS IN EPHESUS: STRONG MATERIALISM. YOU CAN LIVE FOR CHRIST IN ANY CULTURE, ANY TIME, ANY SETTING.

Because of the nearly universal worship of Diana, no one would dare to rob her, thus behind the altar was a world bank, for the safe keeping of currency and treasures.

- KNOW YOU GOT IT. Ephesians 1:11 In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:
- KNOW YOU ARE SECURE. Ephesians 1:14 which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.
- KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE. Ephesians 1:18 The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints,
- KNOW YOU GOT MORE THAN CAN BE COUNTED. Ephesians 2:7 That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in [his] kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.
- KNOW YOU GOT MORE THAN YOU CAN DREAM OF. Ephesians 3:8 Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the

Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; (KJV)

First love is like:

Widow's Mites

Alabaster Box

Mary at xs feet

Mary forgiven much and loved much; last at Cross and first at Tomb.